

A Study of Male Division I African American Football Players

Perceptions of Role Identity

By

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degree of Doctor of Education.

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## **Abstract**

There is limited research focused on male African American Division I football student-athletes' perceptions of the messages they receive from coaches, athletic department staffs, and NCAA policy about their roles as students and athletes. At predominantly white institutions, African Americans make up a small percentage of the student population, but a large majority of the African Americans on campus reside in the athletic department. It is important that athletic departments and universities understand how this group of athletes is socialized into one role or the other.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how seven male African American Division I NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football players made sense of their roles as students and athletes at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). After conducting semi-structured interviews, followed by confirmation communications with participants to ensure the essence of their words was captured, and consulting the student-athlete handbook, the data revealed four major themes. The participants developed an athlete-student identification in their early adolescence years through socialization, and they were re-socialized after arriving at UWI. Using social identity theory as a theoretical framework, the process of how the athlete-student identification was adopted through intentional and unintentional communication was examined. The responses revealed a group of academically motivated young men that struggled with their roles as students and athletes after being exposed to rhetoric that told them football was their key to escaping their neighborhood and securing financial security. While in college the perception was that the football was part of a money-making business, dependent upon winning, and not academics. The African American community, media, coaches (high school

and college), counselors, family members, non-athlete peers, and faculty members were said to all factor into why the athlete-student identification was chosen.

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## **Dedication**

This research study is dedicated to Lyla Marie Patterson. I promised when you passed away that I would finally stop making excuses and complete my doctorate degree. Lyla, your memory carried me through this process when I did not want to go to class or sit down to complete assignments. Words cannot express how much we miss you, but your memory will live on in our hearts and in print forever. Daddy loves you baby girl.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

#### **My Story.**

From the time I was in elementary school, I was socialized into an athlete-first mentality. As a young boy, people would ask, “What sport do you play” or stated, “You must be a football player,” but no one that I can recall asked me about my academic interests. My family, coaches, and the media constantly painted the picture that athletics led to fame and money, and with this information, I identified as an athlete early in life. My identity throughout elementary school was associated with athletics and up until middle school, the word “education” seemed to be an afterthought to my participation in athletics. In middle and high school, my identity also became associated with academics with encouragement from a teacher and coach. Both valued education and athletics and advised me to excel on the field and in the classroom. With the knowledge that I could excel in academics and athletics, I took on the athlete-student identification. As an adolescent athlete, up until my sophomore year of college, I dreamed of being a professional athlete. Unfortunately, I never made it to the professional ranks, but my personal experience as a male African American football and track and field student-athlete at a predominately White, Division I institution (PWI) have shaped my perspective of what it means to be a student-athlete.

Despite a few positive role models promoting academics, my family members, coaches, and community members continually reinforced my identity as an “athlete first, and student second” throughout my elementary and teenage years. My identity as an “athlete first, student second” was later reinforced the first month I arrived on campus as a Division I, football and track and field student-athlete. I can clearly remember “The meeting” (This phrase is used to identify the first time in my collegiate career that my identity was challenged and shaped by an

academic advisor). All freshman football players were required to attend. An extremely large and muscular academic advisor addressed the group by saying, “Look to your right, and now look to your left. Only a handful of you will be here next year and even less will graduate.” That was not what I wanted to hear as an eighteen-year-old, several thousand miles from home. His next statement seemed familiar, but his actions took me off-guard. The academic advisor said, “You are a student first” while holding up two fingers, “and an athlete second” while holding up one finger. This was the first time of many to come, that I experienced a conflict in my role and identity as a “student” and an “athlete.” In this moment, I was unclear of my purpose in the classroom, and interpreted this presentation as a call to dedicate myself to athletics.

I experienced self-identity conflict at “The meeting” and on several occasions throughout my collegiate career. Believing the first memorable “meeting,” applied to all athletes, the second message offered by the advisor, I believed was clearly directed at the African American football players. Upon arriving on campus, and participating in my first practice, it was made clear in the locker room by upperclassmen that African Americans showered separately from the other players on the team. The coaching staff outwardly turned a blind eye and never attempted to interfere with the locker room shower segregation, a move that I still question today. I arrived on campus concerned with race relations and the segregated showers left me worried about how my race would impact my presence on campus. If the locker room environment was racially divided, what should I expect in the classroom? Many of my self-identity conflicts included an inner battle between the athlete, my social self, and the student (typically in that order). “The meeting” gave me the impression that football took precedence over everything including academics and my social life. The separate showers in the locker room gave me the impression that being African American could create issues, even at my Division I institution. I perceived

that it was okay to slack off in the classroom because it would be taken care of, but I learned my grades were my responsibility when my eligibility was threatened. Many of the African American upperclassman instructed me to “play the game in order to play the game,” and I interpreted their words to mean I would need to find a way in the classroom to remain eligible on the field. My mentor, who happened to be an alumnus of my institution, shared these same sentiments; his words were, “just make sure you get your degree.” I noticed the African American upperclassmen who graduated were individuals who took ownership of their academics and personal actions. I slowly came to realize that I had to decide about my future and that future included life after athletics.

With injuries and the conclusion of a mediocre sophomore year on the football field, my vision of playing professional athletics was diminishing. Graduating from college became more of a priority for me and thus, my inner self-identity conflict began to shift to a student-first mentality. My performance on the track and field team seemed to improve, but my minutes on the football field decreased. The reasons for my decreased minutes may have been purely talent related, but I believe a part was due to my new dedication to academics.

I recognize that my experience as an African American male football and track and field student-athlete is just that, my experience, and does not represent all collegiate athletes, however it does offer an intimate perspective. I am also aware that collegiate athletics have changed since I was a Division I student-athlete from 1996-2001. Changes include bylaws requiring student-athletes to meet more stringent standards to gain admittance to universities, student-support staffs increasing in size, and an apparent dedication by universities to recognize diversity issues on campus (Allison, 1995; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Heck & Takahashi, 2006; LaForge & Hodge, 2011; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Smith, 2000; Thelin, 1994).

## **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand how a group of African American male football players in 2015-2016 make sense of their roles as a student and athlete. I interviewed National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) FBS, Division I male African American football players at one institution. There are four areas this dissertation focused on. First, how do football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete? Next, how do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity? Also, how do football players' perceptions of the role of NCAA Policy, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete and non-athlete peers' affect their role identity? Lastly, how do football players' perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity? I will identify recurring themes in these areas that help to explain how the perceptions shared by student-athletes shape their role identification and academic success. After this dissertation, I hope to share my findings with individuals interested in the student-athlete perspective as well as those interested in helping to create a positive educational and athletic experience for all student-athletes in revenue and non-revenue sports. This dissertation should add to the existing research on student-athlete perspectives of collegiate athletics, the socialization of the student-athlete, institutional integrity, student-athlete role conflict, the role of coaches and professors in the educational and athletic experience of student-athletes.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Historically, researchers focusing on college athletics borrowed from several disciplines to help define, measure, and interpret the meaning of academic success for student athletes. A significant body of work has been created concerning academic success (Adams, Bean, &

Mangold, 2003; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Tinto & Vincent, 1987), and research has been focused on student-athlete role identity (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Feltz, Gilson, & Sturm, Sept. 2011; Gill Jr, 2006; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Stryker, 1968). There is limited research focused on male African American Division I football student-athletes' perceptions of the messages they receive from coaches, athletic department staffs, and NCAA policy about their roles as students and athletes. Additionally, there is little research about the impact of these messages on student-athlete role identification. Far fewer studies have examined student-athlete experiences through the lens of a male African American student-athlete.

African American male football players who participate at the NCAA FBS, Division I level at predominately white institutions (PWI) face several academic and non-academic challenges. Like other collegiate student-athletes, African American male football players are expected to take on multiple roles. Recognizing that there are countless roles that could be considered, this study will focus on the roles of student and athlete. Multiple roles can conflict in the classroom while taking a test or when an individual is faced with how much time to dedicate to game preparation and, or studying (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Adler and Adler's (1985) work is often cited when student-athlete role-conflict is discussed. For this dissertation, I will refer to Adler and Adler (1991) for their definition of role-conflict; role-conflict is defined as: "compartmentalizing, neglecting, or de-emphasizing selected roles" (p. 176). When student-athletes neglect a specified role such as the student-role in favor of another role such as the athlete-role, it is referred to as role foreclosure. Role foreclosure is defined as: committing to one role without exploring other roles (Marcia, 1993; Murphy et al., 1996). Notably, the NCAA Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in

college (GOALS) study reports football student-athletes self-identified as athletes rather than as students 79 percent of the time (NCAA, 2011b). With a chosen identity prior to college and preconceived expectations of what it means to be an African American student-athlete in college, African American student-athletes can become confused when their incoming reality differs from NCAA, athletic and academic staffs' verbal and nonverbal expectations (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Daniels, 1987; Singer, 2009; Stone, Harrison, & Mottley, 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Add to this the pervasive belief that African American football players are not academically strong (Beamon, 2012), and this becomes problematic for African American student-athletes because if they neglect their academic roles, they could jeopardize their eligibility and chance of earning a degree.

The process of foreclosing on the academic role in favor of the athlete role is a commonality for many African Americans as well as athletes of other ethnicities that participate in football in high school and move onto the NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)<sup>1</sup> Division I level (Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Bimper & Harrison, 2011; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978). The literature supports the idea that black youth are socialized into assuming the athlete role early in life to obtain future financial security, fame, and a pass out of poverty by going pro in their respective sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). In addition to being socialized into the athlete-student role prior to college, the literature suggests athlete-students are socialized into that role during college as well, noting the influence of athletic staff, university staff, fellow students and the college

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<sup>1</sup> This is assumed to be the designation for the best teams in the country, the results of winning season lead to a bowl game, sponsored by a large company. The games offer a platform for student-athletes to showcase their skills in one or two games (2 games if the top two teams in the country).

environment (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Mahoney, 2011; Stone et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). The most notable influences in the process of being socialized into the athlete-student role prior to college include family, race, high school education, community, and the media (Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978). Once in college, African Americans are influenced by background characteristics (family, race, high school education, community and the media), verbal and non-verbal expectations related to athletics and academics, specifically, athletic time demands (practice, film, games), policies such as academic reform, engagement with non-athletes and professors, and stereotypes (from self-identification, non-athletes, professors) (Adler & Adler, 1991; Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). Early and continuous socialization into the athlete-student role and a desire to go pro can be problematic when the chance of college athletes “going,” pro is made clear. Out of 6,153 draft eligible Division I football college athletes in 2014, only 249 or 4 percent went on to play in the National Football League (NFL). An additional 4.5 percent went onto play in the Canadian Football League (CFL) or arena leagues. For the student-athletes who go pro, the median length of a career is 6 years (Carlson, Kim, Lusardi, & Camerer, 2015; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014b). With so few going on to play professionally, the vast majorities are forced to find some other kind of work. Additionally, 82 percent of student-athletes reported they would have different majors if they did not participate in athletics (NCAA, 2011b). For these reasons, the process of socializing African American football players is problematic when athletes could foreclose on their student role to obtain athletic success.

In addition to navigating roles as students and athletes, African American male athletes attending PWI's have to negotiate their role as African Americans living and acting in a white culture. Between 2007 and 2010, non-athlete African American men represented 2.8 percent of

full-time degree-seeking undergraduates on college campuses, and more than half (57.1%) of the total African American men on college campuses were members of football teams across the country (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Overall, referencing the NCAA 2008 Division I Graduation Success Rate (GSR) cohort, all male student-athletes graduated at a rate of approximately 78 percent. The GSR was created by the NCAA to give a precise measurement of student-athlete graduation rates. Unlike the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), the GSR accounts for transfers in good academic standing regardless of where they enrolled first (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014a). The 2008 NCAA Division I GSR for all student-athletes, separated by race respectively was: White and African American males graduated at 83 and 65 percent respectively (National Collegiate Athletic Association). When football was isolated, the graduation rates were as follows: 72 percent for all football student-athletes, 85 percent White, and 66 percent African American (National Collegiate Athletic Association). With only 8.5 percent going pro (NFL, CFL, and Arena) and 66 percent graduating (19 percent less than White football peers), one can wonder how are African American football players socialized into the role of student-athlete rather than athletes who must go to school to play their sport. Given that athletes make up a significant portion of African Americans at PWI's it is doubly important that athletic departments and universities understand how this group of athletes is socialized into one role or the other. Although not the focus of this study, how they are socialized may have implications for whether they graduate.

### **Research Questions**

This is a study about how NCAA FBS, Division I male African American football players make sense of their roles as students and athletes at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The following questions guided this study:

1. How do football players identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete?
2. How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?
3. How do football players interpret the role of NCAA Policy and messaging, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete peers on their role identity?
4. How do football players' perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity?

### **Definition of Terms**

- *Academic Clustering*: 25 percent or more, of an athletic team enrolled in one major (Fountain & Finley, 2009).
- *African American male*: A male African descendant born in the United States of America.
- *APR (Academic Progress Rate)*: The APR allows a school to monitor the current academic performance of an athletic team real-time and use the information to determine if individual players or teams are progressing towards graduation or towards dropping out (Petr & Paskus, 2009)
- *Athlete-Student*: Intercollegiate athlete that sees himself as an athlete first and student second, due to time demands of their respective sport.
- *FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision)*: This is assumed to be the designation for the best teams in the country, the results of winning season lead to a bowl game, sponsored by a large company. The games offer a platform for student-athletes to showcase their skills in one or two games (2 games if the top two teams in the country).
- *FGR (Federal Graduation Rate)*: The FGR monitors if first-time, full-time, baccalaureate-degree-seeking freshman enrolled in the fall graduate within six years

(Paskus, 2012). The FGR only monitor's student-athletes that receive a scholarship, and this along with other exclusions minimize the number of athletes being monitored. The only exclusions for the FGR are the, permanently disabled, military, religious beliefs or death in a six-year time span.

- *GSR (Graduation Success Rate)*: The GSR was created solely for NCAA institutions to directly addresses the need to accommodate transfer students. The GSR measures the number of student-athletes that enter a university and graduate within six years, accounting for student-athletes that transfer from another institution. The initial enrollment at any institution is used to track if the student-athlete graduates within six years. (Paskus, 2012)
- *NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association)*: Member led organization with a corporate office established to oversee the wellbeing of student-athletes and help members maintain fairness.
- *NCAA GOAL Study (Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in college)*: Study of the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes. The GOALS study was designed to provide data to NCAA committees, policymakers and member institutions on a range of issues important to today's student-athletes. Similar studies were previously conducted in 2006 and 2010 (Paskus & Bell, 2016, p. 1).
- *NCAA SCORE Study (Study of College Outcomes and Recent Experiences)*: The SCORE was a Longitudinal study conducted by the NCAA in 1996, the study assessed the perceived impact intercollegiate athletics had on former student-athletes during and after their collegiate playing career approximately ten-years post college.

- *Student-Athlete*: Term coined by the NCAA in the early 1950's to portray their dedication to the educational experience of students that participated in intercollegiate athletics (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed by the Social Identity Theory (SIT) which comes from the social psychology field. According to SIT, “people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort” (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Ashforth and Mael (1989) use the Social Identity Theory to argue the meaning of social identification in three main points:

(a) Social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons; (b) social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of out-groups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation; and (c) social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification. This perspective is applied to organizational socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations (p. 20).

Put another way, social identification is how individuals view themselves and associate this self-reflection with a group or groups they feel they share commonalities with. This can lead to socialization into a group's social structure and norms. Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest, social identification may also come from subgroups, due to people preferring to work or play with individuals that they see every day and work or play near. In the end, individuals want to be seen

having high self-esteem and be affiliated with groups well respected by all other groups with similar values (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

SIT also seeks to understand intergroup relations and how bias and stereotyping can occur (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Reynolds, 2001). Through the lens of SIT, Marx et al. (2008) contend, “many first-year college athletes should identify themselves with the socially desirable student-athlete status, thus giving them a sense of belonging and self-worth” (Introduction, para 4). This theory was chosen as the theoretical lens for this study because it incorporates the complexity of what it means to be a student-athlete, but it also allows for the inclusion of being African American, male, and enrolled at a PWI. Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed the interpersonal-intergroup continuum, which distinguishes between two forms of social behavior ‘interpersonal and intergroup’ and is related to perceiving experiences as individual or group member. Through the lens of SIT, the complex African American football student-athlete movement along the interpersonal-intergroup continuum can be explored, including intergroup discrimination, perceived to be experienced by African American football players on their team, in the athletic department, on campus, and in their lives generally (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1978).

### **Organizational socialization.**

Ashforth and Mael (1989) tie social identification and group identification together based on Tolman’s (1943) research on group identification and assert, “organizational identification is a specific form of social identification” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 22). At its core, SIT focuses on how individuals try to answer the question, “Who am I?” and in doing so place themselves in a group that they believe closely resembles who they are or want to be (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Newcomers or, in the case of collegiate athletics, freshmen enter college unsure of their place at

the university or on a team; with this uncertainty they attempt to make sense of rules, power structure and expectations (Ashforth, 1985). SIT defers to the literature on organizational socialization to make sense of how social identification occurs within an organization.

Researchers suggest, “situational definitions and self-definitions both emerge through symbolic interactions” (Ashforth, 1985; Coe, 1965; Reichers, 1987 as cited in Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Symbolic interactionism basically is how an individual perceives the inner workings of a group based on interactions that involve both verbal and nonverbal interaction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). With these interactions, individuals such as student-athletes can become socialized into the group norm and form a social identification of who they are based on individual interactions within group and individual settings (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### **Role conflict.**

Student-athletes are expected to fill multiple roles, but the “student” and the “athlete” roles are most prominent. These two roles carry different expectations and at times require the student-athlete to prioritize the demands of each role. While prioritizing the demands of each role, student-athletes can find themselves conflicted due to their own personal identity and set of morals that may or may not match the organization or group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The literature also suggests the idea of compartmentalizing identities or labeling oneself in certain situations. This can present problems for student-athletes if they assume the role of athlete in an academic setting and forgo or belittle the values and standards expected in academia, a process also known as role foreclosure (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For student-athletes, the task of being both a “student” and “athlete” can be daunting when trying to decide which role to assume and when to do so.

### **Background Research**

### **Socialization of the athlete-student.**

The media and my family, friends, teachers, coaches and community all played a part in my socialization into the athlete-student identity early and often in my life. In multiple studies, the groups listed above and their interactions with youth are referred to as background characteristics (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Mahoney, 2011; Stone et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). These background characteristics, reinforce the “athlete” in student-athlete by priming or overemphasizing the importance of athletic success to reach personal success in all areas of one’s life (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Mahoney, 2011; Stone et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). The literature helps to show that I was not alone in my identification as an athlete (as opposed to student) early in life.

### **Reinforcement of athlete-student role.**

The idealistic image that I held and my background characteristics that lead to my athlete-student identification were reinforced at “The Meeting.” When the advisor emphasized athletics being placed above academics, he presented the group with a set of norms specific to athletes at our institution. He believed these norms were necessary to fit the social role of athlete-student, a process also referred to as resocialization or secondary socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Student-athletes often enter college with expectations and dreams like my own but are disillusioned when their realities don’t match their expectations and create a new normal to survive (play the game to play the game) (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1988, 1991; Marx et al., 2008; Pescosolido, 1986). In “The Meeting” the advisor said academics came first, and this is what I heard from multiple recruiters at multiple universities, but his actions contradicted this statement by holding up two fingers despite just saying academics came first.

Researchers have studied situations like “The Meeting” where what is said doesn’t necessarily match what is expected. Institutional integrity is the term used by Daniels (1987), and he specifically describes institutional integrity as the “institution’s degree of consistency between their rhetoric and their behavior relative to stated commitments to the development of all students’ intellectual and social development, including student-athletes” (Daniels, p. 155). Similarly, Singer (2009) describes institutional integrity as the NCAA and its member institutions’, desire and willingness to place the educational interests of the athletes at the forefront of their agenda” (Singer, p. 103). In the 2004 NCAA strategic plan, the educational experience of student-athletes is said to be a paramount achievement (NCAA Executive Committee, 2004), but the question is, do student-athletes perceive their educational experience as paramount, and how does the rhetoric and action affect student-athlete role identification?

### **Identity confusion.**

In college, my identity was affected by background characteristics, resocialization (“The meeting”), institutional integrity, and expectations of athletic and academic staff, alumni and athlete and non-athlete peers. After interviewing the participants in this study, and as I look back, I think “The Meeting” gave me a reason to not feel bad about putting so much time into football. I wanted to be an athlete, being a student wasn’t even on the radar, and interviewing the participants in this study helped me to remember that I was not in the least bit confused. A reoccurring idea in the research is how student-athletes suffer with role confusion or role conflict due to inconsistencies in stated policy and actions of athletic and university staff and varied expectations for student-athletes and non-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Daniels, 1987; Singer, 2009; Stone et al., 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Some examples of these varied expectations are entrance requirements for non-athletes

and student-athletes, hiring practices used to hire professors compared to those used to hire coaches, and the ability to build and upgrade athletic facilities compared to university facilities. Receiving conflicting messages, like my experience in “The Meeting,” has been shown to influence how student-athletes self-identify (Daniels, 1987; Singer, 2009; Thelin, 1994, 2008). This study will explore how African American student-athletes at a Division I PWI perceive their identity is affected by interactions with coaches, university and athletic staff (professors, academic support, etc.), and athlete and non-athlete peers.

### **Academic and athletic effects on social identification.**

After “The Meeting,” I was under the impression that my academics would simply be taken care of, a sentiment shared by other first year student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991). Not surprisingly, this impression negatively impacted my academic performance and threatened my athletic standing. A growing body of research highlights both positive and negative effects of athletic participation on self-identity – how student-athletes view themselves as student-athletes or athlete-students (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Mahoney, 2011; Pascarella et al., 1999). In my case, I discovered that academics served as more than just a necessary evil of my athletic participation; they were an opportunity to earn a degree and gain employment after college. I also observed the differences in approach to academics from the perspective of a revenue (football) and non-revenue sport (track and field). I perceived that my dedication to academics over football resulted in less playing time but increased my grade point average. In track and field my dedication to academics was embraced and my performance on the track improved, which could be attributed to the positive reinforcement I received from my track coaches (Adler & Adler, 1991; Symonds, 2006; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). The effects on my athletic and academic participation were affected differently based on

the sport I identified with at the time (Godfrey, 2010; Murphy et al., 1996; Stone et al., 2012). By looking at football (revenue sport) in current times I am seeking to understand how NCAA Division I male African American football players perceive their sport and their interactions with coaches and staff impact their academic and athletic performance.

### **Revenue sports.**

Student-athletes are split into two distinct groups, those who participate in revenue and those who participate in non-revenue sports. Although both belong to the larger group known as student-athletes, there are assumed norms and beliefs for each subunit. Revenue sports (football, men's basketball) are typically held in high regard within an athletic department because they bring in money. Student-athletes who participate in revenue sports tend to be treated better as is evident in facilities and amenities on most Division I campuses. With positive reinforcement from the athletic department, family, friends and society at large, these student-athletes are likely to identify more with their athlete role and foreclose or undervalue their student role (Adler & Adler, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The three main points presented by Ashforth and Mael (1989) and their application to organizational socialization, role conflict, and revenue sports will help to better understand the perspective of student-athletes and why they identify with their chosen role. Given the fact that student-athletes have two highly time consuming roles as students and athletes, time demands may conflict with the individual social (personal) identity that is separate from the student-athlete (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Role conflict in part can be affected by the values, beliefs, norms and demands required for each role. These roles can be confirmed or confused by individuals that are a part of the organization making up and enforcing rules, values and beliefs, such as the NCAA, athletic department and institutional staffs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### **The impact of race.**

There is a large body of research focused on the differences between Division I revenue and non-revenue sport student-athletes. Several studies specifically address the role of race and how it impacts student-athletes' perceptions of socialization and role conflict (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Colon, 2011; Gill Jr, 2006; Harper et al., 2013). Many Division I institutions studied are Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), and race is often used to compare student-athletes by type of sport due to the disproportionate number of African Americans participating in revenue sports. Between 2006 and 2010 African-American men accounted for less than 4 percent of full-time undergraduates at public colleges and universities, but made up over 50 percent of student-athletes participating in football and basketball (Harper et al., 2013). African American student-athletes experience role conflict issues brought on by stereotypes from professors, media, non-athlete students and the campus community (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Gill Jr, 2006; Harper et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). The literature suggests being a student-athlete alone can lead to stereotypes such as, the "dumb jock", but being African American can add racial connotations alluding to athletics being their only way into college because they are mentally inferior and need the lowered standards to enter college (Engstrom et al., 1995; Harper et al., 2013). Race and type of sport appear to further complicate role identification by offering additional roles to fill or foreclose on, potentially impacting academic and athletic success, (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991).

Male Division I African American football players at a PWI especially face the challenge of prioritizing their academic and athletic roles (Fletcher et al., 2003). Student-athletes with their multiple roles are required to adhere to rules and regulations imposed by both roles. Poor

academic performance in the classroom can lead to academic probation or worst expulsion from the university. Additionally, failure to succeed in their academic role, endangers their athletic eligibility, and worse endangers their scholarship, which for many African Americans is their key to college. Ultimately, socialization, role identification and role conflict all play a role in student-athletes academic success.

### **Importance of Study**

Athletics is an important vehicle for getting male African American student-athletes into college. With an understanding of why student-athletes identify with a specific role, athletic departments could learn what academic support programs during the freshman year and each subsequent year would be beneficial. This research will also address the socialization process that takes place when student-athletes arrive on campus, and are subject to the impact of coaches, academic support, professors, athlete and non-athlete peers on academic success. Understanding how student-athletes perceive verbal and non-verbal messages could lead to training for coaches and academic support staff centered on positive messages in regard to academics being a priority. Additionally, this research could lead athletic departments to review their student handbooks, websites, and how athletic staff and the department interacts with student-athletes face-to-face. In the end, data collected from this study will add to the existing literature on student-athlete role identity, and student-athlete's perspective of the impact of race, background characteristics and type of sport have on academic success.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review is to explore how Division I male African American football student-athletes form and manage their multiple social identifications, and the impact their primary identification can have in their academic and athletic experience at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This literature review is intended to connect Social Identity Theory (SIT) to practices within intercollegiate athletics. To accomplish this, I will address two themes found throughout the literature on identity and college athletes: social identity of athletes and socialization of athletes into a role. The first theme will begin with a review of pertinent components of SIT, followed by literature focused on social identity and athletes, concluding with literature addressing role conflict and athletes. The second theme will follow with a review of socialization of athletes into a role. This begins with a general review of literature covering the key components of the socialization process, followed by factors that influence socialization, and concluding with revenue athletes' socialization experiences. A summary of the two themes in the literature review will close out this chapter.

### **Social Identity of Athletes**

There is research on the topic of social identity, and a growing body of research focused on how athletes form social identities (Adler & Adler, 1998; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Hogg et al. (1995) defined social identity as how individuals view one another based on group membership. With the intent to understand collegiate athletes' social identity, I chose to use SIT as the theoretical lens to understand how student-athletes perceive how others view them, and if they perceive that this impacts their identity (Beamon, 2012; Comeaux, 2010; Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004;

Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Hart, 2004; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001). This section also delves into the number of common ways non-athletes and athletes form social identities before and during college, highlighting major differences. Those differences include: race, type of sport, type of socialization prior to and during college, and athletic scholarships. These differences viewed through the theoretical lens of SIT allowed for a clearer understanding of how the participants in this study identified at UWI.

Before choosing SIT as the theoretical lens for this study I investigated research concerning college athletes identity, and the most common identity theories in social psychology. Within the research the following theories are often referenced: social identity theory (SIT), identity theory (IT), and social categorization theory (SCT). There are numerous similarities between the theories of identity, but each differs in its main focus (Ashmore et al., 2004; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). IT looks at the internal self-verification of self and attempts to explain how an individual's many roles influence their behaviors (Hogg et al., 1995). SIT explains intergroup behavior with the distinction that personal identity and social identity are separate, while also explaining how in-groups and out-groups are created taking into account historical and cultural considerations (Hogg et al., 1995; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SCT focuses on how individuals form their self-concept by categorizing themselves into psychological groups based on how they rate the quality or salience of the situation they find themselves in (Turner, 1999). In the end, all the theories touch on individuals interacting with other individuals in social settings, but the question they are trying to answer is, "how do people answer the question, who am I?" and "what role, if any does' society play in forming identity?"

### **Social identity theory.**

Tajfel and Turner offered Social Identity Theory (SIT) in 1979 to understand the inner workings of human intergroup discrimination and conflict. SIT clarifies the social behavior behind how and why individuals choose a social identity. SIT suggest two extremes of social behavior encompass how we interact with individuals and groups. The extremes make up the interpersonal-intergroup continuum (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose “pure” interpersonal relationships are rare in day-to-day life because these relationships are individualistic. However intergroup interactions are most common because people belong to multiple social groups, and like to compare themselves to others in order to identify positively or negatively in society (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Explained in a general sense, an individual’s social identity is dependent upon any given situation they may find themselves in (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In general, people interact with one another based on how they feel others view their social category (group), and as a result the individual (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals who believe their group is viewed in a positive light will have higher self-esteem and view their group as positive (Hogg et al., 1995). The research suggests when individuals feel they are a member of a social category, that membership becomes a part of their identification and answers in a small part, who they are (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). An individual’s self-concept is comprised of all their social categories, and Ashforth and Mael (1989) note, “People have a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self-concept” (p. 259). Each social category is represented by a social identity, and these identities and categories are continuously evaluated internally in a process called social categorization.

Social categorization is the process in which individuals mentally divide their social environment and create a system that allows them to define other individuals, groups, and ultimately themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Categorization ultimately is how individuals justify who they associate with, and how they perceive others view these associations as positive or negative. The definition of others and self are said to be, “relational and comparative” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16), but this only pertains to the categories in which the individual holds membership and those like it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). An example of this is the category of student-athlete only being meaningful in relation to the category of athlete and the category of student (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Within SIT two groups exist: in-groups and out-groups. In-groups consist of people that are connected through a shared belief and evaluation of their group, and those with different evaluations make up the out-group (Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These groups are formed in the categorization process using stereotypes to establish an “us” vs “them” mentality, giving the group with a perceived positive disposition the in-group status (Hogg & Abrams, 1993). SIT suggests an in-group can become an out-group if being a part of a particular group makes an individual feel negatively about themselves, and this is due to the individual drive to be seen in a positive light (Hornsey, 2008). The notion of two groups, or multiple groups being compared at one time is important in this study because African American student-athletes perceivably compare their race, sport and academic load on a daily basis.

Three general assumptions guide SIT: 1) Individuals want to be seen in a positive light, and have high self-esteem, 2) Individual social identity is tied to membership in positive or negative groups, 3) By evaluating and comparing groups with similar values and characteristics, individuals determine if their social identity and group are positive or negative (Tajfel & Turner,

1979). SIT recognizes people are selfish when it comes to communicating with one another, and ultimately their own happiness is what matters. Through continuous evaluation of groups, people are constantly searching for the reinforcement that they are good people, and other people are not as good as them. We see this fight for prestige in race, religion, social economic status, collegiate athletics, and politics.

As a theoretical framework for this study, SIT describes the complicated process individuals embark upon to choose a social identity after interacting with groups and individuals. African American student-athletes that play football have three prominent roles when they arrive on a college campus (African American, athlete, and student), and as explained by SIT, they want to be seen in a positive light for each role by others. The problem with wanting to be seen in a positive light by others, is that one cannot control the perceptions of others. Understanding that other individuals' perceptions do impact identity, and the role of categorization leading to in-groups and out-groups was helpful in understanding the responses elicited from participants. Complicating matters, is the fact that individual identity is impacted by group membership. SIT helped to explain how an African American football player at a PWI chose a social identity based on his interactions with other groups on campus.

### **Social identity and athletes.**

The athlete identity has been defined as an individual viewing themselves as an athlete before all roles, and using this identity as their main mental state (Brewer et al., 1993). The student identity for Division I, African American male college athletes appears to be intertwined into the athlete role, due to socialization prior to college. Football players identifying as athlete-students are believed to be caused by sports being emphasized early in their lives, and reinforced by the time demands of revenue sports in college (Bimper Jr, 2014; Singer, 2008).

High school historically has served as the point where young athletes became serious about athletics. Edwards (1979) notes that high school is the level for African Americans, “that competition begins for the first major rewards of sports participation – a collegiate athletic scholarship and the opportunity to achieve a college education.” (p 121). Many studies have highlighted African American community’s passion for athletics and the belief that sports, rather than education, provide the only exit from poverty or their neighborhood (Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 1979; Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011). Harrison et al. (2011) discuss the impact of stereotyping, both from external influences and the African American community itself, suggesting being told you are an athlete, reinforced by positive treatment, can lead to a higher percentage of African Americans going into sports. Sports participation is believed to be a status symbol and not playing a sport could impact popularity, self-confidence, and other peoples’ view of an individual’s masculinity (football), especially if a young person’s family and/or community place value and give status to athletics (Beamon, 2009; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978). Understanding how African American youth sports participation in their communities has been described in the socialization literature was helpful in determining if the participants in my study shared similarities or differences when compared to past research.

Researchers explain that social environment can be at least partly responsible for individual identity and for setting the foundation of intergroup and group division based on the social criteria set by the social environment (Tajfel et al., 1971). The social environment upon arrival on campus for football student-athletes is one consisting of football only related activities. Consciously and unconsciously, athletic staff and teammates exemplify what it means to be a student-athlete, leading new members down the athlete-student path (Adler & Adler, 1991; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Early socialization paired with positive experiences in the form

of praise for athletic feats aides in the development of the student-athlete in-group, and all others falling into the out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Division I student-athletes and their non-athlete peers are faced with social and academic adjustments to college when they first arrive on campus. Unlike their non-athlete peers, student-athletes must also adjust to the time demands of athletics as well as academics. The literature suggests student-athletes perceived that the coaching staff as well as the academic staff expected football to take priority over academics, and this perception was shown to cause role conflict for student-athletes (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). The high time demands and perceived directives to focus on their sport have lead student-athletes to refer to collegiate athletics as a business (Hoffer, Humphreys, Lacombe, & Ruseski, 2015). For some student-athletes, the signing of their scholarship is similar to signing a business contract as they are expected to make the company money through their skills (Adler & Adler, 1991).

Across the literature, individuals with multiple groups such as student-athletes, are believed to have multiple social identities. Student-athletes are believed to be susceptible to one of the multiple social identities becoming more valued or threatening to their self-esteem (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1989, 1991; Marx et al., 2008; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). As described in SIT, any threat to self-esteem or a group being seen in a negative light can cause an individual to depart that group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Adler and Adler (1991) point out, a role such as athlete can offer positive feelings and a boost to an individual's self-esteem leading to that role being engulfed while other roles such as student are left idle. Football players at Division I institutions are believed to be more susceptible to role strain and engulfment, as compared to non-athlete's due to their elevated status on campus as an athlete (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Marx et al., 2008). The responsibility to remain eligible while

representing the institution, and adhering to the head coaches imposed schedule, can further strain a student-athlete's ability to perform academically and identify with the student role (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Marx et al., 2008).

When classes begin for student-athletes, the social environment expands to campus where faculty and non-athlete peers play an integral part in the social categorization process. Social categorization was described earlier as a process where student-athletes' social identity formation begins (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Research suggests when individuals separate their environments during categorization, they utilize certain criteria to judge others, and isolate the "good" from the "bad," leading to stereotypes that are often noted as a criteria (Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Hogg et al., 1995). Killeya (2001) suggests, being African American and playing football represent two at-risk groups on a college campus that potentially complicate the successful adjustment to college. The beginning of classes seems to mark a potentially difficult time for African American student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991), and this point in time was explored in this study, with attention given to the perceptions of the participants in relation to faculty and non-athlete peers.

The research on male Division I football players shows race to be a factor in identification, and many studies reveal that African American male Division I football players' struggle with their identification and academic ability once on campus at a PWI (Adler & Adler, 1988, 1991; Cutright, 2013; Harper et al., 2009). African American student-athletes who are engaged with their academics are believed to be the most susceptible to stereotype threat, or as described in the literature, these athletes are at risk to conform to a negative stereotype such as the dumb jock while in the classroom (Stone et al., 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Factors

attributing to these struggles include feelings of exploitation, discrimination by peers and faculty members, and feelings of isolation (Melendez, 2008).

### **Social identity and African American Athletes**

The literature shows African American student-athletes are discriminated against by African American non-athlete peers, and labeled as outsiders because of their elevated status on campus (Melendez, 2008). Despite having the same skin tone, some African American student-athletes disassociate with African American non-athlete peers because they negatively impact their self-esteem with stereotypes such as the dumb jock (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Engstrom et al., 1995; Killeya, 2001; Melendez, 2008; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). Finding there was tension between athlete and non-athlete African Americans in the literature was disappointing but helpful in understanding how and why the participants in this study interacted with their African American peers, and the impact on their identification.

Social identity for African American football student-athletes is impacted further with less than five percent of students on college campuses being African American, and the majority residing in the athletic department (Harper et al., 2013). Harper et al. (2013) found “Between 2007 and 2010, African American men were 2.8 percent of degree-seeking undergraduate students, but 57.1 percent of football teams and 64.3 percent of basketball teams” (p. 1). In 2016, African Americans represented 53.8 percent of the student-athletes on Division I FBS football teams, and 54.8 percent in men’s basketball (Lapchick, Marfatia, Bloom, & Sylverain, 2016). Criteria potentially influencing social identification is lengthy, but race is found in the research to be a key factor in how African American football student-athletes identify (Beamon, 2012; Edwards, 1985, 2000). The number of African Americans in revenue sports feeds the stereotype that African Americans are just dumb jocks on a free ride taking easy classes (Edwards, 1985,

2000; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Further complicating social identification is how individuals perceive others view their religion, social economic status, playing status, and even political affiliations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In an effort to maintain high self-esteem, it seems African American football players perceive they have to take on the athlete role, and turn away from the classroom where they are stereotyped and made to feel undervalued.

### **Role conflict and athletes.**

Numerous studies have explored the concept of role conflict in the African American student-athlete population, and the potential impact on various outcomes such as: academic and athletic success, major choice, and persistence to college graduation (Adler & Adler, 1987; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Snyder, 1985; Stone et al., 2012). The role of student and the role of athlete can be overwhelming for student-athletes at Division I institutions (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Tinto, 2010). For African American student-athletes, the allure of going pro, and expecting to go pro have been cited as sources of conflict between sport and academics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Edwards, 1979). There is also research reporting that some African American male football players enter college with aspirations to succeed academically (Stone et al., 2012). While many thrive, some struggle after interacting with athletic staff, faculty, and non-athlete peers because of mixed messages in regard to academics and athletics (Mahoney, 2011; Pascarella et al., 1999; Singer, 2009). The research undertaken by Daniels (1987) and Singer (2009) delves into institutional integrity and addresses student-athletes' perceptions on exploitation and how the NCAA and the individual members say one thing, but display actions counter to their statements. Singer (2009) points out the NCAA and member institutions list commitments regarding intellectual and social development online, and in print in missions, values and goals (p 103). The NCAA's stated purpose is to make the

educational experience of student-athletes paramount (Singer, 2009), but Singer, 2009 makes a compelling point:

when you consider the fact that the NCAA and its member institutions have a vested financial interest in the relationships that they have established with the media and corporate America over the past few decades, it is easy to see and understand why the educational interest of the athlete might be trumped by the financial and economic interest of those who run the college sport enterprise (i.e., administrators, coaches). (p. 104)

So how do football players place academics ahead of shoe deals, multimillion dollar stadiums, and the chance to go pro when they are stereotyped and called dumb jocks? My study will seek to find some answers.

When discussing student-athletes' ability to balance their multiple roles, Adler and Adler's (1985) research is often cited. Adler and Adler (1991) note in their research, male student-athletes had positive academic expectations for themselves when they entered college. As student-athletes experience classes, social life, and athletics they discover their academic expectations for themselves don't match their actual day-to-day lives (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Stone et al., 2012). These findings contradict self-reported data from the 2010 GOAL study, where student-athletes expressed their expectations matched their college experience 76 percent of the time (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011). Football student-athletes self-identified themselves as athletes and not student-athletes 79 percent of the time in the 2010 GOAL study (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011) supporting the literature on role engulfment.

Additional research suggests role conflict can start in high school and continue into college with the new challenges presented by collegiate athletics (Goldberg, 1991; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). With so few African Americans on campus, African American student-athletes are seen by some as outsiders (Melendez, 2008). Being seen as an outsider, and not being confident in one's academic ability as a result of not being academically prepared for college are two reasons African American student-athletes have role conflict (Watt & Moore, 2001; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

Finding a balance between athletics, academics and personal development has historically been a concern in collegiate athletics (Feltz et al., Sept. 2011; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001). Some research has shown collegiate athletics to be contradictory in their commitment to academics (Daniels, 1987; Singer, 2009). Student-athletes have expressed being confused, not knowing what the athletic department values more, academics or athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Student-athletes perceive their sport (football or basketball) comes first, and believe their coaches and other athletic staff lead them to put their sport first with their verbal statements explicitly stating the point (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Savage, 1933; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). Non-athlete peers, and professors form stereotypes based on athletes not being engaged in the classroom, or not attending group sessions due to practice, not knowing the student-athlete is only following the direction of coaches. These stereotypes further complicate identification for student-athletes, leading to role conflict (Comeaux, Harrison, & Plecha, 2006; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

Stereotypes can inhibit or damage a student-athletes self-image, and according to SIT this can cause them to abort the out-group causing damage (i.e. student role), which could also deter academic success (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Yopyk and Prentice (2005) argue that we can have

varying social identities, and each identity can be the target of negative words or actions, potentially presenting reasons for role conflict. For student-athletes, they are students, athletes, and sometimes viewed by others as lazy, spoiled, dumb jocks that are given special treatment (Bosworth, Fujita, Jensen, & Simons, 2007; Stone et al., 2012). In the Bosworth et al. (2007) study of 538 collegiate athletes, 62.1 percent said they had heard a faculty member make a negative comment about athletes in class. Various studies have reported, professors hold negative images of student-athletes and question their academic ability, and the literature surrounding the topic shows these feelings are intensified when the student-athlete is African American (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Engstrom et al., 1995). Bosworth et al. (2007) state that student-athletes should be up front with professors and ask what they expect at the beginning of the semester to help do away with the negative stereotypes assigned to athletes.

### **Socialization of Athletes into a Role**

When discussing individuals, groups, and socialization, Cooley's "looking glass self" seems fitting, especially with SIT as a lens. Cooley's process of socialization is based mainly in how individuals perceive others view them and how this makes that individual feel (Cooley, 1902). Mead expanded upon Cooley's work, adding stages from birth to death. Mead notes the "self" is discovered when individuals learn to imagine how they are viewed by others (Mead, 1934). Subsequent theories follow in step by theorizing the process of socialization occurs in phases throughout one's life, similar to what is found in SIT. All of these theories come back to Cooley and Mead's first works, and ask the question, who am I, how do others see me, and how do individuals find their "self" (Cooley, 1902; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1996; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977; Mead, 1934). This section will examine the African American student-athlete socialization process, factors that influence socialization, and the socialization experiences of revenue student-

athletes. Understanding the process of socialization from the African American student-athlete perspective in comparison to others, highlights the amount of time African Americans are socialized into athletics, and why they choose a particular social role identification.

### **Socialization process.**

The research surrounding socialization is plentiful, and the same is true for definitions of the term socialization. After reviewing several definitions of socialization, the following combined definition was chosen: Socialization is a life-long process that includes intertwining learning processes undertaken by individuals willingly and unwillingly. This process leads to new knowledge, skills and the proper way to act as an individual and group member in the social order of society, answering the question, who am I (Clausen, 1968; Grusec & Hastings, 2014; Levine & Moreland, 1994; Long & Hadden, 1985; Marx et al., 2008; Ross, 1919; Sewell, 1963; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

The process of socialization and its part in aiding athletes in their role identification prior to and during college is perceived to be damaged for African American student-athletes (Beamon, 2009, 2012; Edwards, 1979, 1988, 2000). Prior to college, three phases make up the socialization process (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Piaget, 2013). The phases suggested by Cote are: sampling years (ages, 6-13), specializing years (ages, 13-15), and investment years (around 15) (Côté, 1999). Parents and siblings are noted to be the first socializers in a newborn's life and represent an individual's primary group (Eccles et al., 1983; Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001; Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984). The primary group is responsible for consciously and unconsciously showing new group members (family members) how life works in the group (Schaffler, 1953). Some suggest we are born as unwilling blank slates into

our culture, traditions, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and gender; some would contend we are hard wired with specific skills, including athletics (Schaffler, 1953).

The primary group verbally and nonverbally establishes foundational habits, attitudes, and beliefs for new members through everyday interactions, and expectations including potential job expectations such as professional sports aspirations, and attainable education level (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 1988; Jodl et al., 2001; Schaffler, 1953). These habits, attitudes, and beliefs, become measuring sticks for future decisions with individuals and groups, and the experiences teach individuals how to classify a decision, individual or group as positive or negative (Markus, 1977; Schaffler, 1953). These interactions gradually move outside the primary group and include extended family members, neighbors, peers, and groups within the community and society at large (Côté, 1999). Over time, learned habits, primary group expectations, and experiences with groups in the local community and society at large all play a role in how individuals identify and decide which groups they become members of in the future (Côté, 1999).

As we grow, we are conditioned to speak the language designated by our parents, act and think in line with their culture and the surrounding community, including how sports are viewed and should be approached. These early years make up the sampling stage; children are introduced to the fun aspects of sport. I mentioned earlier, the socialization process for African Americans is perceived to be damaged (Beamon, 2009, 2012; Edwards, 1979, 1988, 2000), and one example of this is how in the African American community children learn they receive positive attention if they play football or basketball and do well, but don't receive the same praise for academics (Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 2000; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Jodl et al., 2001). The literature suggests the sampling years are diminishing and African American children

are being socialized into basketball and football earlier in life, (Beamon, 2009; Côté, 1999; Edwards, 1988, 2000; Paskus & Bell, 2016).

Côté (1999) deems the period between the ages of 13-15, to be the specializing years where students in middle school begin to play only one or two sports, and parents begin to spend money on the sports and training (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). Some athletes have noted that when they receive positive reinforcement after doing something well, they feel pressure to perform every time, and fear negative comments if they don't attain the same level of success because their parents spent money (Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 1988, 2000; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

During high school, young boys are put on a pedestal and told they are athletic stars. These talented youths are recruited by Division I college athletic programs and told they are athletically gifted. These young boys having been socialized to believe sports are their way out of their community and lifestyle, and they listen intently to recruiters offering them a chance to get a college education and continue playing on the next level. Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) suggest, "During the recruitment process much of the socialization of prospective athletes into the culture begins, and at this early stage the notion of balance emerges" (p. 499). In this quote, the notion of balance is in reference to young boys being told, and believing they can be athletes and students equally. In a case study where organizational loyalty of basketball players was evaluated, Adler and Adler (1988) identified five elements essential to the development of intense loyalty to an organization: domination, identification, commitment, integration, and goal alignment (p. 404). These five elements align with the definition of socialization chosen for this study. Adler and Adler's (1988) work also aligns with Pescosolido (1986) proposed three-stage assimilation process consisting of:

1. Expectancy – new comers are idealistic of what they will experience, and say and do what they think is correct based on information given to them by others, but these views fade when expectations don't match reality.
2. Disillusionment – new comers are faced with the reality of day-to-day life, and their situation not matching the idealistic view they had.
3. Reconciliation – Idealistic views return but not at the same level as in Expectancy. Expectancy encompasses, domination, identification, and commitment while disillusionment aligns with integration, and reconciliation matches up with goal alignment.

During the recruitment phase student-athletes develop idealistic views of college athletics after being told the perceived positives by coaches, potential teammates, and support staff, leading to a choice to attend a university and pledge their loyalty by signing a letter of commitment (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Adler and Adler (1988) suggest strong leaders like coaches can evoke a sense of subordination in student-athletes based on what they've been told by coaches. One student-athlete described his experience, "When you sign it's almost like you're taking an oath that you're gonna follow this man, do what he tell you for four years, play on his team, it feels like signing your life away" (Adler & Adler, 1988, pp. 409-410). In this quote the student-athlete describes the commitment phase (signing letter of intent), and part of the domination phase (feelings of subordination) discussed in Adler and Adler (1988). Research suggests once on campus student-athletes hear messaging contrary to what they heard during the recruitment phase, also known as disillusionment (Adler & Adler, 1988, 1991; Daniels, 1987; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Pescosolido, 1986). One example of this includes student-athletes being told they have control over the balance of academics and athletics. The reality is student-

athletes are told it is their responsibility to remain eligible when they arrive on campus and their time is controlled by coaches (Ayers, Dohose, & Pazmino-Cevallos, 2012; Beamon, 2008; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016).

Once on campus, Adler and Adler (1988) suggest student-athletes are broken down in the domination phase, becoming subordinate to their head coach because of his title and control over playing time. The head coach controls student-athletes through his overarching knowledge of their movements and rules set to keep them eligible (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Several researchers have addressed how and why the coaching staff and other athletic staff make it a point to erase the old reality presented during recruitment, followed by the introduction of the new reality presented in the athletic department (Adler & Adler, 1988; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Adler and Adler (1988) suggest, “A second main component integral to the development of loyalty was the players’ forging of self-conceptions in which they identified with both the organization and the leader” (p. 408). Pescosolido (1986) referred to this as reconciliation, or when idealism returns, but not as strong as when in the expectancy phase. Student-athletes begin to integrate into the system, and as classes begin, student-athletes use one another as a support system to adapt to a predominantly white campus (Adler & Adler, 1988; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Melendez, 2008). The final component in the process of socialization concludes with goal alignment, where student-athletes understand what is expected of them and their teammates (Adler & Adler, 1991). At this juncture student-athletes choose to either work in harmony with the program and identify as an athlete first while staying eligible, or choose to identify as a student and athlete with the intent to balance the two (Adler & Adler, 1991).

### **Factors that influence socialization.**

The media, family, friends, teachers, coaches, counselors, and communities as a whole have been listed as factors that contribute to the socialization of African American youth into the athlete first identification prior to college (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 1985; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1973). In African American communities around the country African American males are socialized to believe football and basketball are their primary avenues to professional sports, better neighborhoods, and success in life (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Edwards, 1983, 1988, 2000). Beyond high school, the socialization process appears to carry on in the college social environment.

A social environment such as a college campus or athletic department can be ripe with social criteria imposed by the university, NCAA, and society. Social criteria being defined as standards set forth by society, organizations, or individuals by which judgments, and decisions can be made and based (Bosworth et al., 2007; *Criterion. (n.d.)*; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Marx et al., 2008). Criteria include academic preparation level, academic advisors separate of the university, lower entrance standards into the university, scholarships, stipends, size of sporting venues, policies, and amount of money paid to coaches, are just a few (Edwards, 1984; Savage, Bentley, McGovern, & Smiley, 1929). The literature suggests these social criteria contribute to how individuals inside and outside of athletics personally identify with the athletic department and student-athletes (Hogg & Terry, 2000). These perceptions lay the foundation for stereotypes, either founded or unfounded (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). This section will be focused on the following factors that were found to have the most influence on socialization in the literature; family, community/high school, university faculty & non-athlete peers, and academic services staff.

### **Family.**

With family members representing an individual's primary group, and having the most influence on children early in life, the research indicates families that place high value on athletics will instill this in their children verbally and nonverbally. Types of influence include paraphernalia in a baby's crib, basketball goals in the driveway, or simply talking about sports often as a family (Côté, 1999; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Jodl et al., 2001). Edwards (2000) cites, the African American youth socialization process began and continues to be fueled by:

a long-standing, widely held, racist, and ill-informed presumption of innate, race-linked African American athletic superiority and intellectual deficiency; (2) media propaganda portraying sports as a broadly accessible route to African American social and economic mobility; and (3) a lack of comparably visible, high-prestige African American role models beyond the sports arena. (p. 9)

In other words, due to circumstance African Americans are told they can play ball well by their families, but that they are not very smart. The only way they will be successful is by playing a sport, or hustling in the streets. In addition to Edwards, other researchers have suggested the process of socialization is preceded by a shift in American culture and the dynamics of the family, including single parent homes, dual working parents, parenting style, and an increasing belief that sports build character (Adler & Adler, 1998; Brustad & Partridge, 1996; Edwards, 1988).

In a study of 444 African American and European American seventh graders, distributed almost equally, researchers found students who strongly identified with their mothers placed greater emphasis on academics and their future academic and career path (Jodl et al., 2001). The researchers also found parents' values predicted youths' values directly rather than indirectly

through the parents' behaviors. In contrast, fathers' behaviors directly and indirectly predicted youth values when it came to athletics (Jodl et al., 2001). It should be stated that the families in the study consisted of non-divorced, two-parent homes, which for this study represented two participants. In a study completed by Beamon (2009), the participants said their fathers pushed them athletically, but not academically. These findings highlight the role of parents as socializers of achievement-related values, and suggest parents play a key role in adolescents' occupational visions of themselves in the future (Adler & Adler, 1991; Adler & Adler, 1998; Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 1988, 2000). Research also suggest, unrealistic professional aspirations can lead to role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991; Adler & Adler, 1998).

### **Community/high school.**

Adler and Adler (1991) speculate that the allure of professional football and the potential to make millions tempts African American youth and adults alike to view football as one of few potential ways out of their financial and geographic situation, leading to professional athletes being idolized. Beamon (2009) similarly found, participants in her study were affected by the neighborhoods they lived in, "placing them with peers who had the same aspirations for professional sports careers and allowing them to model the successful athletes in their neighborhood" (p. 292). The communities where some African American football players grow up in are known for pushing youth into sports because of lack of resources in the schools and lack of confidence in ability to do anything else (Edwards, 1988). These examples of early socialization have also been linked with role engulfment.

As noted earlier role engulfment is defined as one role taking over as the dominant role, leaving little space for other roles to emerge (Adler & Adler, 1991). Athletes, especially African Americans, are seen as susceptible to role engulfment when socialized early into sports, leading

to poor academic performance (Adler & Adler, 1988; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 1985, 2000). Part of the poor academic performance could also be linked to youth not wanting to be stereotyped as something other than an athlete by their peers.

### **Peers (high school).**

From early adolescents to high school, students' identities are formed through interactions with peers and groups within the community (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978). In-line with social identity theory, children seek the approval of their parents, and peers, and want to be seen in a positive light (Jodl et al., 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Goldberg and Chandler (1989) found across socioeconomic class, demographical area, and school size that athletics was the most important component in determining a male's popularity and how they identified. In another study, student-athletes were "recognized, rewarded, and judged by adults for whom sport is no longer a game but a metaphor for life, and for whom their teams performance had become an evaluation of themselves, their community, and their school" (Danish, 1983, p. 333). In another study, with popularity having a strong influence on how adolescents identified, 619 adolescent high school students, identified as student-athletes (31.9%), students (22.4%), and athletes (21%), and stated they most valued their future status as a student-athlete (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). With the family socializing youth to identify as athletes, compounded with the community praising professional athletes, and rewarding athletics and not academics, it is easy to see how youth identify as athlete-students, or simply athletes.

### **University faculty & non-athlete peers**

Focusing on faculty and non-athletic peers, researchers explain the social environment can be responsible partly for individual identity development (Tajfel et al., 1971). University

faculty, and their interactions with student-athletes have the potential to either positively or negatively impact student-athlete identification in the process of socialization (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Engstrom et al., 1995). There have been several studies that have illustrated African American student-athletes perceived stereotyping by faculty members and to being stigmatized due to race (Bosworth et al., 2007; Comeaux, 2010). In a study of 538 student-athletes, Bosworth et al. (2007) sought to find how student-athletes believed faculty and non-athlete peers looked at them and treated them, and they found:

33% reported they were perceived negatively by professors and 59.1% by students, only 15% reported positive perceptions. 61.5% reported they were refused or given a hard time when requesting accommodations for athletic competitions. 62.1% reported a faculty member had made a negative remark about athletes in class. 370 athletes reported specific comments about athletes made by faculty and non-athlete students. The comments reflected the dumb jock stereotype; low intelligence, little academic motivation and receipt of undeserved benefits and privileges. (p. 251)

African American student-athletes say they responded to negative stereotypes by doing what was expected of them: not attending class, or choosing not to participate (Adler & Adler, 1991; Comeaux, 2010). Positive interactions with faculty members resulted in better grades, but for African American student-athletes the possibility of graduating and pursuing more education becomes a tangible reality (Carodine et al., 2001; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Martin & Harris, 2006). For the purpose of my research study, understanding how interactions with individuals such as faculty, as described above, is important in understanding why the participants choose to identify.

Melendez (2008), in an attempt to examine the psychosocial experience of African American football players at a PWI, found the following:

When describing their experiences on the campus, the players seemed surprised at the lack of acceptance and understanding on the part of their classmates and professors. The stigma of being an African American student-athlete seemed to create the most discord for these players.” (p. 437)

The most painful judgement was said to come from African American non-athlete peers (Melendez, 2008), but research indicates all non-athlete peers share similar feelings about faculty, not making them feel accepted or understood (Bosworth et al., 2007). This point was helpful in understanding the connection between non-athlete African Americans and African American student-athletes, as the interviewer it was helpful in knowing this judgement existed.

Walking into a classroom where no one looks like you can be shocking and can promote feelings of being an outsider for student-athletes (Melendez, 2008). Research has shown that African American student-athletes have been academically unprepared for the academic rigor of college, and as a result they are said to have higher levels of academic skepticism (Watt & Moore, 2001; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Student-athletes are shown to have several social identities due to their multi-group membership status. Each identity is competing to be the main identity, but the decision to foreclose on academics is made easier when student-athletes perceive academics are not for them. Student-athletes are constantly evaluating their memberships through social categorization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and in many cases, their self-esteem is lowered in the classroom, and raised on the field. Hogg et al. (1995) argue a “us” vs “them” mentality can be formed during social categorization when stereotypes are perceived to put labels on individuals such as student-athletes. Student-athletes recognize

their teammates as “us” in the “in group” and “them” as faculty and non-athlete peers. So even if student-athletes come into college identifying as both student and athlete, placing both roles as “in groups,” stereotypes, and negative feelings in the academic setting, can cause the in-group to become and out-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hornsey, 2008).

### *Academic services.*

Academic support staff are seen as influential members in a student-athlete’s life and, outside of coaches, have the ability to positively or negatively influence student-athletes’ academic decisions during the recruitment process and again, when they arrive on campus. Academic services for student-athletes vary across the country, but a general consensus suggests institutions need to provide unprepared student-athletes with the tools to remain eligible, graduate, and find jobs after graduation to be considered successful (Gunn & Eddy, 1989; Hollis, 2001). Some studies report that athletic academic support staff are employed to simply keep student-athletes eligible (Commission, 2001; Lawry, 2005). Countless scandals involving academic misconduct across the country are used to substantiate these claims. An issue addressed in the literature is the amount of control athletics leaders, such as the athletic directors and head coaches have over support staff. Although not stated specifically in job descriptions, employment can be contingent upon student-athletes remaining eligible at any cost, including writing papers for them, or suggesting majors not relevant to student-athletes desires (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987; Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010). Lawry (2005) notes:

Scandals involving tutors writing papers for athletes have been common, and most people believe that for every scandal that becomes public, many more remain undetected. In

recent years, the universities of Minnesota, Tennessee, and Missouri al have been tainted by these sorts of integrity-shattering events. (p. 21)

From 19 football players being enrolled in classes they did not attend at the University of Southern California to academic staff reporting credits not earned by student-athletes, academic scandals seem to be endless (Hollis, 2001; Lapchick, 1991). One of the largest scandals involving the University of North Carolina lasted over 18 years and involved athletes being clustered into classes by advisors that did not meet, while others did their work. Additionally, advisors lied about athletes' grades, all to remain eligible (Ganim, 2015).

Although there is evidence of scandals and cheating before the modern athletic departmental structure (Savage et al., 1929; Thelin, 1994), there is evidence suggesting academic support centers paved the way to make it easier for counselors, advisors, and tutors to cheat on behalf of student-athletes for athletic success (Hollis, 2001; Huml et al., 2014; Lawry, 2005). One of the most often referenced examples of academic misconduct and isolation on the part of the athletic department is academic clustering. Academic clustering can be described as a large percentage of an athletic team enrolling in a specific major (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Case et al. (1987) define academic clustering to be, when 25 percent of a team's members are enrolled in the same major. Some studies suggest clustering may be necessary to keep student-athletes together for their own comfort, and to achieve better academic results (McGuin & O'Brien, 2004). More evidence points to clustering occurring to help keep athletes eligible by enrolling them in classes with professors that favor the athletic department (Commission, 2010; Hollis, 2001; Schneider et al., 2010).

Several studies suggest student-athletes are enrolled in specific classes to protect their eligibility (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Hanlon & Potuto, 2007). Fountain and Finley (2009)

surveyed 394 players at major NCAA Division I football programs and they found that clustering occurred at every school in the study, and frequently exceeded 25 percent or more of players in a single class. The consistency of clustering for football players, but more so for minorities is found in Fountain and Finley's (2009) work:

Nearly every school in the study had Minority football players clustering into a single major at a higher percentage than their White counterparts... The pattern of Minorities clustering more densely into a single program held true at nine of the schools. Four teams had 62% or more of its Minority upperclassmen clustered into a single major. Only in one case was the percentage of White players in one major as high (69%) (p. 7). Similar findings can be found in other studies (Case et al., 1987; Schneider et al., 2010; Suggs, 2003).

African American student-athletes have shown resentment to these majors because they believe they reinforce the dumb jock stereotype, and for many the major given to them was different than their desired major (Fountain & Finley, 2009). A participant in the Benson (2000) study put the stereotypes into perspective by saying, "They're just like... Well, he's dumb, so let's put him in this easy class to get his GPA back up," without even looking at my schedule or what I want to do... You know, advisors just want you in hours sometimes...." (Benson, 2000, p. 209). Labels like dumb-jock, regardless of their truth serve as stereotypes, and are said to influence socialization (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Stone et al., 2012). Negative stereotypes aimed at student-athletes' academic identity by faculty, non-athlete peers, and academic services staff can cast negative feelings about the academic role, pushing them to disassociate with the role, as is seen with role engulfment and categorization in Social Identity Theory (Adler & Adler, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Clustering is seen by student-athletes as the coaches and athletic

department attempting to control yet another aspect of their life (Case et al., 1987; Fisher, Ross, & Schneider, 2010; Huml et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2010).

The existence of clustering is supported by findings in the 2015 GOAL study where 32 percent of NCAA Division I football players agreed that athletics had prevented them from taking classes they wanted to take. Also, 25 percent agreed athletics prevented them from majoring in their desired major, but did not regret it after looking back at their collegiate athletic career (Paskus & Bell, 2016). In fact, 70 percent of Division I football players in one study responded that they would definitely or probably would still choose their current major if they were not college athletes (Paskus & Bell, 2016).

Ridpath (2010) reported that the majority of those completing his survey, believed academic support services was essential to their eligibility and graduation. When discussing eligibility and graduation, African American student-athletes described references to education actually being code words addressing their eligibility, and ability to contribute to their respective teams (Beamon, 2008). Benson (2000) ventured to understand how African American student-athletes perceived their academic experiences impacted their expectations, and found:

The idea that others were more responsible for their academic programs than they were themselves was communicated right away by the advisor practice of choosing their classes for them. From this the athletes perceived that they were not considered capable of performing well academically, were not expected to do so, and that they were not cared about as individual persons. (p. 230)

Student-athletes also felt their words held no weight with their counselors:

Rodney felt he was put in classes that did not correspond with his interests, despite his efforts to communicate what those interests were. He felt that an advisor's failure to listen

to him early on had negative consequences later in terms of his academic curriculum and his career plans. (Benson, 2000, p. 230)

Academic services staff is perceived to play a key role in socializing young boys into athlete-students. Although critical to keeping athletes eligible, academic support staff can also lower their self-esteem in the academic setting, and reinforcing the point by not allowing athletes the privilege of choosing a major.

### **African American athletes' experiences.**

There is a large body of research focused on the differences between Division I revenue, and non-revenue sport student-athletes. One of the major differences between the two types of sports is the disproportionate number of African Americans participating in revenue sports at predominately white institutions (refer to page 32 for statistics). Several studies specifically address the role of race and how it impacts student-athlete's perceptions of socialization and role conflict (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2009; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Colon, 2011; Gill Jr, 2006; Harper et al., 2013).

Much of the research has described how different the college experience can be based on skin tone, but this is not to say white student-athletes are not impacted by their identification as student-athletes. Case in point, in the Bosworth et al. (2007) study referenced earlier, of the 538 student-athletes 376 of the student-athletes were white, and 63 were African American, with the remaining 65 being named as other. Forty-two percent of the African American student-athletes reported negative perceptions, while 34.1 percent of whites reported negative perceptions (Bosworth et al., 2007). In the same study, there were 108 revenue sport student-athletes (basketball and football), of which 38 were African American, and 430 participated in non-revenue sports (Bosworth et al., 2007). The literature shows both African American and white

student-athletes as being stereotyped as dumb jocks, but African Americans report negative comments based on the color of their skin compounding how they self-identify (Bosworth et al., 2007; Melendez, 2008; Njororai, 2012).

Noting the impact of the environment, African American student-athletes at PWI's have expressed feelings of isolation, rejection and mistrust of others (Beamon, 2008; Melendez, 2008; Njororai, 2012; Singer, 2009). In a study of psychosocial and emotional realities, Melendez (2008) interviewed six African American football players at a PWI, and the participants believed their African American teammates supported them, but others (non-African American) caused them stress and were a source of conflict. The conflict is partially addressed in the Melendez study, the perception held by African American players, many believed staying eligible and winning games came before racial issues being addressed in the locker room (Cooper, Davis, & Dougherty, 2016; Melendez, 2008). African American student-athletes have a history of staying near their African American teammates because they have similar backgrounds, share a common understanding of perceived perceptions from others, and are clustered into the same classes. These teammates can play a role in how new African American student-athletes adjust to the culture of their university, athletic department, and how they approach academics and athletics.

Sources say exposing student-athletes to non-athlete peers in ways that make sense to student-athletes can influence how they view themselves and help to improve learning and communication (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009). Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009) also found in their study of athletes as students, that student-athletes engaged with non-athletes frequently, dispelling talks about the subculture of athletics in this one particular study at least. Other studies make the point, that it is hard to steer clear of teammates and meet other people due to time demands, meals, tutoring and clustering (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

### **Collegiate athletics and higher education.**

Fletcher, Benschhoff, and Richburg (2003), contend higher education and collegiate athletics are a multi-level political system with sometimes conflicting policies for student-athletes. One student-athlete described how he felt about his universities inability to separate from the benefits of commercialization in collegiate athletics, pointing to the amount of money coming to the program from boosters, media contracts and post season inclusion. He said, “how’s a coach going to tell you, don’t come to practice if you got a really important paper to do” (Adler & Adler, 1991, p. 84), he was referring to not being able to choose academics over athletics. Several studies have evaluated the role played by coaches in shaping how student-athletes identify, and many reverberate the sentiments expressed by the previous quote. Coaches are highly paid, and valued by an institution if the team wins, but pressure is applied from boosters, athletic directors and the public to win if the team loses (Adler & Adler, 1988; Stone et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). This same pressure is believed to be directed to student-athletes by their coaches, perceivably impacting how they self-identify as athlete-students (Adler & Adler, 1988; Stone et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008).

The NCAA has clearly stated that student-athletes need to have adequate time to focus on academics, but at the same time, the membership seems to ignore calls for reform. Some believe calls for reform are ignored because student-athletes report being happy or content with the amount of time they spend on academics, sports, and socializing (NCAA, 2011; Paskus & Bell, 2016). Reports on student-athletes’ opinions appear to differ when looking at quantitative data and qualitative data. The GOAL study is often referenced when studying student-athletes’ college experience. When reading qualitative accounts on time demands, the responses don’t match the GOAL study where student-athletes appear to feel balanced and happy with their

college experience. The following student-athlete statement counters the positive report in the GOAL study, “I don’t care what they say, you are just too worn out to study as much as you need to...I honestly care more about football than school” (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016, p. 507). Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) followed this statement with this, “The structure of the athletics organization works to maximize the athletic role at the expense of academics” (p. 507). Overall, the time demands of collegiate athletics seem to leave little time for academics, and student-athletes that enter college at an academic disadvantage, seem to suffer the most. In the end, academics suffer because there is little time to study, and without preparation athletes are not confident in their ability to succeed in the classroom. Self-esteem is once again lowered, and the possibility of engulfing the athlete role rises due to the student role being categorized as negative.

### **Summary**

The review of the literature began by acknowledging student-athletes navigate a number of social identities at their respective PWI’s. SIT, as a lens through which to view athletes’ identity suggest student-athletes as individuals want to be seen in a positive light and want to be associated with positive groups. Anything standing in the way of this positive identity is avoided (Tajfel et al., 1971). Wanting to be seen in a positive light, tied in with the literature found on role conflict and athletes, and at the top of why student-athletes experience conflict, was being stereotyped mainly in the classroom and on campus by academic services, faculty, and non-athlete peers.

The literature seems to all come back to athletes wanting to be associated with a group that is seen by others as positive. In the African American culture, youth are told to aspire to be a professional athlete because they are paid high salaries that equate to the American Dream. As a

result, African American families socialize children to believe this is their only way to be successful, and this influences how the African American student-athlete views academics, college athletics, faculty and others on college campuses. The literature suggested revenue student-athletes encounter several factors that influence socialization beyond family. The college environment, and athletic department environments are large factors in how student-athlete's identity once away from the direct influence of family. Viewing the literature through the lens of SIT, the importance of raising the academic self-esteem in athletes is important if PWI's want African American athletes to do well academically and athletically.

## **Chapter Three: Methods**

This study aimed to better understand how Division I male African American football players at a single predominantly white institution developed and learned to manage their dual roles as students and athletes and the impact this process had on academics. Taking a qualitative interpretivist approach to better understand the whole student and athlete, the study focused on their beliefs and the meanings behind their words and actions (Geertz, 1994; Maxwell, 2012). When referring to qualitative interpretivist research, Maxwell (2012) notes, “you are interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behavior” (p. 30). In a similar fashion, Merriam (2002) describes an interpretive qualitative approach as, “Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world” (p. 4), also what those experiences and interactions mean to that individual (Merriam, 2002). To understand how male African American football participants, perceive socializing experiences prior to and during college impact their role identity, the qualitative interpretivist paradigm was believed to be the most effective.

### **Site and Sample Selection**

#### **Site selection.**

For the duration of this study, the institution will be referred to as, “UWI.” UWI is a large 4-year, public, NCAA Division I, predominantly white institution with a football team that participates in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). UWI was purposely selected after meeting with the Associate Athletic Director of Student Support Services, and the athletic department agreed to allow the study to take place and to not interfere with the interviews or results. UWI was a good choice because like many PWI’s that participate in the NCAA Division I-FBS

division, a large majority of the African American student population is present on the football team. Having worked with collegiate athletes and athletics staffs across the country in various capacities over the years, gave me credibility with the athletic staff at UWI and made for a positive working relationship.

### **Sample selection.**

Purposeful sampling was used to help select participants rich with information pertinent to the study. More specifically, the participants played football at UWI, and attended meetings, practice, tutoring, class, games and more experiences that could answer the guiding questions in this study. Patton (2002, p. 273) defines information-rich cases as, “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry.” Similarly, Creswell (2003) suggests, when selecting a sample group, it is important that study participants had lived experiences with what the study is seeking to investigate. With this in mind, freshman and spring 2016 transfers were excluded from the study. Freshman and spring 2016 transfer participants would not have had enough time to experience life as a student and athlete for an extended period, which for this study was one full academic year. Additional criteria for inclusion in the study were: athletes on scholarship from 2010-2016, experience with multiple socializing events (team meetings, private meetings with coaches and other athletic staff, practice, games interactions with professors and peer non-athletes), and the ability to effectively communicate verbally and via email. This criterion where used to help ensure the study included participants with personal stories that were information-rich. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the football participants in this study pseudonyms where used to protect their identities and the name of their institution.

### **Sample size.**

The study was intended to have no less than 10 African American male football participants. Although a minimum of 10 participants was a desired goal, I also understood I could reach a saturation point prior to the goal of 10; the idea of saturation is described as the point where data becomes redundant and no new information is recorded (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). It was my intent to recruit ten participants but after active recruitment and request for referrals, only seven participants held their commitment to complete the study. After reviewing the data from each interview and coding them into themes, and after meeting with my committee, all agreed that seven participants was satisfactory. The interviews had already begun to reach the saturation point and the participants that dropped out or never committed likely would have added no new information.

### **Recruitment of participants.**

To begin the recruitment process, flyers were created and posted in the athletic department. In addition, an email was drafted and sent to all eligible African American male football participants. The email and flyer included detailed information about the study, including criteria to participate, time commitments, purpose of the study, and a description of myself, indicating my status as a former student and athlete and current doctoral student completing a dissertation to earn my degree. My contact information and a formal invite were included in the email and on the flyer. Key administrators in the athletic department agreed to support the study. They also agreed to be responsible for sending out the recruitment email to football participants. Coaches and academic support staff were provided a copy of the flyer to help find volunteers for the study. Participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were instructed to either call or email the researcher. Once contact was made, I set a time

and date to conduct the initial interview. The interviews were conducted in the athletic department's academic support wing in study rooms reserved by the participants. With privacy and confidentiality in mind, it was paramount that we ensure no other individuals occupied our space. Originally, the interviews were to take place outside of the athletic facilities, but after speaking with all the participants, it was determined the most comfortable location was in the athletic department.

My personal experience as a former football student and athlete was used to help frame the research and not as a comparison. This research does not claim to cover the full spectrum of all NCAA Division I institutions. This study is based on the individual perspectives of male African American football participants that have experienced at least one full year at UWI. Participants were selected on a volunteer basis and were given the ability to leave the study at any time, and some chose to do exactly that prior to and during the study. Social identity theory will frame this study to keep the focus on how participants perceive themselves as "students" and/or "athletes" while considering the effect of organizational socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations.

## **Data Collection Techniques and Instruments**

### **Interview protocol.**

The interview protocol included semi-structured questions designed to elicit responses aimed at addressing the original research questions posed in this study. As is found in most qualitative research, I used a set of structured interview questions to begin the conversation in each interview, but remained flexible enough to adjust and/or add questions (Creswell, 2003). To ensure my questions were clear and elicited thick descriptive information, a pilot survey was

created to interview African American football players from UWI that played between fifteen and twenty-five years ago. Insights from data were used to guide further data collection.

### **Data collection.**

Prior to conducting interviews, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, who deemed the study not to pose greater than minimal risk to human subjects. The research design used in this study applied two of the three traditional strategies in qualitative research: interviewing and document analysis (Merriam, 1985; Patton, 1980; Yin, 1981). The initial semi-structured interviews on average lasted one hour and fifteen minutes with several follow up questions to discuss findings. The semi-structured interview method (See Appendix for a copy of the interview protocol) was chosen to help ensure the topics covered in the research were addressed in each interview, and the results show through saturation that this indeed happened. This method was also chosen to allow me to probe further into the interviewee's perceptions and opinions to make sure they were stated clearly. This style allowed for a more conversational interview and allowed for both a deep and broad understanding of the participants' perspective (Brugha, Bebbington, & Jenkins, 1999; Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

To further make sure the participants' perceptions and opinions were understood, I utilized a recorder during each interview while also taking notes. Once an interview concluded and was successfully recorded, it was sent to a transcription service and transcribed. The participants were then given the chance to check the document for accuracy, a process referred to as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2012).

Prior to, between, and after interviews, I carefully reviewed the "student-athlete handbook," conveniently found on the athletic departments website. The "student-athlete

handbook” was used to develop a basic understanding of how the NCAA, university, athletic department and any other organization with rules and regulations participants are required to understand and follow. The information in the handbook was then compared to statements from participants and their perceptions of the similarities or differences seen in their daily lives. One of the strengths of using the handbook was the fact that it was a living document that all participants were required to acknowledge, read and sign off on, the rules they would be required to follow. So regardless of what non-written rules participants discussed in the interviews, the written documentation was uniform for all, and gave me something concrete to compare students-athlete comments. Prior to conducting interviews the handbook was useful in offering a perspective of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2002). The handbook was centered on UWI policies and gave me an understanding of the interworking parts of the athletic department. Once interviews were complete, I compared the results of interviews to the “student-athlete handbook” to determine if inconsistencies were present between written and verbal words.

### **Pilot process**

Before conducting the interviews, I conducted a pilot study. Pilot study participants were recruited by word of mouth, but the participants were still required to meet the study inclusion criteria in terms of being African American, previously on scholarship. experience with multiple socializing events (team meetings, private meetings with coaches and other athletic staff, practice, games interactions with professors and peer non-athletes), and the ability to effectively communicate verbally and via email. Maxwell (2012), notes, pilot studies can be used to gain a greater understanding of concepts, theories and perspective of the group under study, while addressing concerns of the researcher. With this study in mind, I was concerned with the

research questions and their ability to elicit relevant responses to the research questions posed by this study.

A total of five participants were contacted and each one agreed to be interviewed. The pilot interviews made it clear that some of the interview questions were unclear and required tweaking. The interview questions were edited on a continuing basis, and the interviewees were contacted after the interviews to gauge if the questions made more sense. After the final pilot interview, I felt I had a reliable interview protocol that was understandable and allowed for flexibility and a more efficient process (Merriam, 1998).

### **Interview Questions and Techniques**

The questions initially were used to get the participants talking and thinking about their experience as an African American football player at a PWI, and the steps they took to arrive at UWI. The interview protocol and questions are included in the appendix.

#### **Interview Techniques**

The participants selected for interviews all came from different parts of the country and offered unique background stories; part of the differences include varied vocabularies and interpretations of words, but the essence of their stories was very similar. It was my responsibility to connect with each respondent and ask questions in a manner that they understood and free of bias or leading, despite differences in interpretations (Merriam, 2009), and I feel this was done and lead to a large amount of data being collected from each participant. I took this understanding into each interview to offer a similar but unique experience for each participant by actively listening and not interrupting participants as they attempted to answer questions, and avoided asking multiple questions at once (Merriam, 2009).

I obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any interviews taking place with undergraduates. Prior to each interview, participants were presented with an IRB approved consent form explaining their options regarding the study, they were given as much time as they needed to read and ask questions. I made a concerted effort to ensure participants understand the form prior to signing. The fact that the study was voluntary was highlighted and participants acknowledged their ability to withdraw at any time. Additionally, participants had to acknowledge and consent to their interview being audio recorded, transcribed and emailed to them for member checking purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Using the basic interpretive qualitative approach prescribed by Merriam (2002), I was able to obtain a rich description from the perspective of each participant, a common approach found in qualitative research. Basic interpretive qualitative studies are interpretive in the data collection phase, but also descriptive and inductive in the analysis phase (Merriam, 2002). Data analysis is said to occur simultaneously with data collection in qualitative research, and that was true of this study. Merriam (2002) notes, “Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way...” (p.14). To keep the data organized in this study, I analyzed data using these generic steps outlined by (Creswell, 2003):

1. Organize and prepare data for analysis
2. Read through all the data
3. Begin detailed analysis with a coding process
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the site and people
5. Interpret the results
6. Validate the data

Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed by Rev Voice Recorder immediately following each interview. The transcribed documents were examined and keywords and phrases were identified and placed into categories followed by being placed into themes utilizing the Microsoft Word, “Insert Table of Figures” function. This function allowed me to code phrases and words within the document in preparation to combine all of the themes in the final coding matrix. My final interpretations came from the thematic groupings, which came directly from the data. The data is shown in this study in the form of direct quotes from participants (Merriam, 2002).

Triangulation, to strengthen patterns, interviews, analysis of the student handbook, and conducting member checks were employed to increase validity. By combining methods Patton (1980) notes, triangulation strengthens a study.

### **Limitations**

Going into this study, I believed my previous experience as a student-athlete would hinder my ability to work with the athletics staff, or they might push the “best” candidates into the study. The staff were extremely helpful and sent several emails and even made announcements at meetings to attract more interest for the study. For reasons unknown, these efforts solicited only seven participants, resulting in a small sample size even for a single institution. One possible reason current and recent graduates would not speak with me was due to their perception that I was an outsider and possibly untrustworthy. Although disappointed, I went into this study thinking participants may be reluctant to express their true feelings towards athletic staff members and university professors for the fear of it coming back to them. With a small sample size, and this study taking place at a single PWI, the results may not be generalized to all Division I FBS male African American student-athletes in the United States. Lastly, I was

not able to interview student-athletes with eligibility remaining, thus not receiving data from the perspective of someone going through the day-to-day activities during the interviews.

### **Verification**

To ensure the validity of this study, I used several steps to secure credibility, beginning with member checking. Each interviewee checked for the accuracy of their self-reported perceptions. By using triangulation and document content analysis, credibility was increased. Secondary questions to gain a deeper understanding from each participant, and lastly, my role, as the researcher and my bias were explicitly stated. By creating a descriptive research design along with implementation strategies, this research lends itself to duplication. To decrease the likelihood of researcher bias, I created a detailed, data driven audit trail.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The participants' lives ruled by a plethora of rules in place as a student and as an athlete. Their lives are made more visible in the public than the average student, and because of the nature of this research, the following safeguards were utilized. Research objectives were clearly stated verbally, in print, and confirmed through verbal affirmation as well as written affirmation. The proper documentation was submitted to the Institutional Review Board, the identity of the participants was confidential, and the ability to drop out of the study at any time was made clear. Finally, acknowledging to the participants in this study I understood that I could jeopardize their eligibility if they were paid. With this knowledge, the participants in this study were not paid to participate in this study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction

This study was conducted utilizing the qualitative interpretivist paradigm approach; an approach intended to understand individuals beliefs and interpretations of words and actions around them (Maxwell, 2012). The purpose of this study was to understand how a group of African American male football players in 2015-2016 made sense of their roles as students and athletes, and how their perspective influenced their behavior. To better understand how FBS, Division I male African American football players described their experiences at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institution, the Social Identity Theory was used to frame the study. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do football players identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete?
2. How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?
3. How do football players interpret the role of NCAA Policy and messaging, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete peers' affect their role identity?
4. How do football players' perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity?

After interviewing seven FBS Division I male African American football players, a rich and thick descriptive narrative of how players perceived socializing events prior to and during college impacted their role identity emerged. Although each player offered a unique perspective, their stories shared commonalities, those shared experiences were grouped into four themes and eleven subthemes under each research question, the method of categorization suggested by (Merriam, 1998).

This chapter introduces each participant and gives readers insight into the data presented in the findings. It should be noted, the data presented in this study comes from the individual interviewee’s perspective. I am not verifying the perceptions in this study, but rather reporting the perceptions of the participants in this study. The research questions are listed along with their accompanying themes. Utilizing quotes from participants and the student handbook to compare their perspectives of the rules, and the social identity theory as a lens, this study will present evidence that athletic department staff including coaches and academic staff, and university staff that work with student-athletes, may find helpful to better serve, FBS, Division I male African American football players.

### **Participant Profiles**

Seven individuals volunteered and met the criteria to be involved in the study. None of the participants were current student-athletes with remaining eligibility, but they still identified and were identified by others as insiders (familiar to the current players and coaches) with the current student-athletes. A snapshot of the participants follows in Table 1.

*Table 1: Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Home Region	Major	Graduate Status	Last year played
<b>James</b>	Oregon	Theater & Film	Graduated	2011
<b>Ron</b>	Missouri	Communications	Graduated	2012
<b>Bobby</b>	Alabama	Liberal Arts & Sciences	Graduated	2014
<b>Joe</b>	Georgia	Liberal Arts & Sciences	Undergraduate (Senior)	2015
<b>Mike</b>	Louisiana	Sociology	Graduated	2014

<b>George</b>	Rhode Island	Sociology	Undergraduate (Senior)	2015
<b>Eddie</b>	Tennessee	Sociology	Graduate	2012

**James.**

James was the first to volunteer for the study and expressed his appreciation for such a study taking place and finally having a chance to express his views. James is from Oregon. Having played his final game 5 years ago, James, reflecting on how he arrived on campus, said, “I was recruited by the coaching staff to come here as a defensive back. I’ve been playing football my whole life and glad to have a scholarship and glad to be here. That’s basically it. That’s me in a nutshell.” Like the other participants, James had grandiose dreams of playing professional football, he mentioned, “When I got here, I just wanted to ball out enough here, so I can go pro.” Unfortunately, that was not the case.

James identified as multiracial but recognized that he was identified by others as African American, and noted, “I was always looked upon by kids who weren’t African American differently.” The community in which James was raised and where he attended high school was predominantly white. He said that attending a predominately white high school prepared him for college at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Also, he credited his older brother, also at UWI with helping him prepare for college. Having an older brother helped James understand how collegiate athletics worked and he felt that knowledge helped him acclimate to the pressures of being a student and athlete even before he arrived on campus. In the end, James said, “once you get here, it’s your job to graduate, but athletics rules your life, people know you and expect you to excel at your sport, it can be frustrating.”

**Ron.**

Raised in Missouri, Ron grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and attended a predominantly white high school. Ron was genuinely afraid of failing his parents in anything that he did, including graduating from college and not excelling on the football field. One interesting thing about Ron was the fact that he originally did not want to play football. A brief conversation with his father substantiated his need to please and appease his parents. “I didn't want to play football. When I first started playing my father essentially said you can't quit. I started the season. I had to finish the season.” It was even more interesting to learn that just after one year Ron's attitude towards football changed. He said, “I saw myself graduating and maybe playing a couple of years in the league in theory. That was my end goal.”

Ron identified as an African American man and noted that his parents stressed the fact that he was a young African American athlete and that's how people would recognize him. Ron said, “I felt, as well as my parents definitely communicated to me, that as a young African American athlete, that's what I'm going to be looked at. I'm not going to be looked at as anything that I do in the classroom because there was that stereotype. He can run, but can he read.” Ron entered UWI with these stereotypes in mind and mentioned he was not as surprised as other African American teammates because he had already experienced it. Ron repeated often, “playing ball in college is a job, this is just business,” a sentiment shared by several of the participants.

**Bobby.**

Bobby grew up in Alabama, where his neighborhood was predominantly African American, a detail that he says made it extremely difficult to feel comfortable with students at UWI, including whites, African Americans and others. Bobby gave his single mother, high

praise for her constant influence on his life, and especially for how she told him to “suck it up” when he complained about being at UWI. Describing himself as an underdog, Bobby felt he had an uphill battle on the field, in the classroom and in general at UWI. A sentiment that Bobby believes helped him graduate from college.

Bobby noted, “I have to get mine, because they gone get theirs,” a sentiment expressed by other participants as well. In relation to coaches, Bobby believed academics truly meant nothing to them, and it was only a business. Bobby offered a unique perspective from the others at this point. He transferred from a junior college and had the chance to witness how the junior college coaches handled collegiate football. He said they [junior college coaches] handled the process far better because they recognized the importance of academics and the culture of their players.

**Joe.**

Joe grew up in a predominantly African American community in Georgia. He described his community as one that assumed or expected all young African American boys to go pro in football, but Joe was not serious about football or school. A self-proclaimed knuckle head, Joe said his biggest source of change was his parents, but especially his mother. He notes:

...with school and everything, just phone calls all the time. She played one of the major roles in me changing because I got tired of seeing her crying all the time when I did something messed up. So I just wanted to make her proud and everything.

Joe attended a Junior college prior to UWI, and like the other junior college participant, he attributes taking that route to his preparedness to the ways of college life.

Arriving on campus at UWI, Joe said he was upset because the athletic staff had lied to him about classes that he could take and majors, amongst many things. Joe said he spoke with

teammates and found out, they had similar stories to tell. Joe was upset by how he was treated on campus, in class, and in the athletic department. He attributed it to him being African American and an athlete, and somewhat naïve about how college athletics worked. He soon came to the same conclusion shared by other participants, he noted: “athletics going to get theirs... everything revolves around athletics, everything links back to athletics being successful.”

**Mike.**

Mike was from an athletic focused community in Louisiana and made it known that football was his way out by saying, “like most of us, athletics was my way out of the city.” Making it out and not getting sucked back in was another concern expressed by Mike. The neighborhood Mike lived in as well as his school were based around a military base and there was no mention of racial issues. With so much emphasis on athletics in the community, Mike believed his teachers may have made things easy on him, but his mother made him work harder and instilled the importance of education. Mike believed the biggest impact on him approaching sports and academics was the presence of his three older brothers pushing him to succeed in athletics.

**George.**

George came from a predominantly African American community where, like other participants, he played football because he wanted to get out of his neighborhood. Not playing football until his first year of high school, George said his mindset had been set. He was going to play football as pro, a dream he was still pursuing at the time of the interview. Unlike the other participants, George attended preparatory school, Junior college, and then made his way to UWI.

George was very direct when talking about his experience in high school. He attributed some of his drive to his recognition that one day he could be gone. He referenced an assembly in

high school where the principle told the group, “Hey, you see the person next to you? You see the person on the right or left to you? They're not going to be here the rest of the year.” Those words hit George, he said at the time it didn't hit home, but later in the year he said, “you didn't notice that until you were like damn I lost a lot of friends.” An experience that helped George refocus on academics to also not let his parents down.

### **Eddie.**

Eddie was born and raised in Tennessee, in a community that highly valued athletics but most especially, football. Eddie attended a high profile high school that reflected the community's values and placed high value on football. Early on Eddie almost quit the game of football because his mentor and father was incarcerated. Credit is given to Eddie's godfather and football coach for reengaging him and showing him that he still had support. Early on football was a staple in Eddie's life because boys played football in his town; and when they didn't, people thought something was wrong with them. Eddie's mother kept him balanced by requiring good grades. He notes, “She said anything less than a B, and I'm pulling you from sports.” Unfortunately for Eddie, he found out the hard way, his mother was serious; even with the tough love, Eddie gave his mother high praise, because this requirement helped him to be a better student.

Eddie credits a high school friend for pulling him to UWI, he perceived that everyone at the university believed in the family atmosphere. To his surprise, the players were, but the coaches did not live up to their word. What they said was not what happened. Eddie, like others said, “Athletics is just one big business, and they are going to use us, so we better get ours.” With aspirations of going pro taken away, Eddie focused on the student part of student-athlete, and he attributes this to why he entered and continues to work on his master's degree.

## Themes

The themes identified as a result of the interviews are summarized in the following table.

Table 2: Interview Questions and Themes

<p><b>Research Question 1</b></p> <p><b>How do football players identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete?</b></p>
<p><i>Theme: Football over everything (Athlete-Student)</i></p>
<p><b>Research Question 2</b></p> <p><b>How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?</b></p>
<p><i>Theme: The Road most traveled</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family influence on role identity</li> <li>• Community/High school influence on role identity</li> <li>• The recruitment process influence on role identity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Question 3</b></p> <p><b>How do football players interpret the role of NCAA Policy and messaging, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete peers' affect their role identity?</b></p>
<p><i>Theme: The athlete, I mean student-athlete culture</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going to class doesn't get the coach wins</li> <li>• Stay eligible, protect the brand, and everything will work out</li> <li>• Dear NCAA, I don't have time do to my volunteer activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Question 4</b></p> <p><b>How do football players' perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity?</b></p>
<p><i>Theme: More than meets the eye</i></p>

- Judged by our own
- The anomaly
- Professors care if you care

The remainder of this chapter will include a detailed analysis of the responses received from participants during interviews, pertaining to the research questions, concluding with a summary.

**Research Question 1: How do football players identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete?**

**Theme: Football over everything (athlete-student).**

The interview questions regarding identity were posed to address the participants' status in regard to how they identified in terms of multiple roles of student and athlete. The data regarding the participants perceived identification revealed two paths to the athlete-student identification. The two paths were perceived to be instilled upon arrival on campus, creating a football over everything mentality. This deep-rooted belief was shared by all the participants, but altered for many towards the conclusion of their college careers. The perceived creation of the football over everything mentality is believed to start with the first meeting, rules and policies in the handbook, coaching staff and the immersion of football related activities upon arrival. The data revealed participants had mixed feelings about football taking precedence over academics, and their varied responses are the reason for the sub-theme, "clarity." The varied responses result in a more vivid understanding of how the participants all arrived at the athlete-student identification through the socialization process upon arrival on campus.

In high school, two out of the seven participants identified as student-athletes with the remaining five identifying as athlete-students. When asked how they identified in college, all

seven participants identified as athlete-students. Interestingly, none of the participants were prompted with the terms student-athlete or athlete-student, but all still referred to themselves as such. George shared his thoughts on his identification, “I saw myself as a student, but I knew I was really an athlete first, and I just so happen to be a student.” James and Ron both identified as student-athletes in college, but reference their arrival on campus as the tipping point to seeing themselves as athlete-students. Overwhelmingly, the introductory meeting and practice sessions twice a day seem to have been instrumental in players seeing that football came first and was not just for fun anymore.

The participants agreed that college athletics was a business. James came to this conclusion prior to college, stating “going into college I didn’t understand that college was a business, but my mom was savvy and understood stuff like that.” Ron thought it was funny to say academics came first, as it is stated in the student-athlete handbook, but he saw it like this:

Everything you do school wise or whatever revolves around athletics. You can't take a certain class if it interferes with either morning stuff that got to do with football or anything or afternoon stuff. If it interferes with a little time in meetings, say you have meetings from 2 to 4. You can't have any classes from 2 to 4, or anything like that.

Everything cuts off at 1, so all your classes got to be done by either 1 or 1:50 so you can make meetings, so it's classes that you don't take because you can't, so it's certain majors that's off the table

The participants all seemed conflicted with managing their roles as athletes and students, but all choose football most of the time because they felt obligated and protected by the fact that they were athletes. Bobby noted, “they brought me here to play ball not go to class, so I’d say football

comes first.” This sentiment was shared by all participants in various ways, but in all instances a coach was referenced as the source of this belief.

In regard to academics, the consensus participant perception of, “you are on your own when it comes to academics,” is validated in the student-athlete handbook with a phrase indicating eligibility is up to student-athletes but will be guided by the department. The handbook was proven incorrect in the eyes of the participants when they were not allowed to select a major of their choosing. The participants went on to explain, voluntary tutoring and class checkers (individuals who recorded class attendance) told them they were on their own beyond staying eligible. All the participants indicated they had been directed into a major except James. James, indicated, “I came in with the mindset, I have to handle my school before athletics or I won’t play, and I think that’s why the coaches stayed off my back and let me choose my major.” This was contrary to Bobby who said: “I was like basically I don't want to do liberal arts. Before I signed here y'all said I could do sports management. That's what I want to do, but no, they said liberal arts was better for me.” The department also sent class checkers to certain classes; and with so many student-athletes located in the same specific classes, the class checkers’ job was made easier and athletes’ movements monitored, fitting into the business model of collegiate football.

All the of the participants identified as athlete-students when in college and part of this was due to their understanding of what would be expected of them for the next 4- 5 years. After arriving on campus all participants noted they began to identify as athlete-students shortly after grasping the totality of what was expected of them. One of the first things participants described was the receipt of their student-athlete handbook. The handbook was approximately 45 pages in length and filled with rules and policies participants were required to know and abide by. After

hearing from the participants and reading through the handbook, I learned the participants were directed to the conference and NCAA websites to further familiarize themselves with additional rules and policies. After these initial meetings, practices, and encounters with new teammates (both incoming and existing) the participants expressed mixed feelings and noted they were not sure of all they were responsible for.

Joe made it clear he felt he was on campus to play football because everything he did was football related upon his arrival except for orientation. “I think orientation is, like, a whole weekend or something. I went to one meeting for my orientation. The rest of the time I was doing football stuff.” He furthered explains, “When I first got here it was instilled in me, ‘You’re here to play football.’ Academics come second.” Mike said, “I was told my job was to play football, and stay eligible.” Ron, Bobby, George and Eddie shared similar stories; stories of being told football took precedence over everything else in their lives soon after arriving on campus. The participants shared these early experiences prompted feelings of betrayal due to being told one thing during the recruiting process and experiencing a different reality. Participants expected they would arrive on campus with support to pursue the major of their choosing, and they would be students and athletes, with equal time allocated for both, and it would be free. Free was expected, but “free” was not so free. Joe speaks of his experience here:

When you come here, it's presented in a way where everything is attainable. Life is good. You don't got to pay rent. You eat for free. You get free clothes. You think of it as free money, but it ain't. You ain't paying for school, so you ain't worrying about tuition like regular students. I was very blind as an undergrad.

The trade-off for the athletic scholarship was time on the practice field, playing and traveling to games, time in the training room, watching film, the weight room, and living a life in the public

eye, while staying eligible on your own time. George believed he would be prepared academically because of the support from within the department. He noted:

They made it seem as though all of the resources that were provided for us was going to equip us to be intelligent, to be, I don't want to say versed, but you're going to be prepared to go into the classroom, know what it is you're going to be talking about, and know your assignments. You're going to be making A's, so to speak.

George's understanding of what was expected changed after experiencing two-a-days and watching an episode of the adult cartoon, 'South Park.' The episode George refers to is when the character Cartman visits the athletic director at the University of Colorado at Boulder and discussed collegiate athletics. George explained the scene here,

He was like, 'It's genius. This is the greatest scheme ever.' He was just saying: how can they not be slaves? They work hard, they do all this, and they don't get paid. The university gets all this money. He was like, 'We are a legitimate establishment and we don't exploit our athletes. We provide scholarships.' He was like, 'Right.' When I was watching that, it really started hitting me like, 'Man, am I really considered a ... Am I a modern-day slave?'

I viewed the episode on YouTube and found the scene to be a mocking of collegiate athletics and the term student-athlete. George understood he was on campus to play football and that coaches cared about his eligibility, acknowledging the difference between eligibility, learning and graduating.

In brief, the student-athlete handbook states: coaches will support and encourage academic success, and when student-athletes falter, they will be supported by the academic

support staff. The reality for Mike seems to sum up the perceptions of the participants in this section:

I knew they didn't care about academics or me when this graduate assistant for my position told me to get with the program. He said, you think I care about school? The graduate assistant only took the position to get into coaching. He said he sold all his books back and didn't plan on attending classes because he spent all his time watching film, preparing for practice and games.

Mike understood his role as an athlete-student after this encounter, he was on campus to play football, a sentiment expressed by all participants in the study. All of the participants entered college with expectations for success in the class and on the field, but for each, it was made clear, what role they were expected to take on first by coaches and others in the athletic department.

**Research Question 2: How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?**

**Theme: The road most traveled.**

James and Ron were raised in middle class neighborhoods and attended predominantly white high schools, whereas the remaining participants were raised in low to middle class neighborhoods and attended predominantly African American schools. Although the participants came from different backgrounds their stories merge when the recruiting process intensifies and they become college prospects. Although that period of intensification varied for each participant, some knew they would receive a scholarship to college after their freshman year of high school. Bobby and Joe did not know until after they entered junior college that they would go on to college, but in each instance the participant's recollection of the recruitment experience

is similar. Parental influence, high school staff member influence, and the recruitment process influence all tie the participants together and lead each of them down the same road to play division I football at UWI and to the athlete-student identification.

The road most traveled became the most obvious theme when the stories seemed to merge at many of the same points. The first being an early and persistent introduction to sports, regardless of the participant's personal feelings. Ron did not want to play football as he explained:

I didn't want to play football, but my dad said I should try. When I first started playing my father essentially said you can't quit. I started the season. I had to finish the season. The first year I didn't want to play, but I learned to love the game. I pretty much played sports throughout the year, football, basketball, track. I got a lot of attention from football initially.

Ron eventually began to like the sport and progressively got better at the sport. He began to stand out as a football athlete, although he already stood out, being one of few African American students. James shared a similar upbringing but he wanted to play football from an early age. James and Ron, believed they would play professional football after college. James said, "At the time I saw myself graduating and maybe playing a couple of years in the league in theory." While Ron said, "I thought it was a sure thing, college and then pro...". The remaining participants shared the desire to go pro, but it was more out of necessity to get their family or themselves out of the hood. Simply put, Joe notes,

like most of us, athletics was my way out of the city. [My City] ain't that bad, but the dudes that I grew up watching, playing ball, was the same dudes that was at our practice.

They didn't do nothing after that. I knew I had to leave the city, or I would just be one of them same dudes coming around telling you about the good old days, what I used to do. Although the participants came from different neighborhoods, high schools, and socio-economic backgrounds, each aspired to follow the same road through UWI to professional football, despite the odds against them.

*Family influence on role identity.*

Most of the participants were first generation college students and took pride in knowing they would be the first in their family to graduate from college. Several participants made references to not wanting to disappoint their parents. The perceived influence of the participants' parents on academics was noticeably high in high school. Mike was motivated to do better and noted, "I never really got into education until I disappointed my parents and had to stay back." George was regretful of his actions and noted, "My mom busted her tail for me and I was messing up bad, man. I saw her crying so hard one day, and it just hit me. I gotta do better and put a smile on her face." The role of the mother was to encourage academics first for all the participants, whereas the fathers seemed to encourage athletics and persistence to complete a task. This not to say they didn't support academics. They just didn't make it a priority like the mothers. Bobby expressed this point while speaking about his mother, "Moms, she cared but she always let you know that I'm not going to ever let football outweigh academics as long as you're under my roof." George describes his perception of his father here:

My father taught me a long time ago, 'be a grown ass man. Stand on your own two feet. Hold it down like you're supposed to hold it down.' It was that simple. It wasn't no tricks to it. There wasn't none of that. I handled my business in class like I should and tear it up on the field

The constant thing in each of the participant's family was the mother and her dedication to seeing their sons succeed. Although the fathers of the participants were not always present apart from two, it seems the participants valued what both parents brought to the table. The participants believed their identity as athlete-student was influenced by community members, the media, family members and the allure of professional football.

*Community/high school influence on role identity.*

Going on to play professional football in the National Football League was high on many of the participants' to-do list coming out of high school. The motivations for these aspirations were varied, but all were perceived to be fueled in part by a community, both locally and nationally, that pushed young African American boys in the direction of sports, and specifically football. Coming from low socio-economic communities, some participants felt pigeon holed, Mike spoke of his community values in this way, "Man, our value was ... Either you were sports or you was a dough boy," a "dough boy" representing a drug dealer and "sports" being an athlete. Joe's words capture how most the participants described why they felt they had to go pro:

It's like soon as you born, it's like we going to put this football, basketball in your hand. He going to go pro, he going to get us out from under all that, so that's just ... it's universal. Every inner city it's like the only way out just to go pro, so they put more emphasis on athletics than school

For many of the participants, football was described as their lifeline out; and although they may have believed other options existed, family members pushed athletics regardless.

Although other pathways to college existed, the student-athletes in this study did not see them as viable. Eddie noted a home divided, mainly him verses his mother and sisters. "All my

sisters, my mom, they were into performing arts. They went to art schools, magnet schools, they was into creativity and academics.” Eddie went on to say he was a good student and at one time pursued an academic scholarship, but the allure of football was more appealing. Eddie like others ended by saying, “Nobody on my daddy's side hardly ever finished college, so there was a typical house, your stereotyped African American person living like, play ball or do whatever you gotta do to survive.”

Joe was an anomaly in this study. He did not play football growing up. He said, “I didn’t play football growing up or in high school. I wasn’t feeling it. I thought it was a waste of time for real, well everything was a waste of time and my grades showed my lack of interest.” He goes on to say, “I straightened up because I saw the pain in mom’s face, and I also saw dudes leave and come back, doing the same thing and going nowhere. Now that’s motivation for you!” Joe went onto play junior college football, and he notes, “it's like the environment that you grow up in, it takes a hold of you and eventually catches up to you. More emphasis is placed on going pro, so some people basically think they going pro, including me at the time.”

Although James and Ron did not grow up in low socioeconomic neighborhoods, they did grow up in highly competitive neighborhoods; and being African American, they at times were stereotyped based on the color of their skin. James said:

Yeah, we had white kids, African American kids, Asian kids, you name it, but in our area sports was what you did. If you weren’t a good student and athlete, people looked at you different. Everybody at my school was going to college for sports or academics, but everyone pegged the African American kids for football scholarships because that’s what African American kids did, and our coaches reinforced that.

Ron shared similar sentiments, his influence included coaches but also counselors, teachers, and other community members. He said that with a major university in his backyard, people expected kids at his school to go pro by way of whatever college they attended. Ron's community, despite his parents support of academics, gravitated to football and the belief that he could go pro.

Bobby, George, and Eddie expressed how important it was to have men in the community that mentored and coached. These men served as father figures for the children the neighborhood that did not have one. Eddie shared a compelling story that embodies the other sentiments on mentors and youth coaches:

My dad wasn't around...my dad was the one that got me interested into football. I was around 4 or 5 years old, I was just a rough kid. Thank the Lord, this was completely divine. This dude named James Patterson, he was the next person to be my coach in Pop Warner Football. He noticed I wasn't at practice the next day. That next week, he went a little bit himself to confirm this. He said that he was looking around for me, stuff like that, and somebody finally told him where I stay. He came to my house, and was looking for me, like 'Hey, you have talent. You cannot quit football. This is going to allow you to be able to make it to the pros, make it to college, get a full scholarship. You have great potential to do it.' I was like, 'All right.' To be honest, I kind of had a love hate relationship with football. I love football.

With all the support for football, most of the participants shared stories of special treatment and discrimination in regard to their ability to perform academically. Ron described both instances, one that benefited him and the other required his mother to intervene:

Were they passing me based on the merit of my work, or because they needed to make sure my grades were in order, to perform on the field, that very well could be it? As a

naïve teenager I didn't necessarily see that at the time; but looking back, I know for sure it was all because of ball.

Ron may not have known at the time, but his interpretation of his counselor's thoughts on his academic performance or lack thereof, seem to allude to teachers appearing to float him through the system:

She didn't think I was going to make it in a 4-year program. My mom called her up. This counselor actually told me that. Of course I relayed that to my mom. When my mom called her up it didn't go well. The counselor...initially started talking to my mom about sports, 'He's such a fine athlete.' That was the first thing out of her mouth... moms was like, why would you tell my son that he's not going to go to a 4-year program? The counselor really messed up when she said, 'he can run, but can he read? So why ask about college, why do you people keep asking about that?' Needless to say, I got a new counselor.

Ron mentioned, his parents prepared him for such comments, and he blamed the stereotyping on his middle-class neighborhood full of people that didn't look like him. Mike had a similar experience. He spoke of football coaches serving as teachers who passed athletes while other teachers were much more stringent. Ron said the teachers that pushed him to do well academically influenced him to believe he could pursue college. Mike recalled his counselor's comments:

I know you're an athlete; but, if you can't pass AVID, if you can't figure out these binder checks, then you're going to drop out of college. You're not going to make it... My calm folded when she said that shit. This is my junior year. I'm like, 'So, you think I'm not going to make it cause I can't pass your class?' I got out of AVID, but my point was to

prove her wrong. As soon as she said that, I'm like, 'Fuck that. I'm getting a scholarship.' That was one of the driving moments in my high school years when she said that to me, because that shit just pissed me off more than I can describe. If she was a dude, I probably would have fought her.

Interestingly, minimal credit was given to the high school football coaches influence on the participants' identification, but many spoke highly of their youth football coaches and gave these individuals credit for instilling a positive self-identity and a football first mentality. The youth coaches instilling the football first mentality fits with most of the participants descriptions of their communities' football first mentality, and most likely influenced how they self-identified. Participants who attended junior college gave their coaches high praise compared to their coaches at UWI, Joe notes:

In JUCO we never had football stuff in the morning, and then academics, and then football again in the afternoon and then tutoring afterwards. It was never like that. I entered UWI all kinds of confused because coach put in our minds that we had to live after football and that was my mindset...not this new football all the time thing here.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, the communities in which these participants lived all valued athletics and held athletes in high regard regardless of their academic standing. Many of the participants referred to their hometown environment, including their high school coaches, as their motivation to attend college and go pro. Some of the high school academic staff were not viewed as helpful. Rather they were a hindrance to the growth of the participants, except for those who were able to turn negative stereotypes into motivation for success.

*The recruitment process influence on role identity.*

Without exception, the participants described the process of being recruited as exciting, and all spoke of how special they felt. Reasons for feeling special included frequent visits from coaches to their high school, countless letters hand signed by coaches, female students assigned to players, and the ability to attend a 4-year university and earn a degree in the major of their choosing. The process of being recruited was often referred to as a fantasy by the participants due to all the attention garnered by their athletic ability. Participants as well as their parents came to realize what they had been told was not 100 percent true. Participants and parents perceived what they heard from recruiters and academic staff at the university to be reality; but soon after enrolling, participating in team meetings, and interacting with upperclassmen, the fantasy was replaced with the everyday experience of being a NCAA collegiate student-athlete at UWI.

“I thought they were honest at first, but then you get here and it’s like damn man, this shit ain’t nothing like what they told me,” said George when asked about his recruitment experience. More specifically, Mike, Bobby, and Joe were under the impression that everything would be taken care of. Mike mentioned he was informed, “Everything's going to be basically provided for you. You basically just play your sport, and they take care of the rest for you.” The participants noted they were provided with tutoring, computers, and other resources to be successful, but lacked the time to take full advantage.

Not being told the truth about major choice was a hot button for many of the participants. Like many non-athletes, some of the participants in this study had an idea of what they wanted to study prior to college. The existence, or lack thereof, a major could be a determining factor for whether these participants choose to attend UWI. Joe shared the reasons he chose to attend UWI:

I just asked them if they had the major that I wanted. They were like yeah. I was like all right so everything basically lined up with athletics and academics, so that's really why I chose to come here because not every school has sports management.

Joe's frustration came, when he was redirected into Liberal Arts and Sciences upon his arrival to campus. He perceived the reason for this was because it fit the schedule he would need to make practice on time, and the classes were seen as easier to help him stay eligible. Although the participants felt jaded by not being told the whole truth, some didn't feel impacted at first because of their athlete-student mentality. George said, "My reaction to all this when I first got here was, they said this and they said that. I wasn't really worried about all that because I was focused on the football and not school." In this instance, George's identity was not impacted by not being told the truth, where others like Eddie, had to adjust to the athlete-student mindset. Eddie's perceived reality of the recruitment process is expressed here: "I feel like, in my own head, I had my own fantasy in terms of what college athletics was going to be like, which is based on all the movies I'd seen like *He Got Game* and stuff like that." To his disbelief, life was not as glamorous as the movies or recruiters made it out to be. All the participants seemed to enjoy the recruitment process, and during the process they identified as student-athlete or athlete-student based on their experiences prior to college. If anything, the participants that did not attend junior college identified as sport stars or local celebrities, impacting the part of their identity not associated with athletics or academics.

The participants in this study seem to have positive comments about the coaches that recruited them, and the academic counselors that met with them during their time on campus as part of their official visits. The true impact on the participants' role identification occurred after they arrived on campus and experienced a different reality from their visit. Mike perceived that

what was said was not the truth and the recruiting process was not true. When asked if the athletic staff cared, he said this:

On the surface, yeah, but everybody's got a motivation. Perfect example: When I came on my visit, both of my parents were with me. We sat in my academic advisor's office. She told my mom that she was going to be like my second mom here. Never been to her house. Never had a meal with her. She hasn't helped me schedule my classes the last three years, so how she my second mom? That's a perfect example.

Mike said this exchange showed him upon reflection that athletics held value and not academics in the athletic department, and that's why he believed she had never met with him. He said, "She didn't care about my life. She cared about her job and that meant getting me on campus. Once that was done, she was done with me." Mike's frustration was shared to a certain degree by all participants, and it was mentioned several times that what was offered during the recruitment process was often nullified by the everyday reality of being a "student-athlete" or as they all noted, athlete-student.

The process of being recruited by multiple division one universities represented many things for these participants. For some it was a chance to fulfill the next step in their plan to play professional football. For others, it represented an opportunity to fulfill a dream their parents envisioned for them at birth. All the participants wanted to make their parents proud and go on to college to succeed in the classroom and on the field. Although most did not know if they were academically prepared, the recruiter reassured them they would have resources. Attractive young ladies reassured them they were wanted and needed on campus; and on their recruiting trips, they were shown the life of the student-athlete, and once again reassured by the academic staff they

had the players' backs. The participants' collective perceptions of the recruitment process are best captured by Joe's words:

It's not hard to tell the truth. I just wish they would have given it to me straight. I feel like they knew they was full of shit, so they had to paint this pretty picture. Truth be told, I would have come anyway. What other choice do I have if I want to play pro ball?

The participants enjoyed the process, but in the end, would have preferred the truth.

**Research Question 3: How do football players interpret the role of NCAA Policy and messaging, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and peers on their role identity?**

**Theme: The athlete, I mean student-athlete, culture.**

Research question three was intended to better understand the role played by the NCAA, the conference, and UWI's rules and policies on participant role identity and what influence coaches, academic staff and athlete peers have on identity. As mentioned earlier, all the participants identified as athlete-students after interacting with coaching staff, academic staff and upperclassmen within the athletic department environment. Many of the participants originally perceived the recruitment process gave them a false impression of collegiate athletics; but upon reflection, collectively they perceived the recruitment process showed them the complex duality between the NCAA, conference, athletic department, and society. Simply put, the participants perceived the recruitment process to be a clear depiction of what collegiate athletics had to offer. The participants recalled the recruiters telling them what they wanted to hear, but hearing different messages on their recruitment trips. They also spoke of movies that depicted collegiate athletics, and it was made clear, that upon further reflection, the NCAA, conference, and athletic department said one thing, but society at large knew they meant something else entirely. Even

though the participants identified as athlete-students early in their career, there appeared to be an identification shift fueled by injury, demotion on the field, a better appreciation for academics on the impact gaining or not gaining a degree could have on life after college. In the end, the participants did not appear to have security or trust in what was said by the NCAA, the conference, or the athletic department.

When asked how they identified on campus regarding the roles they assumed, the participants had similar responses all indicating that football was the reason they had been allowed to attend and engulfed the majority of their day. As a result, they felt they had to be football players first, before anything as Ron indicated:

I would say athlete-student now that I think about it, because again, had it not been for athletics I wouldn't be there in order to become a student. I never would have said that until doing this, but that sounds better to say it that way, because to me right now as we sit here that sounds like more of the reality that I lived every day.

Feelings of obligation in return for the opportunity to go to college were expressed by many of the participants, and this seems to be a result of constant reminding by coaches how they arrived on campus. Joe said, "Coach told me I brought you here for football. You are on a scholarship to perform on the field, and don't forget it." These words matched all the participants' descriptions of mixed messaging from coaches on the priority of academics and athletics. Mixed messaging and feelings of obligation to the team, paired with football activities throughout the day, in the eyes of the participants pushed them to identify with their athletic identity.

*Going to class doesn't get the coach wins.*

The collective perception of the role of academics was clear. Participants believed most of their coaches' only concern with academics was if their starters were staying eligible.

Although the NCAA calls them student-athletes, some of the participants believed their college education and presence at UWI was based on their on-field play. Ron reflected on his playing days and his lack of understanding regarding his scholarship:

I believed you had to perform or give up your scholarship. I was under the impression from coaches that you must produce in order to stay. I didn't know that our scholarships were four-year renewables, until I got out of school. I thought they could have ended my scholarship.

The coaches, in the opinion of Ron, kept the knowledge of not being able to revoke a scholarship from a player in order to keep them in compliance with their team culture, the culture being to keep participants focused on football, helping them to identify as athletes first.

Each participant acknowledged coaches get paid to coach, and that they are judged by wins and losses. That can't be done in the classroom. A few participants alluded to coaches not caring about academics and putting football first, but Bobby spoke to it directly. He said: "I have heard plenty of times you're here to play football. You take care of that academic stuff on your own time," time the participant said he didn't have. Six of the seven participants spoke about not being able to take specific classes because they were offered at the same time as practice. Joe said, "Coaches care about academics to a point, that point is 1:30 PM. After that you better have your ass in this building ready to play football." The NCAA was described in negative terms because participants did not believe the NCAA knew what was best for them, and their policies hurt more than they help. "That's the only reason they want us to go to classes, to make the APR and appear to care," said George when asked about the role his coach played in his role identity. Coaches at UWI have pressure to win and that pressure is placed squarely on the shoulders of the players. That pressure led the participants in this study to strongly identify as athlete-students.

*Stay eligible, protect the brand, and everything will work out.*

In discussions about how coaches and athletic staff impact identity, the sentiment was that most coaches focus on football because it puts money in their pockets. Participants also believed the remainder of the athletic department staff was responsible for keeping players eligible while protecting the brand on and off the field. Participants perceived that some staff were genuine; but in the end, football is a business. In the business of athletics, football comes first, helping participants identify as an athlete first. When asked how he felt about the athletic department staff, Joe reported:

You might have a few people that sincerely and deeply believe in the same dream or direction you have of graduating from college and maybe going pro, but for the majority I think it's just a crock of mess to make you feel good. We're here to get them paid.

Participants described the athletic staff with mixed emotions. Bobby felt the staff judged him before he arrived on campus:

They told me I could do kinesiology when they recruited me, but when I get here they had already enrolled me in like basket weaving or something. Telling me based on my academic standing in Junior college they didn't feel comfortable putting me in that major. Man, I had a 3.8 GPA in JUCO, come on!

This was not an isolated incident. All except one participant believed they had been judged prior to attending UWI. Bobby felt disrespected and lied to. He was told he had to take specific classes because they fit his schedule better, and it was being done to help him stay eligible. Like Bobby, Mike was given a major he did not choose, and he expressed these feelings: "I think they don't do enough to figure out what each of us want to do. They just generalize people and throw them all in the same category." The process of controlling participants' majors and classes to keep

them eligible, did not equate to players graduating or actually learning anything. This angered Joe because he felt it did not match the NCAA marketing slogan, “going pro in something else.” He notes, “when your eligibility is up, you can't play no more. It's like bye. You graduate, cool. If you don't, cool. You served your purpose.” Feelings of being used, lied to and controlled were shared often by participants, and it seems they believed these things were done to keep them eligible, protect the brand, and win games. All with the knowledge some would not graduate.

As participants indicated, protecting the brand included going to class, being respectful on and off campus and on the playing field, not getting in trouble with the law, staying eligible, and doing anything needed to make the department look good. Joe said, “We heard protect the brand constantly. Protect your personal brand. Protect the team brand. Protect the department brand. Protect the university brand, on and on.” The issue with protecting the brand for participants was the perception that the NCAA and athletic department did not follow their own rules. Participants believed the term student-athlete was used because others wanted to hear that they were putting the livelihoods of students that played sports ahead of the game of football. The participants disagreed, feeling it was profit. Mike had these feelings about the athletic department staff:

It may not be personal for them. For them it's probably all business, but they don't realize that this shit is somebody's life. This is setting the foundation for the rest of my fucking life, and you've got me in this hole talking fucking bowling classes, telling me to be a general studies major with no focus. I feel like a lot of that shit gets swept under the rug. They say it will all balance out, but that's bullshit! I've seen too many guys not balance out and leave without a degree.

Three of the participants spoke of teammates that were considered professional prospects and were standouts on the team. These teammates had a few things in common. They didn't go to class and they received special treatment from university staff as well as all athletic staff, but none of these teammates graduated from UWI. Collectively, the participants were angry because selected players were allowed to disregard rules everyone was supposed to follow, including, protecting the brand.

Pressed on the issue of eligibility, the participants brought up tutoring, their disdain for it, and how they were required to attend when their white teammates were not. "I could have a 3.0 and still have to go to tutoring but my white teammate gets to choose his major and not have to attend tutoring. What's that all about," said a frustrated Mike. I followed up with the academic staff, and found that white football players did attend tutoring but at a lower rate than African Americans. Tutoring was thought to be a waste of time to keep participants eligible and out of trouble. George noted "I sat around and bull shitted with my tutor for real. She was getting paid so she didn't care how I feel. Those that want to succeed go'in succeed, the others go'in fail regardless." Most participants believed tutoring was a waste of time, but they also appreciated the privilege of having it at their disposal. Joe shared, "I know not everybody on campus has this at their disposal, and I appreciate it when I need it, but why can't it be just that, when I need it."

Eddie was even more blunt about his feelings on the NCAA, the athletic department and the conference. He said: "If you stay in your lane and don't rock the boat you will be cool here. They all lie, the NCAA, coaches...I learned that the hard way, but if you pay attention to the upperclassmen, you understand the game" He went on to say:

There is no way in hell, anyone if they being real, can identify as a student-athlete. They spewing lies, plain and simple. When we get offered bowl games for our grades, that's

when you will see “student-athletes.” Until then everybody needs to stop drinking the Kool aid.

This opinion reverberated through all the participants. The participants all spoke of hearing how important academics were, and how it was their responsibility. The participants also discussed how their athletic requirements began prior to classes and ended after classes, painting a different picture of how important academics were. Joe believed, “On paper they [UWI] probably abide by all the rules [NCAA]. The public sees that, but us athletes we live a different reality. What they report is what is allowed, but they ain’t reporting the ‘voluntary’ hours we put in.”

Overwhelmingly, the participants believed being told or reading one thing, and being directed to do something entirely different. These contradictory messages directed them to identify as an athlete first despite the student-athlete rhetoric.

Even with frustrations of being told one thing and seeing something different, or being told academics were their responsibility, and with a perceived lack of interest in academics from coaches, many of the participants made it a priority to succeed in the classroom at some point in their career. That motivation was encouraged by parents or individuals on the athletic staff. Many of the participants mentioned their parents as a source of motivation to graduate from college. These sentiments are captured well by Ron’s words:

I didn't want to disappoint my parents. It's not like my parents would beat me to death. It was never that type of relationship. It was just a pure disappointment. I wouldn't want to look them in the eyes and say I was screwing around and I didn't graduate, or whatever the case may be. I think that literally kept me in line more than anything else.

Bobby like Ron didn’t want to fail his single mother, because he was a first-generation college student. Besides, he wanted to be a positive role model for his younger siblings. Several

participants regardless of their parents' educational level, received encouragement and direction on how to be successful prior to college. Ron's parents told him, "you need to make sure you get your academics ready before you do anything as far as athletics was concerned." Ron's mother went as far to show up on campus when she felt she and her son had been lied to about academics taking precedent over athletics. Ron describe the situation here:

There was a class I needed to take that was at 1:30, which was the stopping point, no classes after 1:30...The coaches initially had me in something like basket weaving 101. It was something that was very simple, but it fit into the parameters of what they needed, which was class ending before 1:30. I told my mom and next thing I know, she was here on campus. She said, 'you have my son out here doing who knows what, and that other class is for his major.' Well after my mom raised hell, they let me take the class. She was so disappointed in the coaches.

At this point, Ron described an internal fight between athletics and academics, but he felt he found a good balance with positive reinforcement from his mom. Bobby and George initially gave credit to their parents for academic success, but also believed their deep individual drive, as well as attending junior college before UWI, prepared them better than their teammates just out of high school. George noted, "It definitely wasn't their lies of school coming first, tutors or coaches that got me through. I had to grind to make it. They said we was responsible for school, so I handled that."

Although many of the participants spoke of negative experiences with coaches and some of the academic staff, they also had good things to say about those who they perceived genuinely cared about their well-being in school and long after. Eddie had an encounter where a staff

member who told him, “Get yours on and off the field. You never know what’s going to happen.” Eddie took this information and applied it for the rest of his time at UWI. Eddie noted:

He never told me to not try and go to the league, but he put it into perspective for me. If I do make it to the NFL, still, you can't play forever. You can't. People retire, your non-student athletes, they retire from their jobs when they're 65. Some people don't retire.

NFL, professional athletes, they retire at like 30. What are you going to do for the rest of your life? After that talk he had me thinking about stuff like that. It always stuck with me.

Several of the other participants mentioned similar encounters with this same academic staff member who happened to have played football at UWI long before the participants were even born.

*Dear NCAA, I don't have time do to my volunteer activities.*

One of the top reasons participants offered as justification for identifying as athlete-students was the amount of time spent on football related activities and the lack of time or desire to do anything related to academics. Volunteer activities does not refer to things such as Big Brothers, or Habitat for Humanity. This use of the term volunteer, refers to coaches suggesting workouts are voluntary, or attending summer school and working out is voluntary, when in fact it is implied as mandatory. Participants noted they were required to attend voluntary workouts, outside of mandatory workouts, as well as meetings prior to practice, practice itself and sometimes film sessions suggested or taken on voluntarily. These activities take up more than the maximum 20 hours a week limited by the NCAA. The participants did not know the exact number designated by the NCAA. Bobby shared he and others decided to take on additional athletic hours to protect their position on the field:

Sometime there would be a 20 hour or 30 to 40-hour week. We trying to do what could get us better. If we feel like 20 hours ain't enough it's like all right, we going to try to see what we can do or whatever to make sure we are in a proper position to excel on the field. Sometimes the coaches suggest it and sometimes you just know, do it or lose your spot to the next man.

These additional hours were thought to go undocumented and not count towards the time the outside world believed they spent on football.

Being a football player at UWI meant the participants had to complete all classes by a specific time. Ron mentioned, "When the clock hits 2:00 PM, you better be thinking football and nothing else. It's a wrap until at least 7, and after that you got dinner and probably more film." Some of the participants mentioned different times when they had to be prepared for football but the times were within the same approximate time range. Bobby discussed the reality of his time after starting his day with weights at 6 AM:

Say if I really did homework 3 to 5 hours a night I wouldn't start until like 9, and that leaves me finishing at midnight or later. Mind you, I've been up since like 5:30... I'm tired. I just watched film, got treatment, and practiced for like 4 – 5 hours, and that was the second day of it. I'm tired. I ain't studying for class. It's a wrap. I need sleep I got practice and a game to prepare for.

Many of the participants included tutoring in their athletic requirements because it was mandatory and took away their ability to spend that time on something they choose. So, although some of the participants utilized the reserved time to prepare for class, others slept or talked about topics unrelated to academics.

Two of the biggest complaints of the participants were the inability to manage their own time and the amount of responsibility they had as compared to non-athletes. These two things further helped solidify participant's identity as athlete-students. George grasped what all the participants tried to convey with his interpretation of comments made by Seattle Seahawks Richard Sherman:

In his interviews he actually talked about athletes having more responsibility than anybody that's on campus. Student athletes have more responsibility because they work out early in the morning. Have to be at breakfast on time or be penalized. You've got to be at tutoring or classes at a certain time or be penalized. Then at around 2:30 until like 6 or 7 at night you got practice. Then going back to tutoring or studying for an exam or meeting with a group that you were supposed to prepare a group presentation with. All of that is before you play the game. At the game you get judged by hundreds and thousands, while risking your life. On top of that, you have to do interviews with the media, stay on your P's and Q's and avoid getting caught up in controversy or be penalized by the department and community.

The message was made clear when participants were asked how the NCAA, the conference, and the athletic department impacted their identity. The participants believed they were athletes first because everything revolved around athletics. "When we came in they did physicals, we practiced, they told us how important academics were, but we focused on football for 3 weeks before I ever saw a class. I knew football was the most important." Joe further explained why he was an athlete-student, referencing voluntary summer school:

You can't go home. If you do, you won't see playing time, so you go to summer school and workout. They say it's your time and that you don't have to stay, but that's bullshit.

You have to stay, anything else is frowned upon. You got to do summer school because in order to do football stuff, you got to be in a certain amount of classes, like a certain amount of hours or something, so you go to summer school so you can do summer conditioning.

In the minds of the participants, volunteer activities were known to be mandatory, occupying their time and reinforcing football as the primary reason for being on campus, thus allowing them to identify as athletes first.

Although the NCAA stresses participants in all sports are students first and athletes second, this is not what the football players in this study experienced daily. This in part, was believed to be influenced by the cost of winning and losing, high price endorsements, and the fact that good grades don't impact the winning percentage. The athletic staff was believed to influence the athlete identification by judging participants prior to their arrival on campus and by limiting the classes and major's participants could enroll or elect. Finally, being told they had to attend summer school to work out and prepare for the upcoming season, led these participants to believe athletics took precedent, and therefore they identified as athletes first.

**Research Question 4: How do football players' perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity?**

In response to this question the participants in this study did not believe administrators or alumni, affected their role identity. The participants answers were focused on non-athlete peers and professors.

**Theme: More than meets the eye.**

When asked how they perceive others see them outside of the athletic department, it was clear, participants believed they were judged and stereotyped because they were African American and football players. The participants reflected on how important academics and football were to them during college and the responses varied. The participants all shared they wanted to succeed in academics and athletics, but the ability to balance these and not focus solely on one occurred at different times for each of them. When the participants were asked how their professors viewed them and its impact on their identity, all the participants had positive comments. Even the negative comments were perceived to be used as motivational tools. Administrators and alumni were not a topic of conversation, but non-athletic peers, and more so, the African American non-athlete peers, led the participants to explore the role of skin color in their identification. The participants in this study believed they were viewed as stereotypical African American athletes, not equals to their white teammates. The impact on their role identification was multilayered over the course of their time at UWI, all starting as athlete-students upon arrival and interaction with staff, transitioning to athlete-students with a focus on academics. All the participants believed they were not the stereotype, rather anomalies that benefited from both positive and negative encounters with professors, all while having their lives played out for all to see, in their minds unfairly judged on issues others never had to face in public.

*Judged by our own.*

Although two participants attended predominantly white high schools, and did not have the initial culture shock of attending a PWI, they still noted a difference in treatment by peers for being an African American football player at UWI. While feeling like outsiders at UWI, four of

the participants mentioned being stunned with the number of white students on campus, due to coming from African American neighborhoods. One said skin color didn't impact him, but later noted similar encounters expressed by others that made him feel white and African American non-athletes did not like him or perceived he was above them. The participants perceived that most of the African American students at UWI were on the football team, which was thought to be the norm at other PWI's across the country. I was intrigued by hearing that the participants felt a divide between African American football players and African American non-athletes. The participants expressed being put off by their own people because they played football and perceived that African American non-athletes thought they were spoiled and got a free ride as George noted:

They don't see the workouts. They don't see the sweat. They don't see tears. They don't see it all building up. It's like they don't see that I'm African American just like them. I suffer the same bullshit and more because I'm a football player. All they see is that we're getting a free education, and even that is the furthest thing from the truth, we put in long hours each week, hell more than 40 hours easily.

Knowing they were not accepted equally by African American non-athlete peers, the participants seem to gravitate to athletic peers that make them feel welcome. Interacting with fellow African American football players that have been socialized in the same manor more than likely played a role in the participants identifying as athlete-students.

The biggest issue between African American athletes and African American non-athletes appears to be a lack of understanding from the other's perspective. Eddie noted:

We don't know them and they don't know us, because literally they go through so much and we're in a bubble that doesn't allow us to see what they go through on this campus as a student whose life is not controlled by football. They believe we are nothing like them. Both sides were judging one another. The isolation from non-athletes seemed to broaden the divide while allowing the participants to see African American non-athlete peers enduring the same societal issues as them complicating the fact that forging a connection was strained due to football. The racial tension on college campuses and in society at large across the country at the time of the interviews seemed to heighten the participants' sense of their small numbers on campus, and being somewhat divided from their African American peers was upsetting and George spoke of how they attempted to bridge the divide here:

I used to always go on campus to the spot. I'm like, 'How come they be mugging us and stuff? Why do they be beefing with us?' I'm thinking that's just how it is. We mug each other all the time, like 'Who you looking at?' Trying to have all this masculinity. I'm like, we look the same. We should be connected more.

Mike said, "It makes no sense that all the white students wanna be cool and kick it just to be around athletes whereas our own, the ones that look like me, we have no connection." The connection African American football and African American non-athletes share is their minority role identification on campus and being stereotyped by others to be athletes' due to their skin tone. With these stereotypes, the participants seemed to expect the stereotypes and brushed it off to avoid conflict, like many perceived the African American non-athlete students did. George recalled a conversation where he was stereotyped by a classmate:

I had this guy who actually left class and never came back anymore because of a very heated discussion about white privilege. He was a white male. Granted, he left and didn't

nobody see him. Anyways, he approached me with like, 'You really, really impressed me. You're a smart dude.' All football players that smart. All I could think about was,

'I'm black and I play football, bro.' I just laughed it off. I was like, 'Yeah, man.' (George)

Macroaggressions, like the one above, seemed common among all the participants and for many reinforced their own prejudices. Not being able to bond with African American non-athletes pushed them to identify as an athlete and stay within the athletic confines to avoid tarnishing the images they signed up to protect.

*The anomaly.*

Not one of the participants believed they were lazy, cheaters, only focused on football, selfish, dumb, unable to read, or only at UWI to make it to the pros, all stereotypes believed to be cast upon them by non-athlete peers. They blamed white non-athlete peers more than non-athlete African American. Although the participants believed African American non-athletes shared similar experiences, they also believed they stereotyped them as well. These stereotypes were said to come because of teammates that lived up to the stereotypes. Mike noted:

I don't want to say we lazy. I just feel like people could do more and they choose not to. I don't know if it's because it's too hard, or if they don't want to, or they don't see it's their job to do it. It's somebody else's job. Get somebody else to handle it. I don't know. One guy I know, he one of them dudes that was a star but didn't graduate. He doesn't come back I think. Because he was so well-known, I think he's kind of embarrassed about having to come back to finish. That really changed my perspective. Yeah, it's good to live while you're here, enjoy everything, but it's going to come to an end. When it comes to an end, all these people smiling in your face around here, if you don't got nothing to bring to

the table, they're not going to help you. That really changed how I looked at being here. I thought it was all good.

The teammate described above believed he was going pro and that fully engulfed his athlete role, while foreclosing on his academic role, aligning with the social identity theory.

The anomaly was chosen for this theme because the participants perceived they did not fit the stereotypical African American student-athlete others perceived them to be. Instead, Eddie decided:

I need to make a habit. I'm going to go hard in school, and I'm also going to go hard on the field, so that way, no matter what ends up happening, I end up somewhere. I knew I didn't want to be like Joe. He never went pro and never graduated, and he was scared to show his face around here because I'm sure he thought he thought he was a failure and would get no respect.

The participants all spoke about how being African American, a student and athlete complicated their lives at a PWI. Joe believed he was judged before people knew him:

Like I tell people all the time, they judge us before they even know us. They see the tattoos, you see the grills. They don't make us thugs. You look up in the dictionary a thug is a criminal or somebody who has committed a crime. I mean, no. That's a part of us, that don't make us bad people.

Many of the participants discussed how they faced double standards that their white athlete and non-athlete peers did not. When asked how others on campus viewed him, Ron said, "I wear sweats to class because I just finished working out and receive weird looks or hear people saying how spoiled athletes are, we get stuff; but I work my butt off!" Ron went on to say:

My white teammates don't get those looks unless they 300 pounders. The non-athletes don't get that when they come in looking crazy and probably still drunk. They spoiled because they don't do what we do. They just go to class and drink. It sounds horrible, but I know when they first saw me on campus, they said athlete. I guess that's how I viewed that they viewed me. If you're here at a university such as UWI, any African-American, odds are you're an athlete. That's the odds. Again, that's what I'm thinking. That's how I thought that they viewed me.

All the athletes believed they were special because they could do both athletics and academics, and perceived not many of the non-athletes could thrive in the UWI athletic department environment. For many, the negative connotation associated with African American student-athletes drove them to prove everyone wrong. Although all identified as athlete-students, all the participants made it known they did not want to leave UWI without a degree. Football took priority because it was required, but just as they were told to take care of academics on their own time, they did. Ron noted:

I came here to get my degree. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to go to the league just like everybody else; but I wasn't leaving without a degree. Being the first in my family to graduate and the happiness that brought my mom was priceless. I can't imagine not getting that piece of paper and having to face her. It would be a slap in her face and it would say I was ungrateful, and I'm grateful for what she did for me. For real, she was the main reason I focused on my books. If the coaches had it their way, I might of or might not have graduated. That's real talk. It wasn't easy, but I put the student in student-athlete, me, not them.

Similar statements by other participants were made, reinforcing that this group believed they were anomalies. They followed this up by going to class, staying eligible, finding ways to complete work when out of town, and challenging the status quo by getting their parents involved to take classes that benefited them beyond football. This group of participants used the stereotypes as motivation and threw it back in the face of non-athlete peers. Joe said, “I had a chip on my shoulder when I got here. I was here to prove myself on and off the field.” On the field Joe spoke of his initial fight to gain playing time, and off the field he spoke of the stereotypes he faced:

They see a big black dude like me over six feet tall and pushing three hundred pounds all they see is black football player that ain't about nothing. I can be dressed nice, no sweats and they still gone assume. I know what the shade of my skin is, but why do they assume I'm dumb? That's why I sit back and watch, and just wait to hit them with the stinger when they least expect it. They don't think I be listening, but I hear and see everything, that's when I speak eloquently, and show off my vocabulary. Just because I came from the bottom, and play football at UWI, don't mean I don't have goals. So yeah, the white non-athletes push me to do better, but the black non-athletes do as well, but no one pushes me harder than me to graduate. I play football first, but best believe my books run a close second.

This group of participants against the odds, competed at the highest level in college football, and despite the stereotypes, they graduated, and therefore they are the anomalies.

*Professors care if you care.*

When specifically asked about professors on campus, the participants generally had good things to say, but also acknowledged how their teammates could perceive a professor was against

them if they themselves did not put forth effort. There were also perceptions that some professors did not care about their commitment to academics. They assumed that if you're an athlete, you are lazy. Joe went on to describe how he perceived some professors viewed him, "You're a dumb jock like the rest of them. Just worry about what you got to do, get a D or C, and we're good. I ain't got to deal with you, you ain't got to deal with me." Although some of the participants understood a response like Joe's, many sympathized with professors. Ron sympathized by saying:

I would say initially, again, if you're a football player you get viewed negatively, and maybe rightfully so, based off some of your other teammates, as someone that doesn't come to class, doesn't pick up a book, doesn't do the right things. The stereotypical athlete is someone who rarely shows to class, doesn't participate, whereas I definitely give effort to go to class, even if I'm dog tired.

Some participants explained, they perceived their non-athlete peers called them lazy because of their lack of energy or enthusiasm in class. The participants described their lazy nature more precisely as fatigue. At times the participants said it was easier to just let the non-athlete peers think they were lazy because the players knew how hard they worked. These same athletes acknowledged that some professors sympathized with their fatigue level, and gave warnings, but still expected their best. George suggested encounters with professors that expected his best, but sympathized with his struggles, pushed him to not let that professor down:

We both would come in class, sit at the very edge of the class, and go to sleep. Every time. The professor didn't trip. She would mention, like 'You need to apply yourself, because if not, you're going to get a bad grade.' She gave us a pass, we couldn't just ignore her looking out man, that would be a slap in her face.

Bobby had positive words for a professor that, in words, “would not allow the status quo.” This professor required more. Bobby described the experience where his professor would not allow sleeping or late work:

I had this one professor who was like, ‘No, I ain't having that.’ I was like, ‘Dang.’ Yeah. I ain't going to get away [with sleeping] with this one, so I started applying myself more.

In general, the participants had positive things to say about their professors and noted if anything, professors indirectly encouraged an athlete-student identification because their grade determined eligibility, and eligibility is tied back to athletics. These comments would have seemed off-base earlier in the interviews, but after hearing the participants talk about football ruling everything, these statements made sense.

### **Summary**

Once again, the data presented in this study comes from the individual interviewee’s perspective. I am not verifying the perceptions in this study, but rather reporting the perceptions of the participants in this study. The participants in this study live lives that are under constant view from numerous people and organizations. The lives of the participants and how they perceive others see them is best described as the kaleidoscope lifestyle, one where all aspects of the participants’ lives are revealed and explored by others and more than what a non-athlete would expect. For these participants, being an athlete-student meant they had to live by a different set of rules established by the NCAA, conference, UWI, and UWI’s athletic department. The participants perceived a standout player’s life would be highlighted more so than others. The final thing putting more eyes and pressure on the participants was the fact that they were African American at a PWI.

Normal things such as sending a silly tweet, or posting to Instagram with a funny picture, for an athlete, could be turned into a scandal, or made viral and used as fuel by an opponent. If a normal student did the same, no issues would come about for the most part. When speaking of a spotlight on themselves, participants talked about the process and the indoctrination early in the recruitment process. For some of the participants, it was their high school coach, and for others, the coaches recruiting them told them to be mindful of their online presence. Describing his first encounter with the pressure to be a collegiate athlete, Joe described his recruiters' words.

He told me at UWI we have traditions to uphold, and everyone has an obligation to protect the traditions and the brand with integrity. I had no idea what he was talking about, but then he said, 'we monitor our players' and potential recruits' social media,' I had to take down some of my post if I wanted to attend UWI was the message that he was conveying, I soon understood. He said if I want to play big time ball, I had to play by the big-time rules because all eyes would be on me. He said we don't want kids here that like to pop-off at the mouth, or call attention when it's not needed and said if it was an issue, I wouldn't get my scholy... (Joe)

Conversations about how college football was a business followed Joe's comments, and others shared similar feelings.

They recruited me to play ball, they talk about not making the brand look bad, what brand we can wear, where we can and can't go, and lastly talk about academics being important, but you've already shown me football is what matters. (Bobby)

The participants brought up players such as Jameis Winston, Reggie Bush, and others that coaches believed tarnish the brand. They also spoke about how their parents were given the same speech about protecting the brand and not being problematic. Overall the participants perceived

they had to proceed cautiously in all that they and their parents did, or risk losing their scholarship. Possible one of the reasons the majority identified as athlete-students coming out of high school.

In this study, seven African American football players attending college at a PWI gave detailed accounts of how they perceived individuals in the college environment, especially peers, athlete and non-athlete, white and African American, and professors impacted their self-identification. In previous questions the participants gave detailed accounts of how they perceived coaches and those in their home town communities impacted their self-identification. Despite coming from different areas of the country, the participants shared a number of similar experiences that aided in answering the research questions posed for this study. In summary, the participants in this study believed they were anomalies and not the stereotypes non-athlete peers and some professors believed them to be. For this group of young men, academics were important, but they still identified as athlete-students. The participants still had aspirations to play professional football, and all of them expressed this was the result of the culture (socialization) in their hometown. The socialization prior to college and during college combined to help participants identify as athletes first at UWI. Lastly, the participants made it clear, being African American at a PWI influenced how they identified on a daily basis, and sometimes it was hard. In the end they all made it clear, the color of their skin would not prevent them from taking academics seriously and graduation.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion**

The focus of this study was on how and why African American football players identify as athlete-students or student-athletes at a Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). My findings show the process of socialization to be a vital part of why African Americans collegiate athletes choose a specific social role identity. The participants in this study gave examples of being socialized to value the athlete role more than their student role by people in their neighborhood, at school, the media, and at home by family members. These examples are in line with the findings of Adler and Adler (1987, 1988, 1991). To understand how individuals and groups interact in the various environments described above, the Social Identity Theory provided the theoretical foundation for this study (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

This study used the interpretive qualitative approach in order to hear how African American male football players in 2015-2016 made sense of their roles as students and athletes at UWI. It was also my intent to hear who, and what influenced identification and success academically, athletically, and post college for the participants. Findings from this study provide implications to ethically improve the academic, athletic, and personal life balance of African American football players at PWI's, without socializing players to put football above everything.

Utilizing the interpretive qualitative approach, open communication with each participant was achieved during semi-structured interviews, allowing for verification of interpretations, and ensuring the essence intended by each participant was captured in the findings. The interviews with the seven participants in this study unveiled four themes and eleven sub-themes. To understand each participants' perspective through a theoretical lens, the Social Identity Theory (SIT) was used to frame the responses elicited during interviews. The SIT lens is focused around three general assumptions: individuals want to have high self-esteem, be associated with positive

groups, and by comparing similar groups, individuals determine if their social identity and group identity are positive or negative (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The final aim of chapter five is to connect SIT to the practices of collegiate football, and answer the central question guiding this study: *How do NCAA FBS, Division I male African American football players make sense of their roles as students and athletes at a predominantly white institution?* To reach the essence of this question, four research sub-questions were developed to help reach conclusions based on the findings and offer recommendations for practice and future studies.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The main findings of my study indicated African American male football players at the Predominantly white UWI valued academics in college, but still identified as athletes first. The participants perceived they were athletes first after direct communication with coaches, athletic staff, and teammates. These perceptions were developed despite having respect for their student identity prior to arriving at UWI. There was a defining event during the course of each participants' college career that refocused their attention to academics and life after football, but it never deterred their dream of playing professional football. Prior to attending UWI, the following people and circumstances influenced how the participants identified: media, community, socioeconomic class, race, high school teachers and counselors, parents and the college recruitment process. Of these early influencers, fear of first failing mom, followed by dad for a few of the participants, and the fantasy painted by the recruitment process, lead all of the participants to UWI and the athlete-student identification.

The participants all perceived that the NCAA, and UWI athletic staff pushed them to identify as athlete-students with their actions and verbal expectations, despite false rhetoric delivered by the NCAA and UWI to the public indicating academics came first. The integrity of

collegiate athletics is perceived to be damaged and this is attributed to the business-like culture resulting from the commercialization of collegiate athletics. One of the most difficult things for the participants was being negatively stereotyped by African American non-athlete peers because they believed they should be their top supporters. White non-athlete peers and faculty members also had an influential impact on the identification of African Americans in this study. Although stereotypes are typically viewed as negatives, the participants took it upon themselves to prove the stereotypes wrong on and off the field. This mindset could be why the participants perceived many of their professors were in support of their success. With this knowledge, the participants all agreed they would do it all over again because football was their way to earn a degree and potentially go pro, satisfying their parents with both accomplishments. The remainder of this chapter is a comparison of the findings and prior research.

## **Discussion**

Recalling from the previous chapter, four themes and eleven sub-themes emerged from analysis of data collected from seven African American UWI football players. This discussion section will be separated by the research questions and the themes and subthemes extracted during interviews will address the research questions.

### **Research Question One: How do football players identify in terms of their multiple roles as student and athlete?**

The participants in my study believed their peers and others on their campus placed them as athletes, even before actually meeting them. In previous research, athletes noted that on predominantly white campuses people affiliated being African American as being an athlete (Bimper Jr, 2014; Bimper Jr, Harrison Jr, & Clark, 2013). Although the NCAA, conference, and athletic department suggest athletes are students first, the seven participants in this study

identified as African American athlete-students. For the participants in this study, being African American was not an option, nor was not playing football.

It had been drilled into them from birth that football would lead to a paid college education, and the pros. With their eyes set on going pro, the participants learned to put an emphasis on the athlete role identification after entering college and finding clarity through daily interactions with staff and athletic peers.

For all of the participants, their orientation to the athletic department let them know they were on campus to play football, because that is what they were told. The participants in this study, also gave credit to being on campus several weeks prior to the start of classes with coaches and teammates as another reason they identified as athletes first. Previous research matches my findings and suggest the social environment and the people in them can be partly responsible for how an individual identifies (Tajfel et al., 1971). Also, interactions between coaches and teammates can be both conscious and unconscious demonstrations of how someone is supposed to behave in their group (Adler & Adler, 1991; Tajfel et al., 1971).

The participants felt betrayed after their initial orientation because they expected an academic and athletic experience, but upon arrival on campus were told football is the main focus. This betrayal is found in the literature to cause role conflict between the student and athlete roles because the athlete role is given praise while the student role is ignored in the first several weeks as it was for the participants in this study (Adler & Adler, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1991; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Explained through the lens of SIT, only giving attention the athlete role when the participants first arrive on campus, could result in football in-group, while making academics the out-group (Tajfel et al., 1971). The participants in my study recognized football was a dominant force in their day-to-day life in college, but it was not

everything in their lives. These findings align with past research on academically successful football players (Bimper Jr et al., 2013)..

African American division one student-athletes are faced with similar challenges experienced by their non-athletic peers at PWIs. With this knowledge, it seems mutually beneficial to athletes, the athletic department, and the university for academics to be encouraged and not looked upon as a byproduct of being a division one athlete. To begin the process of trust and build a comfort level with academics, it seems academics should be included in the pre-camp practices in some regard. This could ease the transition from high school, and help to positively socialize players into the academic role identification while in the classroom. Not promoting football over everything could also boost GPA's and graduation rates, and increase the respect for intercollegiate athletics and its involvement in higher education. Additionally, players that see the classroom and football in a positive light, have a better chance of achieving high self-esteem, and a desire to perform well. These things in combination could lead to better recruits, improved facilities and increased attendance at games, all things desired by the athletic department.

**Research Question Two: How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?**

All of the participants reported growing up in communities that placed a high value on athletics. This phenomenon, known as early socialization, is covered in depth in the literature (Beamon, 2009, 2012; Edwards, 1979, 1988, 2000). Although two of the participants grew up in middle class neighborhoods, they felt they were pushed into football by the media, family, members of the high school staff and students, and the recruitment process. Previous research demonstrates identifying with the athlete role garnered more popularity in high school and made

it easier to identify as something others already stereotyped African American athletes to be (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989; Solomon, 1992). The media and the recruitment process have also been shown to influence how adolescents begin to identify as athlete-students (Adler & Adler, 1988; Edwards, 1988). The examples given by the participants suggest, the recruiters made it seem as though their academics would be taken care of for them. The media was perceived to aid the recruitment process and athlete-student identification by glorifying the African American professional athlete persona, while also describing African Americans as thugs outside of sports (Edwards, 1979, 1988; Rhoden, 2010). Pushing a positive self-esteem with athletics and a negative vision of one's self with all other things outside of sports.

The participants that grew up in lower socioeconomic areas perceived their family and the communities believed football was a necessity to go to college and eventually go pro. Previous research demonstrates early adolescents' occupational aspirations can be shaped by parents actions and words in regards to sports and academics (Jodl et al., 2001). Despite their background or identification prior to arriving at UWI, each participant arrived on campus with aspirations to play professional football after graduating with a degree of their choosing.

Preceding their chosen identification was a period of intense recruitment, where they were told how the university needed them and how they could be both students and athletes. They were also told they could major in various majors, even when the major was not offered at UWI. Regardless of socioeconomic status, the interviewees revealed that early socialization by family, members of the high school staff and students, media, and the recruitment process all played a role in the participants role identification, hence the theme road most traveled. The most prominent early experience that continued to impact identity was the relationship with parents and the fear of letting them down. The young men in this study showed their mothers, in

particular, also socialized them to respect their academic role identification, in addition to socializing them to pursue professional sport careers (Beamon, 2009).

The participants in my study described their communities as breeding grounds for professional football players, professional basketball players, and “Dough Boys” (drug dealers). The participants perceived there was a national community of African Americans that believed athletics was the only way out of the hood, a message said to be perpetuated through the media. The community is said to be connected through a history of institutional racism and being treated as second tier citizens (Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 1988; Harris, 1994). With this understanding of community, the participants perceived they were funneled into football, and expected to go into the professional ranks, or be considered a failure. The participants in this study recalled guys that made it out the neighborhood and national sport stars and noted how these individuals were sources of motivation to play football. Similar findings are found in research (Beamon, 2009; Edwards, 1988, 2000). My findings reaffirm how being socialized to focus on football early in life can leave little time and space for other roles, such as student (Adler & Adler, 1991), and the participants in this study shared this concern. Along with being socialized into football, all of the participants in this study, to some degree expressed being afraid to pursue any other avenue to post-secondary education. This last point seems worthy of further research by others seeking to break or understand the socialization process in African American communities.

Moving on to the high schools’ influence in the community, the interviews unveiled if not initially, that all the participants in my study began taking academics seriously in high school and did not rely on their athletic ability to slide by, at least consciously. Research by Greendorfer and Lewko (1978) matches my findings, African American students rewarded for academics equally valued academics and athletics. For some of the participants in this study choosing the

athlete-student identification in high school made sense because that is how people saw them and being an athlete placed them in the popular group. Perceived popularity as a result of playing a sport at the high school level leads students towards athletics, and the athlete-student role identification (Goldberg, 1991). Goldberg and Chandler (1995) point to early personal identification as athlete-students as a reason for developmental problems resulting in less preparation for college. Although the participants in my study noted they received some special treatment from some teachers, it was perceived that the majority of teachers and counselors did not offer special treatment.

To the contrary, the interviews unveiled several instances of stereotyping based on race and sport during the high school years. Most often it was perceived that teachers and counselors stereotyped the participants as less knowledgeable and incapable of going to college unless on an athletic scholarship. These negative stereotypes can be seen as a threat to the participants self-esteem, and as explained in SIT, any threat to self-esteem can lead to departure from a group, in this case the student-athlete group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This could explain why the participants in my study choose the athlete role over the student role. The participants regarded these stereotypes as motivation, but acknowledged it was easier to garner respect as an athlete, and that was why they identified as athlete-students. The responses from the participants when asked about their perceptions of teachers and counselors, suggests the athlete-student identification was chosen by the participants because as individuals no one wants to be seen in a negative light or associated with a negative group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), hence the athlete-student identification. Although the participants wanted to value academics, they still had individuals (teachers and counselors) that consciously and unconsciously socialized them into the athlete-student identification.

The recruitment process was described as a process full of excitement, built on the anticipation of playing on the biggest stage of NCAA Division I football. Pescosolido (1986) proposed newcomers go through three stages of assimilation, beginning with idealistic views of what they will experience (Expectancy). The participants in my study recalled how recruiters from UWI created the ideal image of what student-athletes experienced on campus. The new-found student-athlete image was one that was portrayed by the NCAA in the media, but once on campus this image was distorted. The participants often referenced the line, “going pro in something other than sports,” as a line recruiters used to impress their parents (Zillgitt, 2007). The recruiting process was perceived to be the best part of their early experiences, but upon reflection the participants felt they believed in a fantasy that never became reality. These perceptions experienced by the recruits embody the stages of Disillusionment and Reconciliation proposed by Pescosolido (1986). The disillusionment coming from the reality of day-to-day experiences as a student-athlete, and Reconciliation coming from a more realistic view of life as a student-athlete (Pescosolido, 1986). Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) describe the recruitment process as the entry point into the false notion of balance between academics and athletics, going as far as telling incoming players, and their parents they have control over both. One example offered by the participants includes, academic advisors suggesting to parents their child would be looked after on and off the field. All of the participants and their parents were told not to worry about academics because resources would be provided (Harper et al., 2013), and although the research shows young African American boys are not prepared for college, the athletic staff lead the parents and athletes to believe the academic support would overcome this line of thinking. Despite their early experiences, all of the participants enjoyed their journey, but collectively each noted they would have preferred the truth.

**Research Question Three: How do football players interpret the role of NCA Policy and messaging, the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, and athlete peers' affect their role identity?**

As stated earlier, the participants identified as athlete-students just after arriving on campus and placed little emphasis on the student role. As the participants adapted to the culture and ways of the athletic department, they admitted they did not trust the coaches or academic staff because they perceived their words were empty when it related to academics. Singer (2009), similarly found, African American student-athletes perceived their institution lacked integrity, by saying one thing and following up with actions counter to their words. To this point, six out of the seven participants noted they were told they could choose a major of their choice, but when they arrived on campus they were given majors and schedules that were conducive to meet the time demands required by the football program. Likewise, the findings concerning major choice and ability to choose classes is consistent with prior research regarding academic clustering (Case et al., 1987; Fisher et al., 2010; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010; Wolverton, 2008), and clustering was found to be present at UWI.

The participants shared that the first few weeks on campus were filled with football related activities, surrounded by their athletic peers and very little, if any, at all attention given to academics or other aspects of college. In these first weeks on campus, coaches spoke about the importance of football related activities, and academic counselors were not introduced until days prior to the start of classes. The participants perceived these words and actions contradicted what the NCAA and UWI stated in public about the importance of academics (Christianson & Geren, 2007), leading to the theme, “the athlete, I mean student-athlete culture.” The participants all regarded collegiate athletics as a business, and this perception arose from their lives being

planned to the minute with football as the foundation, and class suggested as a necessary evil of winning games and remaining eligible. Similarly, collegiate athletics and the NCAA is regarded as contradictory in the literature and said to be concerned with revenue and not the athlete's well-being (Byers & Hammer, 1997; Commission, 2010; Edwards, 1984; Ganim, 2015; Ridpath, Gurney, & Snyder, 2015; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). The participants all perceived the NCAA, and UWI athletic staff pushed them to identify as athlete-students with their actions and expectations not matching their public rhetoric.

Despite not trusting in the athletic department, coaches, or academic staff, it appeared the early socialization the participants experienced with their families, communities, and the recruitment process prepared the participants to be re-socialized into the athlete first identification. This is consistent with prior research relating to African American athlete socialization, socialization in general, and role assimilation (Adler & Adler, 1988; Jones, 1986; Pescosolido, 1986). The participants in this study identified as athlete-students because they felt obligated to the institution due to their belief that football was their only way to achieve success in football.

The participants in my study were clear. Intercollegiate athletics was perceived to be a business focused on revenue, starting with the NCAA, and trickling down to the conferences, individual institutions, and the coaches. One of the participants in my study expressed his fear of losing his scholarship. He perceived the coaches lead him to believe he could lose his scholarship if he did not adhere to their rules and perform on the field. The omission of not telling the participant his fears were unfounded is nothing new in intercollegiate athletics, prior research suggest coaches create a sense of obligation in new players in order to socialize them into their culture (Adler & Adler, 1988; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). These feelings of obligation are

referenced in Adler and Adler (1988), where they suggest five elements essential to the development of intense loyalty to an organization. The first element is domination, and they suggest strong leaders such as coaches can evoke feelings of obligation as seen above (Adler & Adler, 1988). Preceding the obligation to UWI, the participants referenced not wanting to be one of the guys to go back home and be regarded as one of the failures. It appears the coaches repeatedly used this knowledge as a tool to socialize the participants into being compliant with the athlete-student culture, which was not in line with the public image of student before athlete.

The participants also discussed how the coaches made it clear, football was their main priority, and the classroom was not where games were won. One participant shared how a graduate assistant, told him he was on campus to coach and not go to class, going as far as selling his books back. Another example given, was star players not attending classes, but somehow remaining eligible. Situations where players remain eligible despite not doing their own work is referenced throughout NCAA history as academic fraud and scandal, and recently in the media showcasing a lack of academic and institutional integrity (Smith, 2015; Thelin, 1996). So, despite being told they were students first and athletes second, the actions of coaches and other academic staff members lead the participants to believe athletics came first, and aided them in identifying as athlete-students, with a focus on academics.

The participants in my study suggested the term “student-athlete” was merely a tagline that was a common joke amongst their team. The perceived clarity that football was expected to be at the center of the participants lives lead them to believe collegiate athletics was a business intended to make money from their skill set. The commercialization of collegiate athletics and high dollar contracts are suggested in the literature to push institutions to win and secure corporate contracts at the expense of student-athletes academic welfare (Fletcher et al., 2003;

Sack, 2001). The participants in my study acknowledged knowing that so much money was involved, including their scholarship, let them know football was their priority in the eyes of their coaches, despite the rhetoric expressed by the NCAA and athletic department. With this knowledge, the participants identified as athletes first despite holding academics as a high priority.

The participants had to look out for themselves and adhere to the culture by staying eligible while also persisting to graduation. A large part of adhering to the culture, was staying out of trouble and protecting the brand of UWI. The brand of UWI included outwardly embracing the student-athlete identity, while inwardly acknowledging they were athletes first. The brand also required the participants to recognize they were always in the spotlight and expected to not place themselves in situations that could embarrass the program, institution or advertisers, on or off the field. The perceived problem with protecting the brand described above, lay in the belief that it was all done to increase revenue. The participants perceived tutors were brought in simply to create the illusion they were supported academically, when in fact they did nothing in their sessions. Likewise, some of the academic staff were perceived to be at the institution to collect a check and adhere to the athlete-student culture.

One thing that angered the participants most was the use of the term voluntary activities. As the participants noted, if it related to football, their presence was required even on days where they were supposed to have an off day. The idea of “time” is discussed at length in the literature and some researchers believe student-athletes have adequate time to accomplish academic and athletic responsibilities (Paskus & Bell, 2016; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). There is however research that states the opposite, and concurs with the responses elicited from the participants in my study, that football players don't believe they have adequate time to be successful in both

athletic and academic roles (Ayers et al., 2012; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Wolverton, 2008). Past research suggests athletic departments have skirted the line in adhering to the 20-hour rule by “requiring,” so called voluntary activities (Ayers et al., 2012). The expectation was that athletics came first, and remaining eligible was connected to this expectation. The participants made it clear this perceived expectation did not mean academics were valued, but more a necessary evil of Division I collegiate football. The collective perceptions of the participants in this study demonstrate messages delivered through direct communication with coaches, athletic staff, and teammates were instrumental in them understanding what was expected of them, but having their time controlled was instrumental in understanding the expected athlete-student identification.

**Research Question Four: How do football players’ perceptions of the interactions with professors, administrators, alumni, families, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity?**

All of the groups listed in the question above were perceived to have some type of influence on the participants, with the exception of administrators and alumni. Despite being told they were athletes first, while the public was told academics were paramount by the NCAA and institution, the participants in this study all valued academics. The affinity for academics grew deeper towards the end of the participants playing careers, but each participant described academics as an important component in their overall experience. The participants believed they were the exception to the rule, or as many stated, anomalies when it came to academics and stereotypes. They believed some professors and many non-athlete peers devalued them before knowing them. Stone et al. (2012) found negative academic stereotypes for intrinsically motivated athletes lead to a perceived imbalance between academics and athletics, leading to

academics losing its importance. The participants in my study expressed similar feelings to the ones found in the Stone et al. (2012) study, but once again, the fear of failing their parents, in particular their mothers was a counter balance that lead to academics not losing its importance.

Although academics did not lose their importance for the participants in this study, stereotypes did indeed impact role identification. The participants noted the most hurtful stereotypes came from African American non-athletes, because being African American is what they shared on a campus where so few African Americans attended. The participants described how being judged by their own made their world smaller and pushed them to identify with the athlete role more. The participants also perceived white non-athlete peers stereotyped them into the dumb jock role, and many non-athlete peers thought they did not belong academically. Faculty were perceived to have a positive impact on identity when they were perceived to give the participants a fair chance at success. The participants noted that one of the major influencers on their athlete identification was the fact that everyone (faculty, non-athlete peers, community members, and athletic staff) knew them because they watched them, or read about them in the media in regard to their on-field play, and as a result they were under constant scrutiny as an athlete, and not a student. Despite the stereotypes, and negative words from some faculty, and non-athlete peers, the influence of family, motivated participants to identify with their athlete role, but to not forget about their academic role, resulting in the theme, “More than meets the eye.”

The literature suggests African American football players choose the athlete-student identification due to the majority of the African Americans on campus residing on the football team (Harper et al., 2013). African American football players also choose the athlete-student identification to avoid being rejected, and judged by the predominantly white university campus

(Melendez, 2008). Through the lens of SIT, this makes sense because individuals want to be seen in a positive light, and to have high self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Others have noted collegiate athletic departments priorities are misplaced, and student-athletes suffer in their academic and personal growth (Benford, 2007; Commission, 2010; Meyer, 2005; Thelin, 1994). Examples of student-athletes suffering both academically and personally include an understanding that these things are done on one's own time: group projects, test, or any academic endeavor had to be handled during times outside of football activities, even those deemed voluntary.

### **Significance**

Historically, athletics have served as a primary vehicle for getting African Americans into post-secondary education. This information is significant for athletic departments, post-secondary institutions, society at large, and research on African American male collegiate athlete socialization. The findings from this study highlight the lack of integrity and life balance for African American collegiate athletes. The findings also highlight the process of socialization at UWI and an environment filled with stereotypes. Athletic departments can benefit themselves, and their athletes by being transparent and truly putting the athletes best interest first, and abiding by the polices put forth by them and other member institutions. Advantages of putting the athlete first include: higher graduation rates, higher APR rates, eligible athletes that can compete, and act as ambassadors for the program, while also raising public trust in the ethics of intercollegiate athletics.

With an understanding of why student-athletes identify with a specific role, athletic departments could learn what academic support programs during the freshman year and each subsequent year would be beneficial. This research also addresses the socialization process that

takes place when student-athletes arrive on campus and interact with coaches, academic support, professors, athlete and non-athlete peers. Understanding how student-athletes perceive verbal and non-verbal messages could lead to training for coaches and academic support staff centered on positive messages in regard to academics being a priority. Additionally, this research can lead athletic departments to review their student handbooks, websites, and how athletic staff and the department interacts with student-athletes face-to-face. In the end, data collected from this study will add to the existing literature on student-athlete role identity, and the student-athlete's perspective on the impact of race, background characteristics and type of sport on academic success.

### **Recommendations**

The participants in this study gave detailed accounts of how they perceived others viewed them and what, if any impact they believed this had on their social identification. The findings suggest early socialization during the adolescent years through high school lead to the participants identifying as athlete-students. Youth coaches, community members, and the national and local media praising athletes, all served as socializing agents, and paved the way for the participants in this study to believe financial success was dependent upon them playing in the NFL. The one force suggesting an alternate path through education was said to be the parents, or more precisely the mothers of the players. The participants feared failing their parents in the classroom, but they feared not making it out of their communities more. Parents and the African American community as a whole need to acknowledge the absurdity of pushing athletics as the only way out of the neighborhood, when only 8.5 percent of college players make it to the NFL (Carson et al., 2015; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014b). There are several viable

options for students to pursue, and the national and local media can help illuminate these options through national campaigns similar to the NCAAs going pro campaign.

The findings indicate early socialization set the foundation for the participants to be re-socialized into the athlete-student identification upon arriving on campus at UWI. Initial team meetings, interactions with teammates and coaches, and reading the student handbook lead the participants to believe coaches expected them to place football over everything. One player noted, coaches don't get paid for them to go to class. The participants said, coaches have a job to win, and if they lose, they get fired. That same responsibility to win is passed down to the players, and one reason the participants believed intercollegiate football was a business. A business were they are lied to, and exploited for the benefit of the NCAA, athletic department and their coaches. The athletic department, university and coaches have a responsibility to be up front with potential college athletes as well as those already on campus. This begins with the recruitment process. Coaches need to give recruits and their parents a realistic view of what to expect once they arrive on campus. It would be beneficial to tell the families that their likelihood of going professional is low but setting a goal to do so combined with a plan to graduate would be beneficial to the players and families.

The participants indicated they were told they were responsible for their education and had the ability to choose classes and majors, but when they arrived on campus they were clustered into classes that aligned with the practice schedule. The findings show, the players day was planned for them, and the vast majority of their time was spent with their athletic peers. The findings also indicated the control of the participants time at the PWI UWI, combined with stereotypes associated with college football players, and the players being African American lead to them being isolated, and part of why they identified as athlete-students. The athletic

department should consider the implementation of policies that require players to meet with academic staff and students outside of the athletic department early in their career at UWI. The purpose would be to allow potential students to visit with academic staff and students in various departments and allow them to see academics from the perspective of a student, and not only as an athlete. This also allows the players to learn about the major they are considering, as well as learning about other majors that could be a better fit. A change such as this is beneficial to the NCAA and athletic department because their statements about putting the student first, become more realistic.

In the end, coaching salaries will probably continue to rise, and the need to win will continue to pressure coaches and athletes into choices that will have negative consequences. Apparel and television contracts will continue to grow, and collegiate athletics will continue to grow out of control in regard to the commercialization, but the likelihood of things slowing down is slim. I could recommend that coaching salaries be capped, or policy be implemented that require member institutions to allow players to attend classes during practice, or even monitor voluntary activities more closely. The problem with doing any of these things is that NCAA history has shown, institutions will simply find a way to work within the system or roll the dice and hope to not get caught. The NCAA, Universities, athletic departments, and parents need to remember who is at the center of collegiate athletics, and that is young men and women that have been promised the opportunity to be a student-athlete. The responsibility of the NCAA, universities, athletic departments, and parents is to prepare these young people for life after college, and transparency in written and verbal communication seems to be the best policy for all parties involved.

## **Future Research**

I would recommend that this study be duplicated on a larger scale and conducted with student-athletes that range from sophomores to seniors at a similar institution. A comparison of the responses from individuals living the day-to-day life verses someone recalling the facts could offer useful information for athletic departments and research on socialization of African American student-athletes. Another area for future research, is the impact of parents (mother and father) in social role identification of African American athletes in African American communities. A study such as this could illuminate how and why communities socialize and are socialized, and how parents can and do change this trend. Additionally, with so few African Americans on campus, and the majority residing in the athletic department, I would suggest a study of this type focus on race, academic clustering, major choice and student-athlete involvement in the academic decision-making process. A study of this magnitude would be beneficial to PWIs, the athletic department staff, and the NCAA. Referring back to the 2015 GOALS study completed by Paskus and Bell (2016), future research could investigate why 70 percent of the football players surveyed would choose the same major, if 25 percent admitted to being prevented from taking a desired major. This type of study could help PWIs, the athletic department staff, and the NCAA better understand the impact of clustering on graduation rates, but also post collegiate career obtainment. A study such as this could also call attention to the NCAA's constant marketing that the student comes first, and ask the question, does the research support this statement? Finally, my study included seven academically motivated collegiate football players, these players despite socialization into the football over everything culture, still remain dedicated to academics. These academically motivated young men lead me to suggest a future research study investigating academically motivated African American student-athletes at

PWIs from low socio-economic status areas. A study of this type would be helpful in identifying groups, individuals, environments, and other elements that play a role in academic motivation and success.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to hear how a group of African American male football players in 2015-2016 made sense of their roles as students and athletes at UWI, a predominantly white institution. The study was also designed to hear who and what influenced identification and success academically, athletically, and post college for the participants. What I found was a group of academically motivated young men that were conflicted due to socialization intended to focus them solely on football prior to college, and re-socialization to do the same as prior to, and during college. The key to academic motivation was found to be the parents, but more specifically the mother for all of the participants. The mothers and fathers influence was strong, but outside of parents, the African American community, media, coaches (high school and college), counselors, family members, non-athlete peers, and faculty members were said to sometimes act as factors in the process of socialization into the athlete-student identification. With so many factors pushing football, limited time to focus on academics, and everything in their lives revolving around football, the participants assumed the athlete-student identification.

After conducting the interviews with the seven participants it became clear, they perceived there to be little integrity in collegiate athletics, and the NCAA and athletic staff (counselors and coaches) at PWIs' were thought to be consumed by the business of collegiate sports. With the priority being placed on winning, contracts, and appearing to put the student before football, the participants believed the athletic department did not value academics nor did they believe they valued them outside of football. Despite all of these things, and a high regard

for academics, the participants in this study still held onto their dream of one day playing professional football. These findings are consistent with the literature in regard to early socialization in the African American community pushing youth into sports such as football and basketball with the belief they could go pro (Beamon & Bell, 2002; Edwards, 1988). Additionally, as found in the literature, coaches hold power over student-athletes, and they have the power to impact change over how athletes identify on campus, both positively and negatively.

The findings also mirror the literature in regard to athletic staff and counselors' role in identification. In my study, these individuals were found to push the athlete first culture by suggesting players could choose a major of their choosing, and choose their schedule, but the reality was these things were done for them, matching research on clustering and the recruitment process, which was said to be filled with empty promises. The findings also highlighted the participants desire to be seen as more than athletes, and consistent with the literature, the participants had positive relationships with most of their professors, and perceived faculty cared if they cared (Ridpath, 2008; Tovar, 2011). One finding that was not expected was the lack of interaction between African American athletes and non-athletes. Melendez (2008) suggest the lack of integration to be caused by the players being stereotyped as sell outs, and privileged, whereas the non-athletes do not hold that status.

In the end, we return back to the three general assumptions guiding the Social Identity Theory to make sense of how the participants in this study make sense of their roles as students and athletes. The participants found it much easier to identify with their athlete role before college because they were socialized to do so, and rewarded for doing so, thus giving them higher self-esteem. Athletes as a group are seen in a positive light when they are performing on

the field, and by association, youth see going pro to be a good thing. Once at UWI, the participants were once again praised for athletics and academics were not associated with anything positive. When viewed through the lens of SIT, it seems clear why collegiate football players determine themselves to be athlete-students.

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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent**

### ***A Study of NCAA Division I Male African American Football Players Perceptions of Role Identity***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to understand how a current group of African American male student-athletes in 2015-2016 make sense of their role as a student and athletes.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: (1) participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour, and (2) you will be asked to review a transcript of your interview. During the interview, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences as a high school and NCAA Division I football player and your perception of your roles as a student and athlete. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission only. If you choose not to have the interview session audio-recorded, you will be excluded from the study.

Participants will also be asked if they are willing to participate in a follow-up interview lasting approximately thirty minutes. This interview will allow the researcher and you a chance to discuss preliminary study findings and enables you the ability to guarantee that the study's findings accurately reflect your voice and input. The second interview will also be audio-recorded with your permission. If you do not consent to audio recording, we will forego the interview and only use the data from the first interview. Again, participation in the interview process is voluntary and confidential.

#### **RISKS**

There is minimal risk associated with this research study. The potential risk associated with this study may come from mental discomfort caused by recalling difficult times from your past as a student and athlete.

#### **BENEFITS**

The benefits' of your participation in this study are primarily through your contribution to the body of research concerning male African American student-athletes' experiences at the NCAA Division I level. Sport scientist, coaches, academic support administrators, professors and student-athletes like you will also have the ability to learn from this research. Your inclusion in this study could contribute to how athletic departments, professors and student-athletes interact with African American football players in the future.

## PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Participants will not be paid to participate in this study to avoid any possible NCAA violations due to the investigator being a former student-athlete and now classified as a booster.

## PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name, department, or any other identifying information will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher will use a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.

Interviews will be recorded and professionally transcribed by Rev.com Voice Recording and Transcription Service immediately following each interview. All audio files will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

## REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

## CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: *Eric Patterson, Joseph R. Pearson Hall, Room 305, Lawrence, KS 66045*

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the researcher may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION should be directed to:

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CEOP/AAI  
University of Kansas  
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[stwombly@ku.edu](mailto:stwombly@ku.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) office at (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email [irb@ku.edu](mailto:irb@ku.edu).

KEEP THIS SECTION FOR YOUR RECORDS. IF YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE TEAR OFF THE FOLLOWING SECTION AND RETURN IT TO THE RESEARCHER(S).

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***A Study of NCAA Division I Male African American Football Players Perceptions of Role Identity***

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Project/Study Title)

HSCL # \_\_\_\_\_ (Provided by HSCL office)

**PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:**

If you agree to participate in this study please sign where indicated, then tear off this section and return it to the investigator(s). Keep the consent information for your records.

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about me for the study.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Type/Print Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

I agree to be audio recorded for the purpose of this study only.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*[If signed by a personal representative, a description of such representative's authority to act for the individual must also be provided, e.g. parent/guardian.]*

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to understand how student-athletes today (2015-2016) make sense of their role as a student and an athlete by interviewing Division I male African American football players.

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Your participation in this research study is appreciated; I understand that your schedule is busy, so thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Remember, this interview is completely voluntary, so if at any time you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer something, don't. We can also go back to questions that you may want to clarify. If you feel compelled, we can also stop the interview at any point.

This interview will be audio-recorded and I can stop the recording at your request anytime. We will not use your name in the study; instead you will be allowed to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the interview to protect your privacy and confidentiality. The interview will last approximately one hour. What would you like your pseudonym (fake name) to be?

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My study is focused on how NCAA Division I African American male football players like you make sense of your role as a student and an athlete. Each role carries different responsibilities and expectations, which can be shaped by events prior to college, events during college, the NCAA, athletic staff, university staff, alumni, fellow athletic and non-athletic peers.

1. Tell me a little bit about who you are, where you're from and what brought you to this university?
  - a) Probe about recruitment process

- [If no mention of expectations – What did recruiter say would be expected of you?]
  - [If no mention of academic or athletic balance – How was the balance of both presented to you and your family?]
2. For some the term student-athlete implies “student” and “athlete” how do you see yourself as a student and athlete at this university?
- a) Probe about primary identification & when it first took place (prior or during HS w/Examples)
    - [If before college, when and how it compares to college]
  - b) Probe about external influences on identity – Before college & Currently
    - [If no mention of individuals, locations or events – probe for coaches, parents, teachers, teammates, classmates, tutors, academic staff, community members, alumni, locker room, meetings]
  - c) Probe about aspirations for professional sports
    - [If no mention of timeframe, ask when it began, if aspirations are the same or different and how this impacts identification]
3. Can you recall the first time you heard the term student-athlete used?

- [If no mention of HS – How did your HS address athletes that played sports?]
  - a) Probe about perceived level of importance for academics and athletics in HS by: FB player, coaches, parents, teammates, teachers and comparison to college
- 4. Can you tell me what you experienced your first week in college athletics?
  - a) Probe about meetings, rules, standards, perceived expectations
  - b) Probe about how rules, standards and expectations were delivered
    - [If no mention of perceptions – ask how he interpreted what he heard and saw. What about teammates?]
- 5. If you compare the messages portrayed by the NCAA in television commercials, posters or publications such as your student handbook to what you heard in recruiting process, upon arrival and today from individuals (coaches, admin, tutors, peers, etc.) in your athletic department regarding “student-athletes,” do you feel the message is the same?
  - a) Probe about matching actions and expectations of athletic staff with the NCAA?
  - b) Probe about which identity is perceived to take precedent over the other?
    - Examples?
- 6. Can you describe what your first day attending classes on campus was like?
  - a) Probe about experiences with professors and students (non & student-athlete)

- b) Probe about type of Institution (PWI)
- c) Probe about comparison to high school?
- d) Probe about identification and race?
- e) Probe about conflict between academics and athletics

7. Do you have anything you would like to add or revisit?