

GIVING IT THE OLD COLLEGE TRY: UNDERSTANDING DEGREE
COMMITMENT AMONG DIVISION I FBS NFL ASPIRANTS

By

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND POLICY

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
WITH A MAJOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the Graduate College

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2012

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

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COMMITMENT AMONG DIVISION I FBS NFL ASPIRANTS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I wish to convey my most sincere thanks to my advisor, Dr. Regina Deil-Amen, for her tireless and diligent efforts in reviewing my work. She challenged and pushed me incredibly to think more critically and never accepted anything less than the best I could do. Her role modeling and commitment to seeing me through my educational journey have shaped me profoundly. She took an interest in me, wrote with me, traveled to conferences, and introduced me to others for my academic development and enrichment that has played a critical part in not only getting through this dissertation, but in other research projects. I give my most heartfelt gratitude for her extreme patience and professionalism with me.

Next, I would like to thank my committee members for sharing their time, feedback, and for adding refreshing perspectives to this work: Drs. Lydia Bell, Jenny Lee, and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar. I wish to thank Gary Rhoades for “planting the seed,” motivating me, and getting me excited to pursue the doctoral pathway.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Michael for his patience, encouragement, and enthusiasm over my pursuits. A special thanks to my Nana, and my Mom for their life-long commitment to my educational and personal success and sacrificing so much for me. A special extension of gratitude goes to my boss Dr. Ken Knox, for his encouragement, modeling, and support for my academic endeavors. I thank my friends and confidants, Sasha Ciara and Tanisha Price-Johnson, for their emotional support, listening to my thoughts, and getting me through this process.

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ABSTRACT

Building on sociological studies regarding college choice and persistence, this qualitative study investigates the college and post college experiences of 15 current students with NFL aspirations and 13 former students who held NFL aspirations, all from Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) programs. A phenomenological design is implemented to explore participants' lived experiences, and awareness of their educational and occupational options. Deil-Amen and Tevis' (2010) Circumscribed Agency frames this study and provides a lens for examining the college choice and departure process. The role of the student exerting agency as circumscribed by context, habitus, and self-efficacy is emphasized with self-perceptions being essential in the process of enacting individual behavior and decisions. Perna's (2006) conceptual college choice model is made up of four contextual layers and is used to further explain students' college choice behaviors. Findings are consistent with Bowen and Schulman (2001) in that students' college decisions are driven by their athletic pursuits. This study also addresses persistence for this group of students. Tinto's (1993) theory on departure is used as a platform from which to examine commitment and social integration. Traditionally, degree commitment has been measured as strong or which severely limits our understanding of persistence. Findings reveal degree commitment to be fluid and contingent upon perceived occupational options, health status, and year in college. The majority of current students express commitment to degree attainment as a priority. However, further investigation reveals degree commitment to exist without a specific time frame set by students. This adds a time dimension to our understanding of degree

commitment. This study further extends Tinto's concept of commitment with evidence of two competing goal commitments: degree and occupational. Decisions to leave college early for the NFL are driven by participants' self-perception of their athletic abilities despite where they are on the team's talent roster. This decision is further shaped by their college community integration consisting of teammates, coaches, and the NFL. Former students who stopped out of college reveal unanticipated challenges with re-entry into college. However, in contemplating a return to complete their bachelor's degree, stop outs articulate a renewed sense of energy and degree commitment given a change in their occupational trajectory and situated context.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

They helped to make (your) university successful and win national championships, but at the end of the day they didn't have a degree... nothing to show for it. (W)hat are they doing at the university? They are simply passing through your institutions on their way to something else. Some of them make it (professionally), some of them wash out.

-Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education,
The New York Times, 2010, p. 1

One hundred and five years after the official inception of the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), an association charged with governing intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, 2011c), the demands on universities to take accountability and responsibility for the academic achievement and degree attainment of students in intercollegiate athletics continue (Benford, 2007; Bowen & Schulman, 2001; Sperber, 2001; Suggs, 2005; Thelin, 1996). Most recently, demands initiated by the above quoted U.S. Secretary of Education, are two-fold. First, Secretary Duncan advises the NCAA to enforce stricter consequences on teams that do not graduate students in intercollegiate athletics. New policies like APR (Academic Progress Rate) consider retention as it relates to eligibility and have been constructed to improve academic progress towards degree attainment among students in intercollegiate athletics. Specifically such policies enforced by the NCAA now penalize athletic programs for poor graduation rates. Some scholars are concerned that without such regulatory enforcement students in intercollegiate athletics, particularly those considered to be at a greater risk of dropping out, could be

left to grapple with low educational expectations and rely heavily on intrinsic motivation to complete their bachelor's degree (Le Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla & Gerber, 2009; The New York Times, 2010). However, empirical research demonstrating the effectiveness of such policies has yet to be published in academic literature. Despite the lack of evidence and analysis, the greater concern is the intended role this policy plays in improving graduation rates of students in intercollegiate athletics. The implementation of benchmarks to track degree progress demonstrates a serious effort toward improving this group's academic achievement. However, *progress towards* is not *acquisition of*. The focus here is to ensure students continued eligibility (to play) rather than actual degree attainment. There is an embedded assumption in this policy that progress will undoubtedly lead to attainment. As this policy punishes programs collectively for not meeting benchmarks, how does this policy improve graduation rates exactly? Are students expected to be driven by fear of team penalty to make satisfactory academic progress to acquire their degrees? Instead, exploration of how students in intercollegiate athletics view their academic/athletic abilities and make decisions within their context could prove useful in uncovering what gives rise to degree commitment as it shapes *both* progress and attainment. Particularly important is an exploration of self-views and decision making among those in high revenue generating sports whom have traditionally been considered at risk of dropping out (Le Crom et al., 2009).

Second, Secretary Duncan shames professional sports organizations like the NFL (National Football League) for their admissions policies. He argues that the NFL admission policy serves as a disincentive for students in college football programs

working toward obtaining a degree (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009; The New York Times, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to NFL eligibility rules, prospective players are required to be three years removed from high school.

Furthermore, students in college football programs can contact the NFL College Advisory Committee regarding their probable draft standing and actually enter the draft one time without endangering their college play eligibility. Glaringly absent from the NFL eligibility is the requirement of a college degree (NFL Players Association, 2011). Consequently, Duncan's criticism is particularly applicable for top ranked students in college football programs considering leaving college without their degrees to pursue a professional career. Imaginatively speaking, this could be tempting. This is also applicable to *any* student in college football programs with strong professional sport aspirations, despite their position on the talent roster (i.e. string).

The NCAA (2011) approximates that only 1 in 50 of 12,600 NCAA seniors or 1.7% actually obtains one of the 224 NFL draft slots. Some scholars have noted that many students in college athletics have unrealistic expectations of professional sport careers (Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 2001). Per Hyatt (2004), Data from the Center for the Study of Athletics (1989) show that 44% of Black students in college football, and 20% of non-Black students in college football aspire to become professional football players. However, buried within these figures is the percentage of those, whom regardless of their string, also have NFL aspirations. What is not known are the personal experiences behind these figures that could potentially add a deeper and richer understanding of students' self

efficacy and decision making as it relates to aspiring toward the NFL, and degree attainment.

Statement of the Problem

College choice has been described as a three-stage process by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) that includes predisposition, search, and choice. They conclude that each stage assists scholars in understanding student values, perceptions, and behavior with regard to college attendance. In the pre-disposition stage, students develop their orientations towards college attendance as educational and occupational aspirations form. Within this first phase of pre-disposition, occupational aspirations are typically connected to educational aspirations. Students determine their route toward upward mobility and consider college attendance in that process.

For most, the purpose of college is to get a bachelor's degree in order to acquire a well-compensated job and improve one's life (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). What happens when occupational goals do not require college degrees? Logically, a non-college pathway would be taken. On the other hand, what happens when the desired occupation (i.e. professional athlete) does not require a degree but essentially structures a forced college pathway in the pursuit of an occupation? Does this dilute the traditional meaning and purpose of college for the aspirant? If this is the case, what might this mean for those aspiring toward such a pathway? The traditional meaning and purpose of college could change drastically. Moreover, this could be the case for distinct groups like students in college football programs with NFL aspirations, be they realistic or not.

College Choice. In general, from an economic perspective, students decide to enter college with the goal of completing a degree hoping that an investment in their education will lead to increased productivity and thus, higher earnings when entering into the work force (Becker, 1962). From a sociological perspective, students decide to enter college for expected monetary and non-monetary benefits for overall upward social mobility (Perna, 2006). For most, there is a goal of degree attainment. However, this may not apply to all students. According to data from the Center for the Study of Athletics (1989), and reaffirmed by Hyatt (2004), students participating in high revenue sports do not enter college with the goal of education and degree attainment. This is particularly the case for Black students in college football programs (1989 study as cited by Hyatt, 2004). Instead, as Hyatt (2004) observed, students in high revenue generating sports attend college with the primary purpose of extending their athletic careers.

Persistence. Arguments aligning with Duncan's call operate from the traditional presumption that a college degree is a requirement for a well-compensated job. Those without degrees are perceived to have less lucrative job choices and insecure employment (Stevens, 2007). Duncan's call assumes that universities, athletic departments, and the NCAA bear the responsibility of enforcing degree attainment for students involved in intercollegiate athletics. However, his question, "what are student athletes doing at the university?" could best be answered if it were addressed to students in high revenue generating sports to better understand their decision-making processes. These processes can provide insight into their degree commitment and the overall purpose behind their college attendance. As such, it is important to explore the mind-set, value system, and

reality this group experiences while in college. In general, degree commitment has been understudied with only Becker (1966), Weick (1995), Singh and Vinnicombe (2000), and Swailes (2002) devoting thorough attention to this topic from a qualitative perspective. Similarly, attention to the concept of degree commitment among students in intercollegiate athletics has also been neglected in prior research. Understanding degree commitment for those students in college football programs following a professional sport trajectory is an interesting case from which to enter the aspiration-attainment discussion. Even more intriguing is the idea of understanding the decision making process among those considering leaving college early to pursue their NFL aspirations. Strikingly, close qualitative examination of students in Division I FBS programs with explicit NFL aspirations has been excluded from academic literature.

Graduation Rates. With the national college graduation rate at 52% among first time, full-time degree seekers starting at a four year university and within five years (NCES, Digest of Education Statistics, 2002 Starting Cohort, 2010), the NCAA's research staff lists a 79% GSR (Graduation Success Rate) for students in Division I intercollegiate athletics overall, but this figure is reflective of a four year class average (NCAA, NCAA Research Staff, 2000-2003 Entering Cohort, 2010a). The NCAA celebrates the fact that this rate is above the national average. Those buying into this platform argue that participation in athletics improves academic performance and thus, improves their chances of graduating with a bachelor's degree (Watt & Moore, 2002). However, this is deceiving given that such a percentage does not hold once disaggregated by gender, sport, and race/ethnicity. In their presentation 2010 report, *Trends in*

Graduation Success Rates NCAA Division I Institutions, among a 2000-2003 starting cohort, the NCAA reports a 72% GSR for male students and 87% GSR for female students in intercollegiate athletics attending Division I institutions. When GSRs are broken down by men's sports, they report the sports with the top three GSRs to be men's gymnastics with an 87% GSR, men's swimming with an 85% GSR, and men's tennis with an 84% GSR. The bottom three sports were baseball with a 70% GSR followed by football (FBS) with a 67% GSR and finally, men's basketball with the lowest GSR at 65%. Within the scope of football (FBS) programs, they also report differences by race/ethnicity with an 82% GSR for White students and a 61% GSR for Black students. According to the NCCA's own studies, it is apparent that students in Division I FBS programs have not fared as well as their general student counterparts. This is especially the case for Black students in involved in these programs.

Significance of the Study

Given the unique and perceived possible post-college options and unconventional college experience this group of students has, it is surprising that qualitative research on their experiences of choice, persistence and departure has remained relatively obscure (Adler & Adler, 1987). Investigations into the broader meaning of college for students in Division I FBS programs and how their experiences and goals give rise to such meaning have not been included in academic literature to date. Instead, the topic remains incredibly active on online newspapers, and publicly debated on sports internet blogs (Associated Content, 2009, 2010; Chronicle, 2010; The Daily of The University of Washington, 2004; Ed.gov Blog, 2010; Mercury News, 2010; The New York Times,

2010; Polldaddy, 2009). Interestingly, bloggers on this topic are not only fans with opinions, but some are university professors and advisers frustrated with college athletics and the perceived low degree commitment among students participating in intercollegiate athletics. Consequently, this issue is of intense interest to the many institutional actors intersecting with intercollegiate participants.

My study provides four key academic contributions to the area of college choice, persistence, departure and re-entry among participants. First, my study addresses Perna's (2006) call for further research into college choice among various groups. From a sociological approach, I qualitatively examine college choice for current and former students. I investigate the purpose for college attendance, college selection criteria, and rationale behind their purpose and choice. Findings add to empirical literature and reveal that choices are carefully calculated and primarily guided by participants' athletic orientations and perceived athletic future possibilities. In particular, selection is driven by participants' desire to best position themselves athletically within a university sport program. Second, my study explores the meaning of commitment and highlights how participants define the idea of commitment as it relates to degree attainment. Thus, I operationalize various factors participants outline in order to generate a possible meaning of college for them. In doing so, findings reveal competing educational and occupational goals that inform participants decision making. Commitment is found to be fluid, complex, and dependent on various factors such as participants' health status, perceived NFL opportunity, and year in college. Third, Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon (2004) call for the inclusion and examination of various student populations in order to better

understand student departure. Accordingly, my study explores the students in Division I FBS programs their disposition towards degree attainment and the decision (for some) to forgo college completion for an early jump start to their NFL career. Findings reveal participants' internal timeline for degree attainment matters in how they make decisions about early departure and how they frame degree commitment. My study applies Deil-Amen and Tevis' (2010) Circumscribed Agency, a unique blend of concepts that I will review in the conceptual framework section, to serve as the analytical lens from which to explain participants' choices. Findings reveal that participants internalize and develop perceptions about degree attainment, their occupational trajectories, and make decisions about persistence and departure based on the messages they receive from their social contacts. Key differences between participants who graduated versus stop outs were their individual perspectives of college departure, planning for life without football, and perceived challenges or ease of undergraduate re-entry. Finally, my study addresses if and how former students with who also had NFL aspirations while in undergraduates, but who were unsuccessful in degree attainment, experienced unanticipated undergraduate re-entry challenges. Findings suggest that current students worry about challenges associated with re-entry merely from a funding stand point rather than considering strategies that would facilitate academic success, persistence, and ultimately, degree attainment in their second attempt. Former students considering re-entry highlight various noteworthy challenges that could be unique to this group and those like them. Findings for former students who re-entered and for those considering re-entry also reveal no described changes in how they define commitment per se. However, re-entry participants

described feeling a renewed sense of importance and connection with (for some) a new occupational goal.

Overall, my study is one of the first to examine the subjective perceptions of this distinctive group to better understand college choice, persistence, and departure among them in effort to advance this area. Despite the intense focus on current and former students in Division I FBS programs, my study extends the concepts of college choice and departure for all students as well. Thorough investigation into degree commitment and its definition as described by current and former students in my study allows for a deeper understanding of how and why students make choices about colleges. Findings demonstrate a variety of factors that go into, define, and shape degree commitment that could be applicable to understanding degree commitment for students of groups other than those involved in intercollegiate athletics. Social context, organizational context, and self-perceptions are explored to gain additional clarity of students' decision making process. From the findings, contextual layers played a critical role in situating the rationale students use in choosing to attend college and which college to attend. Such results, stress the importance of considering the unique contexts students work within to explain why and how students make the choices they do about college that can be applied to other groups. Additionally, this study examines degree commitment and contextual factors as a means to better understand departure choices. Of particular interest is Tinto's idea of social integration, as derived from degree commitment, in the departure process. Findings highlight the value of considering the quality, orientations and composition of social integration students are exposed to and operate within. Not all types of social

integration were found to value degree attainment thus, leaving any student operating within such social groups with the impression that degree attainment was not a top priority. Expanding the overall knowledge about the departure process, findings call for researchers to closely consider the quality, orientations and composition of social integration in their investigations and explanations of students' departure decisions.

Purpose of the Study

Four important points serve as the premise for my research. First, in November of 2010 Browning, Flowers, Fluker, Harmon, Miranda, and Roxbury discussed their summary paper, *Aligning the Study of Intercollegiate Athletics within Higher Education Scholarship and Policy* at the Association for the Study of Higher Education annual conference. Authors admitted that little is known about the day-to-day experiences of students in intercollegiate athletics. As a result, they called for the need to advance and further build a research agenda focused on understanding their college experiences. They solicited educational researchers to explore this group's agency and autonomy to make academic and occupational decisions that affect their future and how their decisions influence graduation and/or life after graduation. Furthermore, they clearly defined topic and method recommendations to fill current gaps in literature:

“Many of the existing data sources available to researchers interested in studying student athlete experiences are quantitative in nature. In order to better understand the complex phenomena that frame student athlete experiences, it is important that research be expanded to include qualitative data. Qualitative research aids in placing data in context and provide in depth insight on a variety of themes. To advance the study of intercollegiate athletics, it is necessary to use multiple forms of data that are inclusive and representative of the many experiences of over 400,000 NCAA student athletes, community college and other four---year student---athlete experiences, and the wide variety of institutional contexts” (p.2).

With this specific request in mind, the overall purpose of my study is to address such aspects of educational research as they pertain to the meaning of college and degree commitment among current and former students in Division I FBS programs. My study acknowledges Browning et al.'s (2010) method recommendation by utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore agency and investigate current and former students in Division I FBS programs and their college and post-college experiences.

Next, the complexity of college choice has been the focus of many empirical and qualitative investigations (Hearn, 1991; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Horvat, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1997; McDonough, 1997). Additionally, various models and constructs within college choice literature have addressed the process for traditional students (Perna, 2006; Paulsen and St. John, 2002). The various academic and non-academic factors that influence college choice among students in intercollegiate athletics have also been addressed, but to a limited extent (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; Vermillion & Stoldt, 2009). These quantitative studies either lump all students in intercollegiate athletes within 4 year universities together, or they isolate the scope of the study to sports that do not include high revenue generating sports and are situated within the community college setting. To address this gap in college choice literature I apply sociological choice constructs and models to explain college enrollment decisions among current and former students in Division I FBS programs.

Third, few studies qualitatively capture the context of the college experience of students in high revenue generating athletics (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Bell, 2009; Benson, 2000; Donner, 2005, 2006; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Hoberman, 1997)

that can inform researchers specifically about how this group experiences college and the possibility of competing educational and occupational goals. Interestingly, a call that informs Secretary Duncan's inquiry is proposed by Hyatt (2004). In her review of persistence literature, Hyatt (2004) emphasized the role that non-academic factors¹ play in the persistence of Black students in intercollegiate athletics. She articulated that the choice to attend college and commitment to degree attainment were two separate but related issues that bear important implications on student persistence and should be further explored. She offered a two-pronged call for further research to focus on the investigation of this group's commitment by a) clarifying the meaning of commitment, and b) articulating relationships that may exist between athletic and degree commitment among this group. In a national survey of students in Division I FBS programs, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) broadly described students' perceptions of their overall college experience. Their study is one of the first to quantitatively address commitment to a college education for this group. They asked whether graduating from college was important in their survey. They found 93% of students in Division I FBS programs stated that it was "very important." These researchers highlight their concern for such stated commitment when graduation rates for this group remain low. Although informative, this quantitative study does not consider how context may influence degree commitment and does not explore why degree commitment is so high while actual attainment remains low for this group. Such research would add a much needed breadth and scope of

¹ Non-academic factors are classified into three groups: 1) individual psychosocial factors such as motivation, commitment, confidence and self regulation; 2) family factors relevant to attitudes toward education; and 3) career planning (ACT, College Success, 2007).

investigation regarding persistence for groups similar to those in my study. As such, I enter into the conversation where Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) leave off. The purpose of my study is to address the educational and occupational goals and contextual factors that may shape degree commitment and influence attainment among current and former students in Division I FBS programs.

Finally, through popular media, we too often hear the success stories of those entering the NFL from revered college football programs (Simons, Van Reheenen & Covington, 1999). Little is known about the decision to leave college early for the NFL nor do we know the unsuccessful stories of those who have fallen short. My study includes the challenges, perceived mistakes, and failures among those who left college early for the NFL without their degree for a more comprehensive picture about decision making and the implications of participants’ choices to leave college.

Key Terms

Conscious refusal of the term “student athlete.” Staurowsky and Sack (2005) noted the term, “student athlete” to be one that has been deeply embedded in academic and popular media culture. They argue that the NCAA’s role in the creation of this term in 1950 was to serve as a mitigating tactic in response to negative publicity surrounding the growing commercialism of college athletics. According to Staurowsky and Sack (2005), controversy with the changes in financial aid policy for college athletes in the effort to recognize their talents and educational pursuits lead to this marketing plan. Staurowsky and Sack (2005) argued that such financial aid policies have essentially made college athletics an employer-employee contract, rather than students serving as true

amateurs in sport receiving what could be termed as an educational grant to assist them with college related expenses. They further noted that the NCAA continues to promote such propaganda by mandating the term be used in its publications and public media. “The term student-athlete itself tells you they are not normal students. . . If student-athletes were normal students, then either the term would not be necessary or it would be joined by other terms like student-musician, student-artist, or student-engineer” (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005, p. 107). Scholars in alignment with this argument have agreed that the term reflects an irrational analysis of the dynamic (Sperber, 2000; Staurowsky, 2004). Staurowsky and Sack (2005) referenced the ethics code of the AAUP and remind readers that as scholars, words matter, and we are obligated to be accurate with our language in professing truths. In an editorial stance, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* declared “student athlete” to be a euphemism and recommend the term be enclosed in quotes (Ericson, n.d.). They advised serious scholars against using the term and perpetuating the manufactured phrase. In the spirit of The Drake Group, Shulman and Bowen (2001), and Staurowsky and Sack’s (2005) proposed halt in using the term “student athlete,” I use the phrasing, students in intercollegiate athletics, and students in Division I (FBS) programs when referring to those on football teams in this paper. I use this phrasing to avoid perpetuating the propaganda and instead, more accurately term my study participants as they are, or were at some point; full time undergraduate students enrolled in an intercollegiate sport.

Goal discrepancy. This is a concept defined by Parker and Kleiner (1996) to describe when one’s expectations about their chances of success. Typically, these

expectations are inconsistent with their current condition and the essential criteria associated with the successful attainment of one's goal.

Aspirations. Aspirations is somewhat of an abstract concept and similar to expectations. However, aspirations represent the idealistic preference for the future beyond short term expectations, and tap into one's values according to Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman (2006). I borrow their definition.

Stop out. An undergraduate stop out is defined as one who has stopped their enrollment despite not having completed their undergraduate program of study, although one embodies an intent to return to their studies at a later time. I borrow, but re-term the concept of attainer from Hyatt's (2004) work. In her literature review she discussed the concept and essentially referred to, what I term stop outs, as *attainers*. She defined these individuals to be those who leave college prior to graduation after they have met a personal or professional goal.

"Successful" NFL career. According to the NFL Players Association FAQ (2012), the average length of an NFL career is estimated to be about 3.5 seasons. Of course, there are variations to this figure depending on earnings and by position. Nonetheless, I go on to define a successful NFL career as having obtained placement on a team roster and having played for three seasons or more.

In the next section I review existing literature relevant to college choice, persistence, and departure among current and former students in intercollegiate athletics. To close the review I further clarify and expand on the concepts and theoretical frameworks I use to explain participants' commitment and decision making.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Before considering the decision making process of students in intercollegiate athletics with regard to college attendance and degree attainment, I review the literature that best captures the current state of college choice and persistence among this group. In setting the context for my study, I present this review in six parts. First, I open by highlighting the role of sports in the U.S. society and universities. Then, I elaborate on the academic and occupational goals and expectations among students in intercollegiate athletics. Third, I review college choice literature while identifying gaps as they pertain to students in intercollegiate athletics. From there, I review the popular perceptions held about students in college football programs. Next, student persistence within four year residential universities is reviewed. I situate where students in intercollegiate athletics fit within this discussion. Fifth, I examine existing departure literature as it relates to this group of students. Finally, I close with a brief review of the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding my study.

The Subculture of Sports in the United States

According to Farrey (2008), the current paradigm among Americans is an increasing obsession with organized sports, particularly with football. The culture of sport in the U.S. is one that is highly valued and sensationalized. Messages connecting sport with money, power, and success, as illuminated by marketing ads via television, the internet, apparel stores, restaurant walls, and college campuses not only reflect the power and high monetary value U.S. society places on those associated with athletics, but contributes to its creation and thus, reproduction (Coakley, 2004). Snyder (1996) and

Simons, Van Rheenen and Covington (1999) have suggested professional sports to be a source causing tension between academic and athletic aspirations. Farrey (2008) and Sperber (1990) found that the power and influence of athletics has been internalized by youth and profoundly shapes their goals and aspirations. Athletics transcends into their young adult lives further affecting their continuing education, career aspirations, and ultimately, career trajectory. In the spirit of Farrey (2008) and Sperber (1990), I review in the following section intercollegiate participation, and the historical perceptions often held about students in Division I FBS programs to demonstrate how educational commitments, and future goals connect with these students' self-images.

Intercollegiate Athletic Participation: Impact on Academic and Occupational Goals

Kennedy and Dimick (1987) found 66% of Black students in football and basketball programs in their study had unrealistic professional career goals. This is concerning because approximately 1.6% of all students in Division I FBS programs aspiring to play in the professional leagues actually play (Edwards 2000; Lapchick, 2001; NCAA, 2011), and the number aspiring to this level of play is increasing (Beamon & Bell, 2002). Even more concerning is that this group is increasingly considering foregoing, or at best, postponing college degree attainment to try their luck in the NFL (College Football Today, 2009).

Snyder (1996) has found racial differences in professional sport aspirations among students on football teams. Snyder (1996) found that Blacks aspired to play professionally more than their White counterparts. On a similar note, Hoberman (1997) discussed the role of sports within the Black culture and found that Black students in

college football programs appeared to have forgone mainstream routes towards upward social mobility in search of fame and fortune in sports. Such strategy, he argued, affirms the stereotypes others might have about athletes and Blacks' academic abilities, planning, and potential. These findings are important because they suggest that there is a prevailing mentality and cultural push within particular subgroups to aim for the NFL in order to obtain status. The racial component of this stereotype could imply that certain ethnicities, those often associated with lower income and educational statuses, may be more inclined to adopt such a mentality and approach to mobility. As such, there could be other ethnicities that buy into this mentality that have thus far gone unexplored.

On the contrary, Adler and Adler (1985) found that despite this group's unconventional college expectations and deep concern over their athletic experience, academic goals were still a priority. In their statistical analysis, they found that the "dumb jock" stereotypes others had of high profile students in intercollegiate athletics, progressively lead these students to eventually abandon previous educational aspirations and gradually resign themselves to sub-par academic outcomes. Adler and Adler (1985) also argued that upon enrolling in college, students in intercollegiate athletics have a general optimism about academics and sincere desire to be successful in the classroom and on the field. Research has found their optimism and goals to be derailed by three major factors: a) the demands of athletics, b) submersion into athletic culture and isolation from general student peers, and c) college academic expectations that often exceed their ability to meet them (Adler & Adler, 1985). Sellers and Kuperminc (1997) found that Black male students in prominent Division I football and basketball programs

exhibited goal discrepancy. As cited by Sellers and Kuperminc, Parker and Kleiner, (1996) stated that goal discrepancy occurs when one's expectations were inconsistent with one's current status in relationship to the criteria associated with successful attainment of one's goal. Applying this to students in intercollegiate programs, it can be said that this particular group experiences goal discrepancy when they hold expectations of a professional sport career when their current athletic status does not merit the goal, which is essentially considered a "lofty goal." Sellers and Kuperminc (1997) found participation in nationally visible, highly celebrated university sport programs, like football, which socially and academically segregate students in these programs from students not in athletics, to be the strongest predictors of goal discrepancy accounting for personal characteristics such as pre-college academic preparation, race, and socioeconomic status. As a result, scholars have concluded that the demands of intercollegiate athletics strongly contributes to the derailing of students in these high profile programs from receiving a quality education and/or degree attainment (Blann, 1985; Hoberman, 1997; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jenson, 2007).

Student retention literature has emphasized that in addition to academic and social experiences while in college, pre-college goals influence student persistence and degree attainment (Nora, 2004; Arbona & Nora, 2007). In the next section, I highlight key pieces of literature that make up what we know about the college choice process and students connections between goals and choices.

College Choice

Although a wealth of literature exists about the college choice process (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006), we do not know as much about the thought process itself as articulated by students, let alone for various student groups, such as students who are adding the transition into intercollegiate programs to their academic experience. Based on their review of the literature, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) deduced that college choice was made up of a three phase model: 1) pre-disposition, 2) search, and 3) choice. They defined the first stage of pre-disposition as a time when students become sensitized toward and interested in attending college as their educational and occupational goals develop. The second stage is defined as the phase when students search for information about colleges. Finally, the third stage is defined as the phase when students make a decision regarding the college in which they ultimately enroll.

Previous college choice studies draw on this three-phase model to investigate traditional students, and minority groups. Various prior analyses of choice have reviewed the impact of SES, standardized test scores, secondary contexts, costs associated with college, location, and personal fit on students decisions to attend college and ultimate destination (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Walpole, 2003; Hurtado et al., 1997; Hearn, 1991; Hill, 2008). Qualitative studies purposefully considering the three phase model to address the decision to attend college among students participating in intercollegiate athletics have yet to be published. Examining the predisposition, search, and choice phase for students in Division I FBS programs using a qualitative approach could yield important insight into college choice

that could ultimately allow for a more comprehensive understanding of not only the choice process, but the overall meaning and purpose of college for this group.

Regarding college destination, much more literature exists as it relates to students in intercollegiate athletics. However, these studies are quantitative, and not all findings are pertinent to those in football programs and those matriculating into four year universities (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen & Palmer, 2003; Vermillion & Stoldt, 2009). Bowen and Schulman (2001) found that college choice among high school students in athletic programs was determined primarily by athletic factors with minimal concerns for academic adjustment to college level work, suggesting a greater emphasis on athletic concerns, and relatively weak academic intentions and commitment. Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen and Palmer (2003) examined the factors influencing college selection for students in intercollegiate athletics and how they differed from those who did not participate in intercollegiate athletics. Their study focused on the responses of first year students from all competitive sports. They found the top three factors that influence college selection were: 1) degree options, 2) head coach, and 3) academic support services. Letawsky et al. (2003) also noted the two least important factors shaping destination choice were: 1) TV exposure, and 2) financial aid.

In Potuto and O'Hanlon's (2007) quantitative national study on students in Division I FBS programs, they countered Letawsky et al.'s (2003) findings by demonstrating evidence that financial aid did matter as students in intercollegiate athletics consider university attendance. Moreover, they found that students in their study decided on schools based on where they would have the best chance of starting on the

team's roster over academic programs. Finally, Dumond, Lunch, and Platania (2007) offered an empirical model to predict the college destination for high school students on football teams while considering NCAA recruitment practices and policies. They found governing patterns for selection were: 1) location, 2) school's athletic rank, followed by 3) the athletic conference the institution belongs to. These studies highlight the fact that students in athletics face starkly different circumstances when choosing what college to attend.

Although important, these previous studies have not focused on the circumstances students in Division I FBS programs face and how the values and norms within their football subculture may contribute to their mind set as they work towards various goals, degree commitment, and decision making patterns. These studies also lack a rich qualitative description and analysis of the choice process, and deciding factors present in students' contexts that may inform choice and destination for students in Division I FBS programs. Perna and Titus (2005) called for further disaggregation among student groups as well as more qualitative studies to be done as they are especially useful in explaining the process students' experience. Further deconstruction of college choice among students in athletics could uncover even more nuances in differences and expand on previous college choice models if closer examinations of the exact circumstances various subgroups of students in athletics, like those in Division I FBS programs, confront. Such disaggregation and qualitative approaches serve as a tool for more comprehensive understandings of choice in general (Perna, 2006). Exploring self perception, occupational goals in relationship to educational goals and social actors within students'

lives can deepen our understanding of how these interwoven, complex factors shape their decisions about college choice and add to the explanatory power of enrollment behavior. Using this approach, I borrow from Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model, and expand on it by including the dynamic social perceptions and value-relevant processes noted above. Additionally

Perna (2006) offered a comprehensive model grounded in economic and sociological approaches. To conceptualize the choice process, she proposed that students' college choice decisions were shaped by four layers of context. In her proposed model, these layers consisted of: 1) a students' habitus, 2) organizational and community context, 3) higher education context, and 4) social, economic, and policy context. Her model allows for an emphasis of these contextual factors that can assist researchers in reconciling choice differences across various student groups. My qualitative study specifically considers all four layers of Perna's (2006) proposed model. First, I consider students' habitus by examining participants' perceptions of appropriate choices and behaviors as shaped by their values. Second, the organizational context is considered in my examination of the NFL as an existing organization. As this organization houses the sport participants in my study aspire to play in, I consider how the NFL influences their choices to attend college and shapes their commitment to educational and occupational goals. In the same vein, community context is addressed in my observations of the environment participants frequently occupy and establish relationships in. As a result, academic support centers designated for students in intercollegiate programs being that team members, athletic academic advisors, and coaches closely interact within this shared

space. For the third layer, the higher education context or the role institutions play in shaping college choice is included. Coaches and their staff on recruitment assignments can serve as a vital source of information and can convey messages about the institution and program passively. These messages could influence students' outlooks on a particular institution as they strategize about which program to matriculate into. The fourth layer, social context is explored by collecting information about the social actors in their lives and values accepted within the group. Perna's (2006) conceptual model assists with understanding the goal defining, degree commitment, and decision making processes of a distinct group of students in a high revenue generating sport. I further discuss a variation of this application in the conceptual frameworks section.

In the following section, I review previous retention literature that has assisted in understanding the context from which students in Division I FBS programs operate within. Before delving into this existing literature, I recap what other scholars have found regarding occupational aspirations and degree commitment among students in intercollegiate athletics.

Perception of Students in Intercollegiate Athletics

Due in part to the "dumb jock" stereotype, students participating in mostly high profile masculine sports have been stigmatized in the academic domain by student peers and faculty (Engstrom, Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen, 1995). In other words, their social identity as an "athlete" has been stigmatized in the particular context of the classroom, thereby devaluing their student identity (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, Jenson, 2007). In their study of faculty and student peers not in intercollegiate athletics,

attitudes and perceptions towards their athletic counterparts were unfavorable (Engstrom et al.1991, 1995). They found the comments of faculty and student peers not in intercollegiate athletics to reflect a “dumb jock” stereotype inclusive of low intelligence, little to no academic motivation, and benefactors of underserved assistance and privileges. Simons et al. (2007) found that some faculty and student peers not in intercollegiate athletics perceived intercollegiate athletics as a threat to the academic mission and purpose of college. They found that such perceptions have led to stereotype jokes that have been widely held as acceptable. As such, Simons et al. (2007) inferred that such perceptions and comments serve as an expression meant to release the annoyance and bring to light the frustration that other campus actors may feel with regards to this particular group of students.

The documented perception and attitudes faculty and student peers not involved in intercollegiate athletics have on students in intercollegiate athletics has been found to be those that students involved in intercollegiate athletics buy into themselves and maintain as an identity (Adler & Adler, 1985). Murphy, Petitpas and Brewer (1996), and Adler and Adler (1987, 1991) analyzed this group’s identity and found that they primarily relate to an athletic identity without ever having explored or had the tendency to explore other identities. Therefore, for them, no other identity could possibly exist. Therefore, these researchers have concluded that such a mind-set and awareness of stereotypes hinders their ability to maintain their initially optimistic academic goals and possibly commitment to degree attainment. They conform to the role and in turn, poorly or unwillingly plan alternative occupational options. As a result, recommendations from

Adler (1997) and Murphy et al.'s (1996) work for faculty, coaching staff, and advisors were to increase expectations for this group. Such studies are important in that they inform faculty and retention specialists about the role of expectations for this group to empower them, and value positive interactions with them. These studies also provide a foundation from which to build a case about examining student persistence and departure for this group.

Persistence toward Degree Attainment

Degree attainment is a major priority for many universities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). Even after decades of continuous reform and strategies to increase degree attainment, retention specialists and faculty continue working towards enhancing persistence and graduation rates among students at their universities. Prior student development research has found that certain student populations may be more challenging to retain than others. For instance, non-traditional older students; low income, first generation college students; and minority students have been found to embody differing needs in support services, navigation of bureaucracy, financing, and assimilation factors making for unique challenges in persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; London, 1978; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003; Rendon, 1994).

Retention specialists have also directed their attention to reducing college student departure among students in intercollegiate athletics (LeCrom et al., 2009). Students in intercollegiate athletics have become of particular interest for scholars because of the visibility, celebrity, and controversy that sometimes accompany intercollegiate

participation. Thus, students participating in popular sports, because of their “celebrity” status, face an additional and unique set of challenges that other students may not encounter in their educational pursuits (Adler & Adler, 1987; Sperber, 1990). Additional exploration of this notion of campus celebrity could assist us with a more clear understanding of how self-perception plays a role in students’ perceived occupational goal setting and persistence behavior. If these students perceive themselves to be local celebrities, considering their mind set about their place on campus could inform us about how their experiences as “celebrities” may lead them to perceive that they are a rather special group. Further examination of this status could add to our understanding of how this group interprets the purpose of college to be and where they fit or do not fit in. Clearly this is a unique circumstance that no other group to face and context from which to make decisions to leave college for their occupational goal. Investigation into such differences can improve our understanding of departure.

Tinto (1993) provided explanatory power in his interactionalist model that explored voluntary student departure from four year universities. Included in Tinto’s (1993) hypothesis was that students’ success is realized when a compatible relationship exists between institutional goals (graduating students) and students’ aspirations. He further argued that the roots of departure were embedded in individual intention and commitment to degree attainment. Although Tinto (1993) did not explore the concept of commitment in depth, he alluded to the idea that commitment levels impact the extent to which students successfully integrate into their initial university of choice. Regarding the institution, Tinto (1993) argued that the university also plays a role in departure in that it

was to provide the conditions with which students felt satisfied and socially and academically integrated. Moreover, Tinto (1993) promulgated that commitment takes on two major forms, goal, and institutional. Goal commitment refers to one's personal commitment to educational and occupational goals and institutional refers to their commitment to the university in which they enrolled. According to Tinto (1993), commitment "indicates the degree to which one is willing to work toward the attainment of one's goals within given higher educational institution... (T)he greater the commitment, the greater the likelihood of persistence" (p. 43).

Other quantitative researchers have found that personal commitment to academic and occupational goals is the single most important factor in college persistence (Cope & Hannah, 1975) and that the level of commitment to college held by students and their parents best determined the chances of withdrawing during a student's freshmen year (Hackman & Dysinger, 1970). In their studies of student persistence, these researchers focused on academic preparation, and creating institutional conditions that better assist with integration. There was a focus on motivation and student engagement that was defined as time and effort spent on academic tasks, faculty interaction, and resource allocation to academic support services from the university (Astin, 1984). Since these studies were published, serious investigation into degree commitment has largely been abandoned and only slightly re-addressed by other researchers (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Expansion of Tinto's (1993) described concept of degree commitment would entail scrutinizing what goes into it, who, and what shapes it in order to making sense of the concept as determined from the stand point of a student. Focused

attention on degree commitment could reveal a more thorough understanding of degree commitment. I further detail how commitment and Tinto's (1993) theory fit into my study in the conceptual framework section.

Braxton et al. (2004) provide a revision of Tinto's interactionalist model that they applied to students attending residential² universities. They found that rather than academic integration being the most prominent, social integration was the factor that mattered most in persistence. Of particular interest is Braxton et al.'s idea of communal potential. In their definition, a subgroup of students exists within the university community and shares values, beliefs, and goals. Their model predicts that the more a student perceives a potential of a community they could identify with on campus, the level of social integration should increase. Although logical, this concept was applied to students living in resident halls and not in intercollegiate athletics, and the model assumes that students should anticipate high levels of social support with an emphasis on academic achievement. Such conditions may not strongly exist within all the subcultures of students in intercollegiate athletics. If researchers examine the fraternity that is a football program, a subculture that exists in the locker rooms, "student athlete" study halls, team apartment housing, and team buses, a very different communal atmosphere could be at play. What if subcultural beliefs de-emphasizing academic success and shared occupational goals do not emphasize completing a degree, but rather emphasize athletic prowess? For this reason, further exploration of what students have to say about life

² The population of interest for this study is student athletes. As such, only Braxton's argument for residential attendees will be reviewed because the vast majority of Division I schools are residential and not two-year commuter colleges.

within their social context is important. Such data could better inform our understanding of social integration for high profile athletes and could reveal anticipated communal subcultures that could be detrimental to degree attainment.

These previous models measure and broadly define student commitment to degree attainment. Despite their wider contribution, these quantitative studies lack elaboration on the fluidity of degree commitment and how students define this pledge, and express how and if it changes depending on their individual context and goals.

Commitment and persistence among students in intercollegiate athletics.

Hyatt's (2004) literature review on persistence and Black students in intercollegiate athletics warned researchers to carefully consider commitment for these students in future studies. In her review, Hyatt (2004) highlighted how, traditionally, persistence among students in intercollegiate programs has been measured in terms cognitive or academic terms (i.e. GPA, test scores, graduation rates). For instance, in response to NCAA recommendations, many universities have implemented academic advising programs to meet the diverse needs of students in intercollegiate athletics (Carodine, Almond & Gratto, 2001). Scholars have argued that these support programs, although important, too often focus on tutoring, schedule planning and eligibility (DeFrancesco, 1996; Roper & McKenzie, 1988; Scales, 1991). Academic advisors for students in intercollegiate athletics often focus efforts on evaluating requirements for athletic eligibility and may not have the skill set (and time) to attend to the personal or non-academic needs of students, particularly those deemed "at-risk" (DeFrancesco, 1996; Roper & McKenzie, 1988; Scales, 1991). Hyatt (2004) inferred that "if cognitive variables alone determined

persistence of student athletes, the strict eligibility requirements and the ‘no pass, no play’ philosophy of the NCAA (as recommended by the Knight Commission, 1993), along with academic advisement programs should have more impact on the graduation rates of student athletes” (p.262). She went on to highlight Sedlacek and associates findings that non-academic variables such as social beliefs, attitudes, motivation, commitment, and members of their campus communities affect students’ decision to persist. They recommended that following college admission, particularly for non-White students in intercollegiate athletics, non-academic skills such as commitment and goal setting should be used to assess and inform persistence needs among these groups (Hyatt, 2004; Sedlacek & Gaston, 1993; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). According to these scholars, there is growing evidence that non-cognitive factors may play a more critical role in the persistence of minority students, non-traditional students, and students in intercollegiate programs. Using Tinto’s (1993) theory as an introduction, her review cautions researchers that in order to understand commitment among students in high revenue generating sports, we must breakdown commitment into two categories: goal commitment and athletic commitment. Her piece encourages researchers to seek a better understanding of various commitments and their influence on degree commitment. Juxtaposing educational goals (degree commitment) with the occupational goals (athletic commitment) could be the first step towards understanding degree commitment in a unique way.

Referring again to Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007), their quantitative national study of students playing Division I football found high levels of degree commitment despite

relatively low graduation rates for this group. Findings highlight that the majority of their participants indicated on the survey instrument the highest possible level of commitment to degree attainment. However, graduation trends among students participating in Division I football are surprisingly low given their participants stated commitment levels. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) inferred that among students in Division I FBS programs, there was "no disinterest in graduation" (p.5). Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) admitted that offering any additional inferences regarding this paradox was well beyond the scope of their study. As a result, they called for researchers to seek a better understanding of this phenomenon. My study attempts to make sense of this contradiction by investigating beyond graduation rates to gain an understanding of what goes into degree commitment and a possible relationship between educational and occupation goals for students in Division I FBS programs with NFL aspirations.

Kamusoko and Pemberton (2011) quantitatively investigate perceptions of well-being among freshman and sophomore students in Division I athletics at one four year university. In a multilevel model, they included students' satisfaction ratings regarding athletic departmental policies and practices, educational characteristics, institutional facilities and services, and their intent to persist. Findings revealed that students surveyed were generally satisfied with their well-being and intended to persist through the completion of their undergraduate degrees. However, significant differences in perceived wellbeing and persistence intentions were associated with gender and sport played. They found that male students in athletics, and particularly, those males on team sports (e.g. football), in contrast to individual sports (e.g. track and field, gymnastics) reported lower

levels of satisfaction with their wellbeing and intentions to persist. Including the voiced experiences of male students on a team sports would add perspective about persistence behaviors common to this group.

Graduation rates. Factors that are important in attempting to advance our understanding of commitment and persistence among students in intercollegiate athletics are graduation rates. NCAA GSR (graduation success rates) vary widely by sport race and gender (Fountain & Finley, 2009). GSR reports only include participants who are full-time, on athletic scholarship, and captured during the first year of their enrollment. Reports also only include those who remain at the same institution and graduate from the same institution within a six year period. Reports exclude participants not on athletic scholarships, walk-ons, recruited walk-ons, or those who may receive athletic aid after the first year. Furthermore, reports exclude those who transfer out, drop out *and* turn professional. Despite improvement in the availability of academic support services for students in intercollegiate programs, not all groups are graduating at the national 64% GSR rate (NCAA, 2010a), which is higher than the national rate of 52% (NCES, BPS, 2011) for the general student body. Graduation rates for male students participating in high revenue producing sports within NCAA Division I programs, have been lower than those of female student athletes historically (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009; Harper, 2006). For example, females in Division I sports graduate at a national rate of 71% while males graduate at a national rate of 56 % (NCAA, 2010a). Graduation rates differ across Division I sports as well. Men's football and basketball have the lowest national graduation rates of all Division I college sports. For example, men's Division I

gymnasts graduate at national rate of 70%, while Division I football players graduate at the rate of 55% (NCAA, 2010a). It is important to note that graduation rates for students in football programs have improved over the past several years, but continue to trail behind women's (Rishe, 2003) and lower revenue producing sports.

Stratified rates further exist between Black and White students in Division I football programs where Blacks trail behind their White teammates (Harper, 2006; NCAA, 2010b). White football players' national graduation rates are 64% whereas their Black counterparts are at 49% (NCAA, 2010b)³. Unfortunately, current studies focus heavily on the Black experience or Black/White comparison (Beamon & Bell, 2002; Benson, 2000; Donner, 2006; Harper, 2006; Hoberman, 1997; Hyatt, 2004) and neglect an exploration of rates and related experiences of other minority students in Division I football programs such as Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and Asians.

Recent studies on the academic and retention outcomes of students in intercollegiate athletics are rarely disaggregated by athletic sport (Beamon & Bell, 2002; Le Crom et al., 2009). As a result, it may be especially useful to couple various persistence approaches and consider how previous integration models can assist in better understanding student departure from the context and reality of students in college football programs. Such applications could allow for interesting insights into this student groups' decision to remain or depart, particularly regarding the upperclassmen that leave for the NFL just a few credits shy of graduation. Thus far, scholars have not explored what goes into their decision to leave, and what happens to them in the end.

³ All percentages reflect national graduation rates for the 2002 graduating cohort.

As important as the role of the individual student is to degree commitment and degree attainment, so too, is the role of the university and external actors (Cabrera et al., 1993). In the following section, external forces are reviewed, as they also exert power and influence on the early departure of students in intercollegiate athletics.

NCAA policy and APR. The NCAA and universities have taken steps aimed at improving educational persistence and graduation success rates for students in athletics such as APR (Academic Progress Rate)⁴ and academic support services specifically for these students. However, these measures have yet to be proven effective from an empirical and longitudinal stand point (Le Crom et al., 2009). Previous empirical studies have found that among students in intercollegiate athletics, particular subgroups such as those participating in high revenue generating sports, like football, are considered “at-risk” of dropping out (Le Crom et al., 2009). Although a relatively small population, studying subgroups of students in high revenue generating sports are worth investigating to assess possible similarities and differences between them and those in low revenue generating sports and even between students not involved in intercollegiate athletics.

Influential others. In his revised student departure model, Tinto (1993) acknowledged that communities external to the institution play a role in the departure process for students. For instance, family, work, community, and financial obligations could pull the energy and time away from studies and derail the priority of persistence to degree. However, the role external organizations have in shaping, explaining, and

⁴ Comprehensive academic reform package designed to improve the academic success and graduation of every college student-athlete (NCAA, 2010d).

understanding psychological and sociological persistence behavior is also critical (Cabrera et al., 1993; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011; Lukes, 1978). Internalized messages from business organizations, like the NFL, may influence departure decisions among students in intercollegiate football programs.

To a certain extent, students in intercollegiate football programs are privileged with a very unique and lucrative occupational option despite relatively unfavorable odds of admission into the occupation, let alone success in the occupation. The average pay for a professional football player is \$1.17 million per year. This does not include signing bonuses and endorsement payouts (NFL Players Association, 2009). Such astronomical pay incentives make playing high profile sports like football all the more attractive. To add, professional sport organizations like the NFL have lax admission requirements from an education standpoint. The league mandates prospective athletes to be three years removed from high school, and complete three years of college football to be eligible for the draft or admission onto an NFL team roster (NFL Players Association, 2009). According to the NFL, its three year rule is said to facilitate a deeper commitment to academics, and college life (Brown, 2005, March 14; Christianson, 2004; Le Crom et al., 2009). Although, such a mandate promotes college attendance for NFL hopefuls, it fails to send a message that the organization prioritizes and values degree attainment. Thus, these circumstances suggest that college football could simply be serving as a feeder system and farm medium for athletic skill development from which the NFL could benefit from.

Although other professional sports organizations like baseball and basketball require potential players to enter their leagues directly from high school for baseball (MLB) or with one required year of college level play for basketball (NBA), the NFL's three year policy offers no incentive to finish college with a degree. Interestingly, none of the professional sport organizations require any sort of postsecondary degree, yet college sports are seen as the stepping stone for professional level play (Sperber, 1990). Previous literature has yet to address the influence of such organizations and admissions standards on the educational choices and career trajectories of students in Division I FBS programs.

Athletic Retirement and Career Transition

Harrison and Lawrence (2010) qualitatively and quantitatively explored the perceptions of 26 Division II Black students in intercollegiate athletics and their transitioning out of sport and into career. Although their study was limited to one institution the important take away point from their contribution was that the experience of planning for life after sport for Black males in intercollegiate athletics is drastically different and much more of a challenge for them than their non-Black counterparts. They recognized that various actors such as coaches, professors, counselors, parents shape identity development and play a critical role in their career decisions. Eiche, Sedlacek, and Adams-Gaston (1995) found career confusion/ambivalence as a common theme in their quantitative report. After studying Division I freshmen students in high revenue generating programs at one university, they posit that participants lacked knowledge of the world and time to explore various career options as a plausible reason for their ambivalence. They also cited getting a better job as a main reason for completing their

degree. In addition to considering the various actors who shape and influence career decisions and pathways, but also important to consider is how others such as coaches, peers, and family shape orientations toward degree commitment for students in Division I FBS programs. Exploring the (dis)connections between educational and occupational goals of students in Division I FBS as they work towards their post college plans is useful in addressing their context and providing a glimpse into their angst over living life after sports.

Undergraduate Re-entry

Coinciding with life after sports, those choosing to stop out of college, for any reason, may have the desire to return to college and complete their undergraduate degrees for personal advancement or to meet the requirements of another career pathway. Returning to college with the educational goal of completing an undergraduate degree after stopping out is referred to as re-entry in my study. For the most part, those returning to college are categorized as non-traditional students based on a variety of re-entry demographics. The definition itself has not been clearly outlined as it can be inclusive of numerous elements. The NCES' Special Analysis of Nontraditional Undergraduates (2002) suggests students with part time status, delays or interruption in enrollment, and outside the age of 18-25 to be common elements. Rendón (1994) based her qualitative study of non-traditional students on Astin's (1984) idea of student involvement. From interviews with students she found that for non-traditional students campus involvement was difficult. Findings revealed a central need for academic intervention and that these students had doubts about their academic success. In the spirit of cultural diversity,

Rendón proclaimed that with the changing demography of students, university cultures needed to change to meet the diverse needs of various student populations to better promote learning and success.

Specific to students in intercollegiate athletics, Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) suggested that students in intercollegiate athletics could be understood as a type of non-traditional student group with their own unique culture and norms. Although an important contribution, their study does not capture the returning spells of former students who once participated in intercollegiate athletics who have shifted into what is essentially a returning student category.⁵ How returning students who were former athletes, experience re-entry into college after stopping out, could assist researchers with a more comprehensive picture of re-entry. Currently, there is limited research regarding undergraduate re-entry, and educational spells (DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2005). DesJardin et al.'s (2005) empirical contribution focused on factors leading to stopping out, dropping out, and graduation among the general student bod. They applied an event history model to explain students' persistence behavior. However, there has been a focus on the duration of spells, likelihood of re-entry and graduation, and demographic factors related to predicting re-entry and graduation. Qualitative studies examining re-entry among students in intercollegiate athletics is uncharted territory. Life after sports and successful transition is one thing, but what about our knowledge of the specific experience of students returning to college after an unsuccessful sport endeavor?

⁵ Length of time spent in a particular state (DesJardin, Ahlburg & McCall, 2005).

All in all, it is essential to recognize this group as one with its own distinct social and subcultural system. Previous literature has neglected to address the values, context, and commitment to degree attainment among students involved in the highest tier of competition among college football ranks. Remaining unknown are the rationalizations and systems of incentives for this group. I implement a combination of concepts and theoretical framework to situate and interpret college choice and degree commitment among current and former students in Division I FBS programs. The following section details the blend of frameworks.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Understanding that academic and occupational values inform various forms of commitment is paramount (Astin, 1975). Whether it is towards degree attainment, athletic careers, or institutional choice, values vary and give rise to overall goal commitment and thus, perceived purpose of college (Chapman, 1981). Values, as derived and shaped by individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and every day context are important non-academic factors that influence choice, commitment and departure (Hyatt, 2003; Sedlacek & Webster, 1978; Sedlacek, 1987; Sedlacek & Gaston, 1992; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). For students in athletics, particularly those in high revenue generating sports, they must operate with and respond to a context driven by multi-million dollar deals between institutions and private business like Nike, television networks, a high stakes high school-to-college recruitment process, and incessant media coverage of college teams: all of which exert power and influence on students day to day choices. Overall, students enact a type of agency to guide decisions within the bounds of their own perceptions,

interpretations, and lived experiences (Bandura, 1982; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010). The emphasis of such non-academic factors and focus on their “situated context” that play a role in the process of choice and persistence have been scarcely addressed in prior research (Hyatt, 2003). Moreover, when non-academic factors are addressed and applied to students in intercollegiate athletics, researchers have explored influential factors using quantitative methods (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011; Lewtasky, 2003; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Qualitative exploration remains entirely absent from academic literature regarding the non-academic factors related to college choice, degree commitment, and departure among students within high revenue generating sports like football. In other words, there is much research talking about them rather than talking with them. Thus, prior research has not improved the understanding of commitment and the decision making process for students in intercollegiate programs with professional sport aspirations.

Although Tinto (1993) did not explore the concept of commitment in depth, he contributes to the idea that commitment levels impact the extent to which students successfully integrate into their initial university of choice. As summarized, in my literature review, according to Tinto (1993), social integration solidifies commitment, and in turn, the more the commitment, the more likely a student is to persist through college. This study acknowledges Tinto’s (1993) approach as a foundation from which to begin contemplating and dissecting commitment and departure among students in Division I FBS programs. In the effort to develop our understanding of commitment, participants in my study are asked to define commitment to degree attainment as they perceive it. They

are asked and challenged to apply and describe their decisions to stop out or remain in college and relate it to their stated commitment. Moreover, my study does not dispute Tinto's (1993) argument wherein he states that increased social integration leads to increased commitment and finally increased likelihood of persistence. However, underdeveloped in Tinto's (1993) contribution is the quality and make up of social integration itself. There is an ideal and embedded assumption that social integration will equal positive reinforcement of degree attainment for all students. In short, when participants make decisions, the specific quality and values that make up social integration, as informed by commitment, could play a very different for this group.

Although Tinto (1993) takes us far in terms of connecting commitment to departure while stressing the importance of social integration, a deeper our understanding of degree commitment could arise with the use of multiple concepts as lens from which to analyze in tandem with Tinto's foundation. In their work, Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) interview Black and Latino students attending low SES high schools. They explore the subjective perceptions these students had about what is typically thought of as "objective" standardized entrance exams, like the ACT, and how these perceptions influence their college planning, decision making, and transitioning. This integration emphasizes the place where students enact agency to guide their decision making about college and do so in a fashion that is encircled by the perceptions embedded in various contexts. With the premise that behavior depends on internal reflections and its exchange with various layers of individuals' social contexts, they introduce the multi-lens concept of *Circumscribed Agency*. *Circumscribed Agency* is applied to describe how students

interpret their performance on these tests? How their context influences their interpretation, and how their scores influence their perceived ability to be successful in college?

They draw from three disciplines: a) higher education, b) sociology of education, and c) sociological psychology to explain the interplay of their high school social context and perceptions. I review these concepts in more detail in the following section.

Habitus. Originally presented as a concept explaining one's ability to fit in with the dominant upper class society, cultural capital has also been referred to as a system of attributes derived by parents that defines one's class status. Such attributes are language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms. Cultural capital assists in explaining an individual's actions and can only be fully understood in the terms of the structural context within which one operates (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this study, participants often refer to their structural context when describing their college attendance decision, college experience, and the influence important others had in shaping their orientations and their decisions.

According to Bourdieu (1977), *habitus* is a system of preferences and perceptions common to one's social group that results in one's cultural capital. Individuals draw from this collective framework to interpret their surroundings, make decisions, and engage in certain actions. The subjective component of student choice eludes clarity and researchers know little about the decision making process, particularly for this subgroup of students in intercollegiate athletics. The decision to attend college, where to attend, why it matters, whether to remain enrolled, or return later, are core questions that guide the greater

purpose of my study. I connect the idea of habitus to participants' socialization into an athletic subculture that gives rise to and reinforces particular values that further shape their academic and occupational goals and commitment to degree attainment. As a result, students' family, self-identify, and football subculture can be analyzed as additional factors influencing their habitus. Such a multi-faceted exploration can perhaps allow us to better understand their choices and orientations.

Situated Context. Measures of cultural have been found to play a critical role in explaining college enrollment decisions, transitions, and persistence, particularly for minority and non-traditional students (Perna, 2000; Nora, 2004). Perna's (2006) conceptual model incorporates both economic and sociological approaches. Shaped by numerous contextual layers, this model acknowledges that students' attitudes and values play a role in their decisions about college. These layers or "situated context" include the role and influence that habitus, community, higher education, and policy play in their decisions. This particular model recognizes differences across individuals and structural constraints that shape their choices. Not only do these structural forces shape their college choice, but they also shape students college experience and the choices they make while they are there. Of particular interest are the forces that play an important role in their decision to pursue a college degree. As such, my study considers the "situated context" of participants as influenced by family, peers, and groups external to the university, such as the NFL.

Self-efficacy. Typically used in the context of learning and drawn from social cognitive theory, the concept of *self-efficacy* has been found to correlate positively with

academic performance (Multon, Brown, and Lent, 1991). However, trends in applying self-efficacy as a framework to explain attitudes and values have increased, particularly in college access, retention, and career development literature (Hackett, 1995; Braxton et al., 2007; Deil-Amen & Tevin, 2010). According to Bandura (1994) the concept of self-efficacy is defined as an individual's beliefs about their capability to produce certain levels of performance that function as influential determinants of key events such as educational attainment and chosen vocational paths. Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, behave, and motivate themselves to do something that is important and meaningful to them. Self-efficacy is used to frame participants' beliefs about their academic and athletic performance to understand their perceptions as they relate to their decision making process.

Circumscribed agency and degree commitment. Recognizing that goal commitment may not be static, students interpret and define commitment for themselves based on their habitus and wide range of cultural capital as a function of students college community, social, organizational, and family contexts. As a result, students' decision making is a reflection of interpretations that have passed through a mechanism that students perceive as logical to them given their web of subjective perceptions and various contexts. As I consider the relationship between the decisions students make about goal commitment and their perceptions of their own abilities to follow through, I draw from Deil-Amen and Tevis' (2010) multiple concept approach to frame agency among current and former students in Division I FBS programs. Their capacity to engage and make decisions is defined by their educational and occupational goals, layers of context and

self-perceptions at play. Again, this type of agency is circumscribed or restricted within a limit by: habitus, context, and self-efficacy, with their sense of self playing a key role. With these combining concepts, my study taps into the perceptions of what current and former students in Division I FBS programs consider “reasonable” or “attainable” goals. How commitment influences confidence in acquiring goals? Also, as students work through their educational and occupational goals and their context continues to evolve, how would commitment to these two goals present themselves? Circumscribed Agency assists us in understanding the role students self-perceptions play in their decisions about commitment that could further inform students college choice, and departure behaviors.

In examining current and former students’ perceptions, an investigation including their voices and lived experiences was deemed most appropriate. In the following section, I review the methods employed in my study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In 2009 I piloted a case study of eight students in Division I FBS programs and the values that shaped their occupational choices. An interesting mind set among this group was discovered. Findings revealed a rather unflattering perception of what college life would be like from friends, media, and coaching staff prior to college among students in Division I FBS programs. Moreover, participants expressed intense interest in pursuing an NFL career and could not clarify any alternative goals.

First, practice and one team meeting was observed, and focus group interviews with three current students in Division I FBS programs, four individual interviews with current students in Division I FBS programs, and one interview with a former student from a Division I FBS program were conducted. Two observations were conducted; one was a two hour spring football scrimmage and the other was a 30 minute team meeting. The scrimmage observation provided additional context for the argument that football on college campuses carries with it such incredible celebrity among hundreds of students and the community at large. From the observed meeting, it was clear that coaching staff valued academic commitment and performance when listening in on team meetings. Coaches shouted at the students in their program specifically about the importance of attending their classes regularly. Coaching staff also dedicated the first 20 minutes of their team meeting to the discussion of passing their classes. I wondered whether their efforts to push academics stemmed from their deep commitment to the education of this subgroup of students or if they were going through the motions to keep them eligible for play.

Next, focus group participants explained how they valued degree attainment and the college experience. However, if presented with the opportunity, participants stated that they would seriously consider leaving college early for the NFL for several reasons. To begin, participants expressed their perception that college completion was something that could be postponed. They believed that upon returning to college after a successful NFL career and thus, large accumulation of monies, they could afford tuition on their own without having to rely on athletic scholarships. Finally, participants expressed uneasiness over risking a severe injury during the final season of college play that could remove them from NFL consideration. As such, leaving for the NFL early while they were injury-free was perceived as optimal. It is important to note that this focus group of three also stated that returning to college to complete the degree would be a priority--only as a promise not to themselves, but to a family member. Interestingly, participants also stated that a reason for staying in college and not leaving early for the NFL would be to improve their statistics on the field to further attract agents and increase their draft stalk. Absent from their answers was any discussion about academic motivation toward degree attainment.

Last, a single interview with a former student from a Division I FBS program revealed the critical role sports has played throughout his life and how he, and many others, believed that playing in college could provide him with an athletic training ground in preparation for a career in the professional league. Such discovery led to the following inquiry: What then, is the purpose of college for this group? What are they truly investing in given where many of these students desire to be occupationally: in the NFL?

In this section I present the design of my study. I include my key research questions, an explanation of methodology, and appropriateness of the design, sample and site description, recruitment approach and results, analysis, and close with a summary of study limitations.

Research Question and Guiding Inquires

My study explores the subjective experiences of two groups of students in Division I FBS programs to better understand degree commitment. The first group examined is current students in Division I FBS programs. The following overall research question has been adopted: What is the meaning of college for current students in Division I FBS programs who aspire to hold careers in the NFL? Supporting questions that give rise to my inquiry further ask:

1. Given their occupational goals, what is the purpose of college attendance?
2. How do those with NFL aspirations articulate degree commitment relative to the NFL admissions policy?
3. Who are the key actors within their social context involved in shaping their degree commitment?
4. For those seriously considering leaving college early for the pro circuit, how do they exercise agency in their decision process given their contexts?

The second group analyzed is former students from Division I FBS programs. I extend the exploration of the reflective and subjective experiences to former students to also investigate their decision making process, explore their degree commitment, and consider their ultimate occupational outcome. As a result, the overall research question

asks, what is the meaning of college for former students from Division I FBS programs?

Supportive questions that give rise to this inquiry ask:

1. Given their past occupational goals, how do those who had taken one of the post-college trajectories outlined below understand the purpose of their past and current college attendance?

The range of trajectories include former aspirants who either: a) did not complete an undergraduate degree and played for the NFL, b) completed a degree and played for the NFL, or c) did not complete a degree nor play for the NFL, but have re-enrolled or are considering re-enrollment in college

2. How did former students with NFL aspirations or lived NFL experience define commitment to degree attainment, particularly for those re-entering college at the undergraduate level?
3. For those who stopped out or dropped out for the NFL, how was their decision made given their context?

Methodology

This study is a qualitative phenomenological study that explores the subpopulation of students involved in Division I FBS programs. In qualitative research, phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the lived experiences of those who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Maxwell, 2005). Phenomenology is a methodology that promotes the understanding of relationships between the individual consciousness and social life. Reflective of classical Husserl phenomenology, according to David Woodruff Smith

(2011), “The basic structure of consciousness, we find in reflection or analysis. Thus, phenomenology develops a complex account of temporal awareness... This (said awareness) makes up the meaning or content of a given experience, and (is) distinct from the concepts they present” (p. 1). This method allows for elaboration and theorizing on common and individual themes to derive further meaning of a phenomenon. In this case, students within this subgroup face the option of leaving college early for a professional sports career which does not require a college degree. I sought to understand why they leave college early, how they make the decision to leave, and more broadly, because of this unique and perceived option, how does their context and described experiences inform educational researchers about degree commitment and the overall meaning and relevance of college to their life’s goals. Accordingly, a phenomenological approach is appropriate in that this qualitative design allows for the exploration of current students in Division I FBS programs, and facilitates a description of what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and their rationalization of college, commitment and the decision to depart for some (Harper & Kuh, 2007).

Similarly, a phenomenological methodology is also suitable for the second unit of analysis and extension of my study. This includes former students from Division I FBS programs. I recognize this group as valuable informants who can speak to what worked well or proved harmful to their college experience and quest for a college degree, if indeed, the degree was the true quest (Harper & Kuh, 2007). As analyst, my role is to explicate participants’ points of view and describe how they perceive, express, and

operate within their world. I also play a minor role in which I offer my own sociological explanation and interpretation of context and habitus shaping their own understandings.

Operationalizing “commitment.” Sociologist Howard Becker (1966) argued that to fully understand commitment, researchers must analyze a system of values and reconcile “the family of images involved in the idea of commitment” (p.4). In a recent critique on the concept of commitment, Swailes (2002) noted that researchers have concentrated on *measuring* commitment rather than conceptualizing the *meaning* of commitment itself. Accordingly, Swailes (2002) recommended further research on the meaning as well as research across different student types to clarify the meaning of commitment for other social groups. Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) suggested that the meaning of commitment can be discovered qualitatively by examining the life experiences of individuals. They argue that life experiences are important avenues for exploring meaning, sense-making and social constructions of reality. Weick (1995) also argued that commitment is reflected through actions—overt demonstrations of values-- that sustain the activities and involvement in a particular endeavor. As a result, in operationalizing commitment to degree attainment, I barrow from both, Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) and Weick (1995) and consider two key sources of commitment: educational values and goals, and occupational values and goals. By interviewing current and former students in Division I FBS programs with NFL aspirations or experiences, I capture how this group discusses two separate, but related components of commitment: value placed on a) attending college, and b) completing a degree. I utilize these

expressed educational and occupational values to define, dissect, and analyze degree commitment among this subgroup of students.

Operationalizing “meaning of college.” I isolate participant statements about college choice, degree commitment, perceived occupational opportunities, and decisions to remain or depart from college for the NFL in order to go beyond the described data and infer how participants possibly construct the meaning of college (See Figure 5). Isolating statements to illuminate the researched phenomenon into themes allows phenomenologists to gain insight into the meaning of elements (Creswell, 1998; Holloway, 1997; Hychner, 1999). By synthesizing emergent themes, one can derive meaning from described elements (Groenewald, 2004). Deriving meaning from such themes is a critical phase of explicating data. In the following section I delineate site and sample information, recruitment and collection methods, and analysis/explication.

Data and Data Collection

Participating sites. Division I FBS programs were selected for this study because these programs are the most competitive level of college football play. These programs continue to represent the highest percentage of NFL draftees. 86% of draftees have originated from schools within this particular division for the last 22 years (Elias Sports Bureau, 2010). To use the phrasing of Sellers & Kuperminc (1997), these Division I FBS programs can be considered “intense athletic programs.” In their study of professional sport expectations among Black male students in Division I football programs, they found a positive association with goal discrepancy. They argued that as these types of schools produce more professional athletes, students in these programs

observing peers could be more willing to maintain high, and for some, unrealistic occupational goals for themselves (Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). With this in mind, incorporating students from sites within the Division I categories was appropriate for the purpose of my study.

Universities situated within the Division I FBS conference are further disaggregated by twelve sub-conferences (i.e. Big 10, South Eastern Conference, Pacific-12). To maximize acquiring interviews with students on the football team with NFL aspirations I recruited such target participants from schools statistically favored to send players to the NFL. More specifically, I recruited students from football teams within the Pacific-12 conference: a conference among the top three FBS sub-conferences who make up just over a third of all NFL drafted players (Elias Sports Bureau, NFL, USA today, 2010). Within the Pacific-12, three universities with personal and professional ties to me were selected to assist with the facilitation of interview access for my study. All three universities are large public four year universities, two of which are of moderate selectivity and one of which is highly selective. The football programs within these universities are prominent and nationally recognized given their consistent presence in post season bowl games. To protect participant and program anonymity my study did not reveal the universities. Instead, pseudonyms were implemented for both participants and programs.

Recruitment and selection. For the first part of my study, special access and previous experience with an inside academic advisor and directors for academic support units designed for students in intercollegiate athletics were utilized in two of the

participating sites. The third site was accessed through a personal connection with the coaching staff and associate athletic director.

After acquiring permission from both the athletic departments and the academic support centers for students in intercollegiate athletics at all sites, each assisted with the facilitation of recruitment. A brief five-question electronic survey for initial recruitment was distributed. As a recruitment tool, it was important that the survey title, phrasing of the request for its completion, and its direct distributors were carefully tailored to attract potential participant attention to acquire a viable potential interview pool. The goal of the questions was to have respondents think about life after college. As such, a focus on NFL aspirations served as the platform for the survey to market toward their interests (See Appendix A for text).

Distribution of the electronic survey was entrusted to the main advisor assigned to the football team. The IRB approved email text was sent via distribution list. Criterion to receive and complete the survey included recipients to be a freshmen, freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior students on the 2010 football roster at each site. Each of the three site's football teams received the electronic survey for a grand total of 307 recipients. I was copied by the distributing advisor to ensure the release of the survey and adjust the survey window as needed. Two sites released the survey during the off season month of January 2011 and the other in early February 2011. Respondents were given four weeks from the release date to complete the survey and an additional reminder from the advisor. Survey respondents willing to sit for a personal interview had the option of

logging their name at the end of the survey to be contacted by the advisor on behalf of myself.

Ultimately, 39 of the 307 potential participants completed the survey. Twenty-one survey respondents volunteered to participate in a single follow up interview throughout the 2011 spring semester (See Table 1). Through purposeful selection 15 current students on the football team were included. To remain in compliance with IRB permission, five from each participating site were selected for interview as stated in my project application. Peripheral criteria for purposely selecting some respondents over others were the following: a) having starter status, and b) being of an ethnicity other than black or white. These criteria were deal breakers in the selection process in order to include those whom have “playing time” as they have more of an elite status than their back up counterparts and thus may see themselves as being more likely to continue play at the next level. Also, so as to include the experiences of those rarely studied and highlighted in previous studies, those of other ethnic backgrounds (i.e. Hispanics, Pacific Islanders) were over sampled. In accordance with NCAA regulations, current students on the football team who completed the survey and those who volunteered to participate in the follow up interview were not financially compensated nor given community service credits for participating in my study.

Through a combination of purposeful selection and snowball sampling, the second part of my study includes 13 former students from Division I FBS programs or their equivalent programs (i.e. formerly Division IA). Snowball sampling originated with three key informants encountered during my 2009 pilot study and one participant from

my current student pool (Weiss, 1994). These four key informants agreed to participate in the study. After their own individual interview, informants connected me to other former students from Division I FBS programs (See Figure 1 for a map). Eleven participants originated from the same conference as the current student sample, the Pacific 12, and two from similar conferences in terms of athletic prestige, the Independent and Big 10 conference (See Table 3). This sample was compensated with \$25 in exchange for an interview as they were no longer eligible students participating in NCAA governed sports. As a result, such compensation did not violate NCAA regulation.

Description of interview participants. Demographic information of current students in Division I FBS programs included in the interview portion of my study, is important to note, and thus, reviewed in this section. Noted demographics for current student in Division I FBS programs were extracted from the study's survey primarily, but also from individual interviews. Detailed notations can be found in Table 2.

As extracted from the study's survey, this group of participants self-identified as NFL aspirants. Participants consisted of one Hispanic, five Whites, one Pacific Islander, and eight Blacks. Participants included freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. My study included one True junior, one junior college transfer classified as a sophomore in eligibility, two freshman, three sophomores, and four seniors. It is important to note that with the exception of one True junior, the remaining participants were in "redshirt" status⁶. Furthermore, seniors in this study were considered 4th year seniors not yet

⁶ This refers to a delay of a student's athletic participation in the game in order to extend their period of eligibility. Ordinarily, a student's athletic eligibility is four seasons. However, a student in intercollegiate

utilizing their final year of play eligibility nor yet in their final semester of study.

Disaggregation by “class year” is included in order to consider if and how participants closer to graduation, define degree commitment and forecast their occupational pathway.

In a similar vein, participants are situated within a wide range of talent levels, as stipulated by their programs’ depth charts. Participants represented each level: starter, secondary back up, and third string. In athletics, such terms are utilized to demonstrate the placement of students participating in a given sport. This is essentially a status hierarchy based on coaching staff evaluations of students’ athletic ability and performance (Rees & Segal, 1984). Such disaggregation is included in order to consider if and how participants with tiered athletic prowess define degree commitment and envision their occupation trajectory similarly or differently. With eight starters included in this group, just over half were the top athletic performers of their program and as such, listed as starters. Three were second string and four third string. Occupational goals, as stipulated in participant interviews, were coded in interview transcripts. 7 of 15 listed the NFL as a primary occupational goal. Alternative occupation goals included a range of disciplines from police and detective work to business. Table 2 lists participants’ options.

Demographics for former students from Division I FBS programs were extracted from individual interviews. Detailed notations can be found in Table 3. Former students from Division I FBS programs included in my study were made up of one Hispanic, one Pacific Islander, three Blacks, one Black/White mix, two Hispanic/Black mix, and five

athletics may be offered the opportunity to redshirt for up to two years. This which allows the student to spread those four years of eligibility over five, or six years

Whites. Participants were one to 20 years removed from college enrollment with the average years removed at 9.6 years. Nine participants were graduates with uninterrupted attendance. One had interrupted attendance, but has since returned and graduated and enrolled in graduate studies. Three were stop outs with one considering undergraduate re-entry. All participants self-identified as starters on their program's depth chart. Five participants played in the NFL and eight did not successfully achieve this professional endeavor. At the time of interview, participants' current occupations ranged widely from high school or assistant college football coaches to waiting tables. Although not a surprise; actual occupations among this group concentrated on those with direct ties to athletics, if not, football specifically.

Methods and Trustworthiness

Between-Method Triangulation (Denzin, 2001) was employed to establish validity. In qualitative research, validity can be understood as "true" and "certain" (Denzin, 2001; Kirk & Miller, 1986). Findings should be "true" in the sense that they accurately reflect the situation, and "certain" in the sense that findings are supported by the evidence. Three methods were used to build interpretations to ensure validity and trustworthiness. As data triangulation involves using different sources of information in order to increase the validity of a study, I analyze my research questions from multiple sources and perspectives. First, with research questions guiding protocols, interviews with current and former students in Division I FBS programs were conducted. The second perspective included observation of physical space. Observations of academic support centers at three sites designated for students in intercollegiate programs were

conducted in order to gather a sense of the atmosphere and an overall “feel” for these centers or communities of these students. These centers exposed me to not only the facilities that informed me about the athletic subculture within the institution, but exposed me to team members, athletic academic advisors, coaches and other students involved in sports outside of football. As a third source, official NFL draft regulations were reviewed. This review not only gave me concrete information about the NFL’s admission policy, but the documents text helped clarify how the creators construct content in their favor and convey particular messages about the value of education and the lack thereof (Prior, 2004; Whitt, 2001). In analysis, data from these three sources were coded into themes to determine consistent areas of agreement across data sources. Those themes constitute my ultimate findings.

For those in the first part of my study, one round of one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 15 current students on the football teams. Twelve interviews were in person and three were via telephone. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. Both, myself as the interviewer and the participant shared in the structure and direction of the interview and material covered (Wengraf, 2001). Phone interviews were the result of adjustments and difficulty in scheduling and delimited to participants attending Green University. In person interviews for those at South University and Rollo State were left to my discretion. As a result, I consulted with each of my participants and allowed them to choose the meeting place. All of them preferred to meet near the athletic facilities. As such, I was able to negotiate a study hall space or empty office within the student services area. With these two sites, I was given

the contact information of those who volunteered for the interview. I was allowed to directly contact the students on the football teams of these two universities to schedule an interview.

Noteworthy was my experience at Rollo State. This program preferred a highly structured run of my interviews where the head advisor scheduled all interviews to be conducted on a single day. All were back to back with 30 minute breaks built in after each to accommodate any interviews that would run longer than expected. Unexpectedly, this program provided a light breakfast for me, formal tour of the sports hall, and reserved a private office space for me within the student center for interview conduction.

Participants were asked a set of protocol questions to capture influential actors throughout their life, offer insights into how they perceive their professional sport odds, how they describe commitment to degree attainment, incentives and disincentives to remain in college, and their overall purpose for college attendance. A few questions asked were: “Talk to me about the role football has played in your life,” “What was it about this school that got you to come here,” “Do you think you have what it takes to play at the next level and why,” and “Would you ever consider leaving college for the pros without your degree” (See Appendix B for exact protocol).

For those involved in the second part of my study, one round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with 13 former students once on a Division I FBS program with NFL aspirations. Eleven interviews were in person and two were via telephone. Each interview lasted between 90 minutes to two hours. Phone interviews were the result of referred participants not residing in an area where I could travel to inexpensively. In

person interviews were conducted in locations as suggested by the participants.

Interviews ranged from participants' homes, library conference room, to their places of business. Interview questions drew former students from Division I FBS programs to share their lived college experience. Questions prompt them to reflect on previous educational and occupational values and assess how those values shaped their current place in the work force. For example, participants were asked the following questions: "Was your college what you expected it to be," "Why are you going back to school now," "Take me through your decision to leave college for the NFL," "Share anything you would consider doing differently", and "What has changed for you" (See Appendix C for exact protocol).

As an additional layer of data review, I transcribed all 28 interviews verbatim.

Second, document analysis was applied to the National Football League's college draft and free agent eligibility regulations. Reviewing official league documents for admission standards allowed for concrete information about the admissions policy (Prior, 2004; Whitt, 2001).

Third, observation of the student services centers designated for those participating in intercollegiate athletics for all participating sites was conducted. In the effort to triangulate, field notes were taken to connect visual messages from the environment to the overall tone of participants' experiences and expressed values. Field notes were taken before and after meeting current students for their interviews. Many students from various athletic programs were present in these centers at the time interacting, studying, or waiting to see their advisers. These centers are important to

include in analysis as students in intercollegiate athletics spend a significant amount of time at such centers for academic advising by athletic counselors, and study hall (Lanning & Toye, 1993; Martens & Lee, 1998). Moreover, such observation was included in my study design to meet the broader objective of better understanding the athletic subculture and possible embedded messages that could give rise to their degree commitment and occupational goals.

Given that I had the opportunity to meet, and for the most part, conduct interviews within the student services centers for those participating in intercollegiate athletics at all participating sites, I noted the physical space around me. Walking the facilities, a visual manifestation of the athletic and academic values of the institution became apparent. Noted were the most prominent cues about graduation goals, scholarly expectations, and celebrations of athletic achievement. Details of what I, as the observer, considered important components of the overall scene, mood, and interactions among these students and support staff were noted. I documented concrete details about the space, support service material in print, and mission statements to the like. I avoided noting my initial impressions and opinions, but rather note after taking in visual messages, reflecting, and connect observation to the experiences of my participants (Mason, 1996). Such field notes were taken at each setting and included in analysis. In the next section, I articulate the combination of these processes.

Data Analysis/Explication

This study is both descriptive and heuristic in that it presents documentation of quotes and attempts to highlight how students in Division I FBS programs are

interpreting internal and external messages about education, money, and power as they define their commitment to degree attainment and weigh their post college options. A qualitative approach was chosen because the purpose of my research was to answer questions about how this group's lived social experiences have been created and defined. In this case, I sought to uncover and understand the values of students in Division I FBS programs, interpret how they define degree commitment and how their college experiences influence their decision-making process to leave college early for NFL pursuits (Weiss, 1994).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) call for phenomenological analysis in order to go beyond the data and to develop additional ideas. Groenewald (2004) noted that Hychner cautioned against the connotation of *analysis* on phenomenological data and instead, encourages the term, *explication*. Explication is essentially "bracketing" or the technique of illuminating the description of lived experiences and calls for reduction to ascertain the meaning of elements and gain insight into the micro-dynamics that make up a broader picture. This implies that the investigation consists "of constituents of a phenomenon while keeping context of the whole" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 161). As a result, observation notes, and NFL admissions document text were included in analysis, and interview transcript data in explication.

Coding. Data was organized using the Microsoft Word 2007. Each document was coded and linked with a memorandum to note emerging common or clustered themes as well as more nuanced individual themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Groenewald (2004) reminds phenomenological researchers that unique or minority voices are vital

counterpoints to illuminate and should not be discarded. Heeding his caution, I did not cluster common themes when major differences surfaced.

Interviews. Interview protocol was structured to extract the individual experiences, and contexts in which they occurred so as to be the central source of data. Data were coded into several broad categories as themes emerged. I termed these categories, Parent Themes. Those themes were academic values, athletic values, occupation goals, perceptions of college, locus of control, influential actors, and decision making. In a second review of data, refined or focused coding was applied for theme modification and theoretical connections. These data were placed into what I termed, Child Themes as they were more specific branches of the original Parent Themes (Saldana, 2009). These themes were family/coach/peer/external networks, fluctuation, NFL, (dis)incentives, investment, perceived mobility, and athletic subculture. Memorandums with reflection and notation of possible theoretical connection to foreground them accompanied.

NFL document: college draft article. In search of one document fact, simple initial coding for employment eligibility was exercised on this article.

NFL Players Association web content. The FAQ (frequently asked questions) tab tailored for NFL aspirants researching the career was explored. I coded for messages regarding their stances on college attendance and degree attainment on aspirants' lives.

Observation field notes. Similar to the interview transcripts, data were coded into broad categories as themes emerged. Parent themes that emerged were academic and athletic values. Child themes emerged after focus coding and connected to interview

themes via memorandum notes. Those emerging themes were graduation/degree attainment messages (through verbiage/artwork), NFL messages, and athletic heavy or academic heavy subculture.

Positionality

The reason that I am interested in this topic is because little research has addressed the needs of students in intercollegiate athletics when we consider the challenges they face *within* and *beyond* college and how these challenges may inform degree commitment. I share particular affinity with this subgroup that stems from my former occupation as a professional dancer. Similar to the NFL, professional dance companies do not require degrees for employment. Many artistic students majoring in Dance Performance or completing a degree face similar choices when it comes to life after college. I had to face artistic retirement, and forced to consider how I was going to support myself long term after stage life. In my lived experience, dance teachers, professors, and choreographers do not choose to be so while in high school or college unless they recognize they lack the talent to engage in professional performance. Rather, they “end up” as such after coming to terms with being 30, overcome by physical ailments from the wear and tear of rehearsal and performance, and a slowing metabolism that cannot compete with that of an 18 year old. This is especially the case for female dancers.

Ultimately, whether it is dance or football, there is an innate desire to stay close to what one has indulged in for the majority of their life if they reach elite levels of performance and embraced by exclusive circles. Albeit, professional dancers do not have

the glaring perk of making multi million dollars per year, I can certainly empathize with the choices and commitment challenges this subgroup of students face. Moreover, as a former college student who participated in intercollegiate athletics (freshman cheer squad member) and supporter of college athletics, I am concerned about the unrealistic expectations (some of) our students in intercollegiate athletics have. Particularly, those students in high revenue generating sports like football. To add, as I consider persistence and attainment among this group, poor graduation rates among our male students in high revenue generating sports are considerably lower than those of students not participating in such sports, and thus, a very real concern. As one truly invested in improving the attainment and post college outcomes, gaps in research call for more knowledge regarding this subgroup's experiences in order to piece together the context from which they operate. As such, this study is my gestalt.

I recognize that a) being a women, and b) not a former student on an elite college football program leaves an interesting footprint on my research process and outcome. As I began my research process and further brainstormed the legitimacy of my academic contribution and appropriateness of my overall research question, I engaged in a few discussions with contacts of mine who were in athletic administration. I recall my overall research question being met unenthusiastically from a couple of administrators. Embossed in my mind was one particular assistant athletic director stating to me, "Well, that's silly! Everyone knows (the meaning of college) is to get a degree and (study participants) won't tell you otherwise." I recall grappling with some insecurity and questioning whether my proposed research was too simple, too obvious, naïve and thus,

useless. None-of-the-less, I forged ahead, but with some trepidation despite my pilot findings suggesting that I may well have an academically worthy and interesting research question. Such challenges and perception of my own position are worth noting. As a result, in the following section I cover the disadvantages and advantages of being an outsider from my point of view.

Perceived disadvantages of being an outsider. As many researchers have noted, there are myriad challenges to research access to elite athletes at the college and professional level (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Benson, 2000). My experience was no different. Although utilizing personal connections to gain permission from sites came easily, recruitment and interview organization for current students in intercollegiate athletics was extremely challenging. I attribute some of this challenge to being an outsider. I define a true outsider for this particular type of research as one who is not a current or former student on a Division I FBS program or one who is not a male employed by student services or the football program within the university. As an outsider, allowable exposure to my target sample, a highly protected subgroup of student, for recruitment was limited. Initial and additional marketing opportunities for my study were miniscule to none. I had no access to the email listserv to send reminders or respond to any inquiries that potential participants may have had. The progress of recruitment and data collection was highly dependent on the advisors entrusted with survey dissemination. This was particularly the case for Rollo State's advisors who structured the interview experience tightly. As a result, I was at the mercy of advisors for timely dissemination, verbal reminders, and participation encouragement. I learned from this

experience that persistence, sometimes in the form of chasing, nagging, and relentless pursuit is an absolutely necessary tool for forward progress on research.

There is something to be said about the influence of physical presence when trying to gain access and securing research time with a high profile group such as student in high revenue generating sports. First, once I made physical appearances at the academic service centers designated for students in intercollegiate athletics for scheduled in person interviews, more students on the football team present at the study centers came forward willing to participate. This occurred at two of the three participating sites. It appeared to me that rather than recruiting participants via electronic survey, if I had the access to personally speak to potential participants to recruit and inform them of the electronic survey, I may have had a more robust sample to draw from. Second, gender played both a negative and positive role in my research. Unfortunately, being a women interfacing with these gentlemen and investigating within their environment lead to a few inappropriate stares and comments, not from interview participants, but from surrounding peers on the football team present. This only occurred at Rollo State being that the athletic administration structured the interview process in the effort to assist or maybe even to control or monitor activities. Obviously, such gestures and behavior influenced the proceeding interview atmosphere. All in all, I observed and experienced that gender plays a role in this type of research and certainly leaves indelible impressions on the process and outcome.

Perceived advantage and neutralization of being an outsider. As per research ethics, I stressed confidentiality and anonymity to my site authorizers and participants so

frequently that I must have won their trust to the highest degree. I perceive that the only advantage of my outsider status is that the interview participants, being so honest in their accounts and confident that I would not share identifiers, may not have concluded that I had any close connections to advisors or coaching staff that would be to their detriment. Being that I do not roam the halls of these centers for students in intercollegiate athletics daily, participants may have not felt threatened that their secrets and stories would be identified and divulged by a complete stranger at the wrong time to the wrong person.

In my experience with former students from Division I FBS equivalent programs access, recruitment and collection was less onerous. This group was particularly accommodating and graciously connected me with eligible participants. For this group of former students, not having been a member of their subculture did not pose any major obstacles.

Ultimately, my qualitative training regarding how to phrase questions to certain groups, tone, and indirectly demonstrate knowledge of lingo became crucial to gain some type of legitimacy among this subgroup. I had to prove that I was knowledgeable about football at the onset of most of my interviews. Knowing how to dress, talk, approach, and interface with this subgroup was key to the successful establishment of rapport and getting interview participants to divulge experiences and values. Dressing in athletic attire in combination with business casual attire to connect with participants visually was a strategy I employed. Approaching each interview participant with a gracious tone and curbing the use of unfamiliar terminology that maybe only fellow educational researchers would know was also a strategy I used. Finally, opening each interview with a discussion

related to participants personal reputation on the field or overall team performance where I could demonstrate my knowledge about them, team performance or the game, served as an effective icebreaker. Employing such techniques made being an outsider not necessarily advantageous, but rather, it appeared to neutralize the disadvantage of being outside the subculture.

Limitations

One cannot possibly cover every angle and be 100% comprehensive in studies. In the effort to remain concise and focused, I direct this study toward the exploration of degree commitment among current and former students in Division I FBS programs. Although my study offers important contributions, there are shortcomings in considerations and design. In the following section, I review those limitations.

To begin, this study makes the assumption that a college education is necessary for success and should be valued by all people. It is understood however, that values vary across people, households, and industries. Alternative pathways toward obtaining upward social mobility, aside from a college education, are a possibility, but these alternatives are not within the scope of my study and thus, go unexplored.

Second, degree commitment as it relates to NFL aspirants within Division I intercollegiate athletics and attending four year universities is the central focus. As such, this study excludes degree commitment among NFL aspirants attending Division II and III intercollegiate programs and those attending community colleges.

Third, this study does not explore SES and the implications SES may have on participants' academic and occupational values. Although I could make inferences about

participants SES based on parents college completion, such data was not gathered from all participants as relevant questions were not included in the interview protocol.

Statements about SES did surface in interviews by chance and direction of the interview flow, however including this data would merely serve as anecdotal evidence if reported in my findings.

Fourth, the sample size of both participant groups is small. This does not allow for me to generalize findings. However, the goal of qualitative analysis is the appropriateness of data sources and theme saturation as oppose to generalizability (Gaskell, 2000; Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, given the implemented method of phenomenology, according to Groenewald (2004), including data obtained from small groups and implementing the technique of isolating individual themes or nuances experienced by the minority of participants, is not inappropriate, and still of value for understanding human development and the awareness of lived experiences.

Fifth, current students in Division I FBS programs, in their final years of study, were asked to reflect on college choice and former student from Division I FBS programs were asked to reflect on their college choice and undergraduate experience as they discussed degree commitment. As such, one could argue that this study is based in reflective bias. Similarly, self-selected bias could also be argued in that participants within Division I FBS programs elected to participate and defined themselves as NFL aspirants and/or participants.

Sixth, my study does not incorporate additional theory such as Critical Race to fully explain difference by race/ethnicity for a more in-depth analysis by race/ethnicity.

My study simply describes the experiences of those races/ethnicities not typically heard in such research (i.e. Pacific Islander, Hispanic), but does not explain why differences and similarities appear to exist across race/ethnicity.

Finally, this study does not include parents in interviews. Including them in interviews could have allowed for a better awareness and understanding of the role important others play in shaping degree commitment. I delimited this study to the perspectives, interpretations, and interactions students in Division I FBS programs have of their parents and/or important others. Without actually interviewing parents and important others (i.e. coaches), I only capture interpretations of interactions and influence as described by participants. However, focusing the study on students is also a strength of this study given the limited knowledge we have about them and the inner workings of their decision making process and degree commitment.

In the following section, I present my findings from both groups of participants. For the sake of brevity, the findings section will refer to participating current students, and former students in Division I FBS program, simply as, current or former students.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

By way of analyzing interview transcripts of current and former students' lived experiences, the NFL draft eligibility document, the NFLPA website, and observation notes, several thematic findings providing important insight into the essence of college attendance and degree commitment among students in Division I FBS programs emerged. Findings are divided into four core sections: a) occupational goals b) the college experience, c) the decision to leave college early for the NFL, and d) the post-intercollegiate experience. Within each core section, multiple subsections are included to highlight nuances wherein the conceptual framework of Circumscribed Agency is implemented as the lens from which to elaborate on the behavior and orientations of participants.

In the first section, findings related to pre-college factors are presented to address the educational and occupational goals as they reflect an individual's interests, values, and perceived talent. These goals and values inform me about students intended educational trajectory and allow me to make inferences about the meaning of college and driving force behind their choice to attend college. The following section focuses on the college experiences of current and former students. I report levels of degree commitment and how commitment is defined among current students with NFL aspirations progressing through their undergraduate career. I posit an explanation as to why and how they come to such articulations, and I juxtapose their stated values to fully ascertain and refine the meaning of college and degree commitment. I do the same for former students' reflections about degree commitment levels and how they defined commitment while

they were in college. The third section describes and discusses the decision making processes for current and former students facing the decision to leave for the NFL or remain in college. In the final section, I focus on the post-intercollegiate experience of former students to explore the often untold stories of unsuccessful degree attainment and unrealized NFL hopes.

Occupational Goals: A Reflection of Values and Perceived Ability

From the survey, all current students in the study reported having NFL aspirations and selected the highest survey option to express their interest in an NFL career: “extremely important.” In their interviews, current students clarified their survey responses and articulated several occupational plans that included the NFL. Even though they listed two goals, behaviors and decision making among this group typically oriented toward their NFL goal. Of the 15 current students, eight were starters, three second stringers, and four third stringers. The primary occupational goal of an NFL career was prevalent among starters, seen across race/ethnicities, and amongst those attending moderately and highly selective institutions. With intense animation and vigor, Wayne, a current student and starter, discussed the goal of playing in the NFL:

We (team mates) talk about it all the time, I mean, *all* the time. Especially during the off season... we in the gym... and we really trying to come back for next season bigger, stronger, faster... You have got to have a goal in mind to drive you to work as hard as we do and we all are thinking about the pros. I mean it's hard not to... You also see some former players...who are in the NFL now...back using the facilities and it's like, ‘man I wanna be you!’

From interviews, 13 former students reflected and discussed their occupational goals while they were in college and playing football. Similar to the current students, all former students reported a primary occupational goal of getting to the NFL. Mirroring the

sentiments of the majority of former student participants, Hart stated, “We talked about where we’d fit on a [NFL] team and I was guilty of it, too. You have to chime in and give your lil’ dig on it or it’s like, you don’t love football or you don’t want better for yourself...I certainly felt that pressure.” Descriptions of envisioning oneself in the NFL appeared to be a common practice and a widely accepted goal within this social group. Those who did not adopt the NFL pathway as a central goal were perceived to not take the sport seriously and stigmatized by teammates.

Students judged their athletic ability to be of the highest caliber and strongly desired to extend their athletic career into the professional ranks. Their self-assessment was based on the comments and overall messages received from teammates, and coaches. These comments added to their sense of self-confidence where they gauged their athletic ability to be one that could afford them the opportunity to play in the NFL. Joyner, a starter, expressed,

I think I can go [to the NFL]. I’ve made it this far and not everyone on my high school football team... that graduated with me... can say they are in the same position as I am...Dudes on [my college] team look up to me...and I put up numbers ...I compare myself to others around the nation and I can hold my own. [Team mates] remind me and my special teams coach does, too. That’s how I know.

Despite where current students were located on the roster, they all perceived and articulated the professional league as a realistic occupational option for themselves. Among non-starters, who also shared this NFL goal, a combination of pressure to share in the group’s values and norms, and internalized comments from coaches and teammates about their athletic talent (mistakenly taken as accurate assessments of their ability) lead

to their self-perception of being a viable candidate for the NFL. Indicative of goal discrepancy, Jankowski, a third stringer echoed the same sentiment,

I have a lot of work ahead of me... but I can climb the roster as I get better...I had the chance to walk on here and I have somethin' to prove not a lot of people can say that. When I got the OK to walk on, the coaches told me I have starter potential someday. To me, that gives me somethin' to shoot for and... it makes me think that maybe I have a shot at the NFL if I bust ass enough. I have plans to be a detective, but I really want to go pro...in my heart of hearts that's what I want and I can't forget that that easily.

Former students also discussed messages from teammates and coaches that informed their self-perception. However, after reflecting, they concluded these messages to be rather disingenuous. While in college, they discussed interpreting messages from coaches that conveyed a testament to their actual athletic ability and potential to play at the professional level. After reflecting back on their experiences, they questioned the truth behind these messages, and admitted possibly misinterpreted them. They described considering these messages to perhaps really serve as motivational strategies meant to encourage aggressive and confident play instead. Not successful in achieving his NFL aspiration, Barnett resentfully stated,

[Sigh] this hurts to admit, but thinking back you know, I was a child. I was a kid. I had coaches tell me all this hype like 'oh you got the goods son,' but when push came to shove, I really didn't...and I'm pissed! They lie to you...I think it was just a tactic to get us in the right frame of mind to play top programs and give us confidence. It wasn't ever about me. They don't care. They'll say anything to get you amped when you're there... and when you leave and you flop, they're like 'I'm sorry, who are you?'

Those who were relatively successful in achieving their NFL aspiration stated experiencing a similar tactic. However, for those matriculated into the NFL credit their

coaching staff with their successful transition into the next level of play. Anthony admitted,

I think coaches are obligated to motivate us on and off the field. I remember coach pulling me aside and telling me that if I did more of x, y, z, I could go pro. He was right, I mean, I did it... If it wasn't for his feedback and our talks and stuff, I'm not sure I would have had the confidence, will, and plan to improve my skills so I could get to the NFL.

Explanations of current and former students in my study have illustrated the power and influence of messages from those rooted within their social group on how they perceive and interpret their own abilities. Participants' subjective interpretations of these messages give direction to the goals they set for themselves. For some, particularly those at the lowest ranking of their team rosters and those unsuccessful in the NFL, these (mis)interpretations could explain the inflated or unrealistic goals of reaching the NFL.

In the following section, I describe current and former students a) decisions to attend college, b) decisions about *which* college to attend, and c) rationale for their decisions based on descriptions of their lived reality. Participants assessed the relevance of their educational and occupational goals in deciding college pursuits and matriculation toward a particular university.

College choice: why enroll and why where matters? In the predisposition phase, all participants discussed their childhood experience playing an array of competitive sports (e.g. track and field, soccer, rugby), but the majority articulated their experience playing pop warner football as a young child. In their reflections, participants proudly discussed their on-field success. In doing so, participants highlighted the central role football had played throughout their lifetime and how profoundly it had shaped

several of their key educational and occupational decisions. Football served as the impetus for them to think about attending college. Participants stated that the discussion about attending college accelerated while being on the high school football team and interfacing with teammates, coaches, and college football recruiters.

All participants reflected on their predisposition to attending college. They noted multiple reasons for their choice to attend college that may not reflect what many have traditionally associated the purpose for college attendance to be. Overall, from their interviews, the three prominent reasons to attend college were to: a) extend their athletic careers for a few more years, b) work on their athletic skill set, and c) acquire an undergraduate degree sometime during their adult life. Nuances in their answers demonstrated that participants had multiple reasons for college attendance with some reasons carrying more emphasis over others. Those nuances are reviewed in detailed below.

Eleven of 15 current and 11 of 13 former student participants stated that the most important purpose for attending college was to a) extend their athletic career from high school, and b) improve their athletic skills as college was perceived to serve as a medium from which to do so. In his senior year, Wayne, a starter, stated the NFL to be his primary occupational goal. He echoed this widely shared sentiment in his interview. He stated, “I always wanted to go to college on a full ride scholarship to play [football] for [Rollo State]. This is mostly why I feel like I’m [in college]. Get your field skills unpacked, cleaned up, refined... [college] is really a stepping stone for the NFL.” As another example, Joyner, also a starter stated, “Football play is huge to me. Since I was itee-

bitee... It's the reason why I'm even here....I've always wanted to go to college and I want to play in the NFL... Being [here] gives me that chance." These are a few examples of current students' perceptions about the purpose of college.

Although participants shared the aspiration of the NFL, they communicated having several possible occupational aspirations and ranking those aspirations. Even for those placing the NFL aspiration as a secondary option, choices appeared to be guided by their relevance to the sport and continued opportunity to play. A third stringer, Washington stated, "Thinking about college [in high school] I just worried about putting together my highlights tape for the coaches so I can keep playing. I came to college because I really want to keep playing." Even though this freshman stated his occupational goal to be a pharmacist first and foremost, his purpose for college attendance contradicted his priority occupational goal. Moreover, highly recruited students like Middleton described the college recruitment experience as an additional feature that further shaped the college choice process for him. He said, "I got letters from these big time schools...coaches calling and coming out to my high school games to watch me play." Such letters, communication, and interaction could easily lead to young students allowing their purpose and ultimate decision to attend college to be primarily driven by athletics. This calls into question how universities sell the image of college to high school students playing football. This is particularly the case for highly recruited high school students playing football. Experiences such as these lend for an extremely unique reality from which participants described making their decisions from, and forming perceptions about what the meaning and purpose of college was for them.

It is important to note the recruitment process for those students in Division I FBS programs who are on athletic scholarship like those highlighted above. For students on athletic scholarship for football, the final year of high school is defined by intense recruitment practices by college football teams. Although these practices are tightly regulated and structured by the NCAA high school recruitment bylaws, the college choice experience for those being considered for a scholarship to play on an athletic team is unique and one that general students may not experience. For students who are recruited by a team, their “choices” are limited by the program’s athletic information about the student, and the NCAA recruitment regulations that structure and bind interaction and campus visitation. In actuality, this recruited group of students do not have a choice of which college to attend, but are instead chosen by the college team to play for them. In some cases, if multiple teams have expressed interest in a student and choose them, then only these relatively few students end up with an actual choice.. Amongst these few offers, these students prioritize where to go based on where they can get the most playing time and the prestige of the football program that has expressed interest in them. As a result, for those on scholarship, the tradition three phase model is experienced differently. Rather than a) pre-disposition, b) search *by the student*, and c) choice *by the student*, those being highly recruited and thus, subject to a potential football scholarship, the college choice process can be understood as a) pre-disposition, b) search *by the institution*, and c) choice *by the institution*. To an extent, the “choice” is reversed where the institution makes the choice instead of the student. This reversal of the choice process could explain why students in my study discuss worrying about preparing their

football footage tapes for coaches. They are, in a sense, attempting to look as attractive as possible to the institution so as to be chosen.

Elaborations on their purpose for college attendance revealed that completing a degree at some point in their adult life was deemed necessary acquiring a well-paying job, and for gaining legitimacy in the workforce. However, returning to school to complete the degree at a later time was a widely accepted consideration. All students described anticipating little to no challenge in re-entering college at later time after a professional football career. Hill, a former student recalled, “I thought I’d get some respect and you pretty much need a degree to do anything now-a-days, but...I thought I would come back for those last three units or so if need be.” Kandela, a third string sophomore also stated,

I’m going to the NFL...because I’m a beast... School will always be there and I can go back. The way I think of it is if I go pro and even if I’m on the practice squad only, I’ll make around 80-100k which is more than my parents make now and one of them has a degree!...With that money, I don’t have to rely on scholarships and I can pay for my tuition if I need to go back...I care [getting a bachelor’s degree]... It can just wait.

Similarly, Carey, a starter and True junior expressed,

Since high school I’ve been thinkin’ that college isn’t one shot... Now I think, at some point I’ll need a degree to get a good job you know...People will always take a kat with a degree over one who don’t. Even if I played in the NFL that may not matter when I retire and try to work somewhere else...They’ll say, ‘Oh, he’s got a degree. That means he can think.’ People will take me serious and respect me more...I should get it done, but there’s no rule that it has to be done now. I can come back and finish...For me the NFL is right there and people... like the fans, my coaches, my parents, everyone expects me to go after this year...I’m one of the best [in my position] All-conference... All-American last year and I have great expectations from myself this season...gotta take that opportunity when it comes you know.

Four of 15 current and 2 of 13 former students noted several reasons for college attendance that included the opportunity to continue playing football, and acquire a degree *within five years*. These respondents articulated a perceived dual purpose for college attendance that included college a) serving as an opportunity for extending athletic careers, and b) serving as a mechanism from which to receive a bachelor's degree. Immediate transition into a specific academic or occupational destination, beyond the undergraduate career, was articulated as a clear priority. Those stating the aspiration of completing a bachelor's degree within a five year period were mostly those in second and third string positions among the current student group. Six respondents concentrated in moderately selective schools and two were from the highly selective school in the study. O'Shaughnessy, a third string sophomore expressed, "I'm trying to get to grad school. I hope for the best with the NFL, but I'm not sure... I'm focusing my energy on getting into grad school and I don't want to waste time... done in four is my goal. Period." Four to five years to complete a degree was a reasonable amount of time for completion and this appeared to be important to this group. Thompson, a junior and secondary back up added,

The NFL is always in the back of my mind...but I'm studying sociology...I've put a lot of work into it. I like studying people. How they think. What makes them tick and do what they do...so I want to get into the police academy first and foremost. You know, apply it to what I'm doing...I mean, I'm realistic...about my abilities...and planning for my future. If [the NFL] come[s] a calling, OK, but I'm planning on goin' straight to the academy after graduation... and with eligibility [requirements], I have to get this done in five years tops.

For this small minority, it is apparent that their perception of college was one where schooling was finite and guided primarily by their initial occupational goal.

Overall, participants perceived college as a transition step for their next occupational or educational phase. During their pre-disposition phase, the primary purpose appeared to be driven by their concern with remaining in athletic participation. Given the overall expression that athletics had played a central role in participants' lives, extending the life of their athletic career as their primary concern and sought after goal was not surprising. Such expressions reflected the high value participants placed on their athletic career. The vast majority of participants viewed college in two distinct ways. From an academic standpoint, they viewed college as an opportunity to complete a degree for legitimacy to an employer who requires it, but with an unrestricted timeline for completion. In other words, college was an opportunity that could continue to exist for them and one they could easily return to. From an athletic standpoint, college was the opportunity where high school athletes could extend and improve upon their athletic skill sets within a finite amount of time.

If one conceptualizes such values through the idea of habitus it allows for an understanding that the preferences of these individuals and the associated social group emphasize and highly value football participation. Simply put, among members of this subgroup, such reasoning is the norm and acceptable. Extending their athletic career was most important and a college education seemed as an additional benefit of college attendance. College appeared to play an unconventional role in participants' goals and thus, decision-making process. This suggests that participants perceive universities not necessarily as places to confer degrees, but as a professional training ground: specifically, an athletic training ground. Such a perspective was not surprising when considering my

observation of student service centers. In moderately selective schools, I observed student centers for athletic participants were physically distant from those serving students not in athletic programs. These centers were essentially silos and focused exclusively on students in athletic programs. Although these centers displayed academic images and mission statements underlining their devotion to assist students with acquiring their bachelor's degree, the majority of space displayed nostalgic athletic photos that encapsulated the corridors leading to student study and advising areas. To add, the decorated halls of fame nearby emphasized and celebrated the athletic achievement of former students. Obviously proud of past athletic achievements, the dominant visual composition of study centers dedicated to students in competitive athletics at the moderately selective sites in my study, could be communicating messages to participants that indirectly foster an association of college with athletic skill development. As a result, participants' college outlooks may actually be influenced and/or reinforced by the indelible visual cues surrounding the often segregated study centers they frequent.

Despite the celebration and heavy emphasis of athletic achievement and pride dominating the physical space of student centers, it is important to note the somewhat obscure, but nonetheless, present evidence of academic images and mission statements highlighting their commitment to assisting students in intercollegiate athletics with degree acquisition. These images and statements conveyed the message that graduation was an organizational goal and thus, a priority. However, the verbiage did not communicate the expectation of degree completion within a specific time frame. For example, there was nothing stating "finish in four," etc. Although six participants ranked

their NFL aspirations and alternative pathways differently, meeting the goal of degree attainment within a predetermined time frame was important before moving forward. This was especially intriguing given the mission statements expressing commitment to graduating students in athletic programs, and photos of the school mascot wearing a mortar board symbolizing degree attainment. This suggests that even with these types of visual messages conveying academics as a priority on the side of student centers, participants' subjective assessments of their athletic ability and occupational goals could dilute the power and influence of such messages.

Which college to attend? Just as important as the choice to attend college is the *type* of college chosen. Every participant illustrated how they decided *which* college to attend. The vast majority of participants expressed basing their decision on several factors. Two key considerations that emerged among the 28 participants were which: a) university would allow them the most playing time, and b) university was classified as a Division I program.

When it came time to consider various universities and ultimately make the choice of which institution to attend, participants described strategizing about what programs would best enable them with the most playing time. Carey, a starter at Rollo State exemplified the first factor,

The role I'd play in the football program was really important in where I'd go to college. Hands down... I knew I could come in and compete for the job and have a real shot... some of the other schools looking at me had those positions filled with people returning so I wouldn't get that much play.

Athletic success, for many, was not only reaching the ranks of college level play, but reaching the status of "starter." While optimizing playing time appeared to be

important in the search process for this group, participants also considered where they would fall on the talent roster for each program. During the search process, participants strategized the best roster placement they could acquire for each program. In short, for them, better placement equaled more playing time. Participants expressed having knowledge of the current roster and position needs for their short list of schools. Participants appeared to be so invested in their play, that some, like Carey above, referred to securing a position on the roster as securing a “job.” Consistent with Bowen and Shulman’s (2001) findings, participants assessed universities to attend based on where they would fit in on a university’s football program over the university’s academic offerings. Former student, Hoyt, stated “[State University] had a handful of graduating seniors in the back field, so there would be a better chance of me starting over there than with [another university]...That is why I ended up going with [State University].”

Rodriguez, a senior starter for the University of the South also illustrated this theme,

[The choice] was where to play football. Going to a DI college was important. I guess academics didn’t play as huge of a role as it should have. I was more focused on football and the program and coaches...That was motivation as to what school I was going to go to...I can pretty much major in whatever, wherever, really.

Playing time mattered in terms of visibility for those with particularly high NFL aspirations. According to participants, the more time on the field participants engaged in, the more time they had to be seen by scouts attending the game, the more opportunity they had to improve their statistical performance to enhance their draft possibilities. Coinciding with optimizing visibility is the medium from which to gain visibility. The

medium in this case was a prestigious college football program. For participants, attending a Division I university was defined as prestigious and highly valued.

Traditionally, academia has determined university prestige or selectivity by a given set of admissions data and student composition. In discussing how they determined which universities they valued most and sought to attend, participants measured a university's relative prestige by different standards. The ranking and sorting of universities was assessed by *athletic* prestige. University programs were assessed and refined in the search process according to a multitude of athletic offerings that participants believed would work in their best athletic interest. In discussing their standards, they all referred to the a) categorization of colleges and universities as classified by the NCAA, and b) statistics specifying universities within Divisions and sub-conferences with greater NFL draftees as valued markers of a prestigious and thus, desirable programs to consider in their choice set.

An intriguing twist is when academically selective universities are situated within Division I programs. Participants discussed being drawn to the university they eventually matriculated into because of the athletic prestige or placement of the program in a Division I category. Five of six total participants who attended academically selective universities shared how the deal breaker over which selective university to attend was determined by the notoriety of the Division or conference the program was situated within. Joyner, a junior starter for Green University stated,

The reputation of this school is that academics are tough... It's lived up to its reputation. I'm keeping up. I could have gone to some other schools, but when you grow up a Cali kid like me, all you know is Pac-10 [now 12] football and you want play for one... Anyone will tell you, Cornell versus Dartmouth versus

[Green University]...good schools...actually, they're great schools [laughs], but I picked Green because I want to say, 'I played for a D-I.'

Turning to the concept of habitus to explain participants' choices, we can consider their choices based on a system of values. In this case, participants and those making up their social group in football highly valued the sport and their perceived athleticism. Participants elaborated on their careful calculations about assessing their athletic ability, and strategies to best position themselves on their football program's depth chart to optimize their opportunity to play. Their self-assessed athleticism was considered an asset that they hoped would yield them lucrative post college rewards in the professional circuit. From their depictions, it was evident that college choice behaviors reflect athletics as the guiding force in their decision making and planning. Specific to college choice, such findings challenge the generalization of Letawsky et al. (2003) that academic programs primarily guide students participating in intercollegiate athletics. When, the search process certainly appears to yield very different considerations.

Strong athletic orientations were prevalent among participants and were illustrated as they discussed making their decision to attend college, and the information they used to make decisions about which college to attend. Preliminarily, these findings serve as evidence that the purpose of college could be to primarily cultivate athletic skills for their desired NFL career.

In the following section I highlight how participants defined degree commitment, and reveal who their central consultants appeared to be as participants elaborated on their idea and definition of degree commitment.

The College Experience: Commitment to Degree Attainment

To further understand and deconstruct commitment to degree attainment among participants, I apply the logic stipulated in my methods section. To briefly review, I operationalize commitment to degree attainment by considering participants stated educational and occupational goals, and statements about their college choice process.

Commitment among current students. Current students defined commitment using the terms “promise,” “loyalty” or “loyal oath.” A theme that emerged to describe their commitment to degree attainment was that of a promise made to both themselves, parents, (and for a few) their young children (See Figure 3.1).

For 7 of 15 current students, the NFL was the number one occupational goal and therefore, top priority. Six of 7 were starters with one being a third string participant. The remaining eight expressed contemplating alternative occupations in case of failure and/or NFL retirement. Current students were asked to rate the strength of their commitment to degree attainment on a 5-point Likert scale: one being a very weak commitment, and five being a very strong commitment. Fourteen of 15 expressed a 5, and 1 expressed a 4.5. Yet, when each was posited with the question: would you leave college early without completing your bachelor’s degree for the NFL? Four of 15 stated yes, they would leave early. In his junior year, starter, Albertson articulated this running theme:

Albertson: I’d say a 5, super strong!

Interviewer: OK. You’re still working on you bachelors right?

Albertson: uh-huh [affirmative].

Interviewer: If you were faced with having to make the decision of entering the draft this year, even though you’re not done, would you leave early?

Albertson: I'd say [pause] I'd say that I'd have to leave early. If I'm getting consistent talks from coach...and to a degree, actually, I think I do have a good chance. I mean, come on [laughter]...we are talking millions just for signing on...it's literally overnight. It changes your life drastically... how often does that opportunity come in a life time for people...not for everyone...and I'm young, healthy...So why not?

This type of response resulted regardless of participants' occupational priority order, level of play, and school selectivity. Despite reporting degree attainment as an important educational priority, there was an apparent disconnect between their stated educational commitment -- a bachelor's degree -- and their willingness to leave college early for the NFL without the degree. It is important to note that this is not necessarily a contradiction in statements for the majority of current students unless their stated degree commitment stipulated a time frame for completion (e.g. within five years). This was a contradiction, however, for the four current students that articulated their educational goal of completing their degree within five years. This suggests that current students may be committed to attaining the degree, but instead may not be committed to attaining the degree within a specific time frame and/or prior to entering the NFL.

This phenomenon was even prevalent among those describing non-athletic career pathways like dentistry and pharmacy as their first occupational choice. This stipulation was also prevalent across the various levels of play. Despite being on the lowest rank of talent on the team or immediate back up to a starter, with the exception of one current student, even third stringers expressed considering leaving college early for the NFL. Furthermore, little to no differences regarding this phenomenon emerged among those attending the selective and moderately selective universities. Attending a selective institution did not necessarily preclude these participants from having similar dispositions

towards degree commitment as their participating counterparts attending moderately selective universities. Attending a selective university did not appear to generate any more or less strength in degree commitment or different conceptualization of degree commitment than those attending moderately selective universities.

Differences based on those who volunteered the information that they receive athletic aid emerged. Five starters among the overall 15 discussed receiving financial aid for their athletic performance, and, thus, stated having a stronger affinity toward an athletic mission while in college. For example, third stringer, Jankowski stated, "Like I mean, [pause] I'm here on a football scholarship...not an academic...I need to keep that up so working on agility, coordination, lifting and stuff... like that is where my focus is." One can consider the context in which participants' rationalize their funding sources and feel a sense of greater responsibility to the entity funding their college attendance. As a result, they embraced focusing on their athletic mission over their stated educational goal.

Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) also found a similar commitment-attainment inconsistency in their national quantitative study on students in Division I FBS programs. They drew into question why graduation rates for those in the same social group as my participants were inconsistent with their proclamations of degree commitment. A plausible explanation for Potuto and O'Hanlon's (2007) inquiry, aside from inflated educational goals (Sellers & Kupermic, 1997), was the idea of misaligned educational and occupational goals. If the educational goal was to complete a degree, and the occupational goal did not require the educational goal to be attained for entry,

than competing goals may surface. Essentially, current students stated they were committed to one thing, but still wavered in their convictions.

Additionally, as APR monitors progress and penalizes teams that do not graduate students, APR does not penalize those stopping out of college for the NFL. APR reinforces structures consistent with students' degree commitment relative to their professional sport goals. The actions of both the team, who appears to encourage specific behaviors among students and the students, who appear to be influenced by messages received from coaches are circumscribed by the NCAA's APR system of incentives. Current students understand that demonstrating progress is a requirement, but they know stopping out for the NFL does not hurt the team score. It is possible that current students focus on progress, but fail to obtain the degree. For them, it appeared as though completing the course of study within a specific or traditional time frame may not be imperative to them at this juncture of their life, and particularly irrelevant to their occupational goal of entering the NFL; which again, does not require degree attainment for admission

Increasing and interchanging commitment. Participants in the upperclassmen ranks (i.e. junior year) discussed experiencing an increase in degree commitment as they progressed through their undergraduate years. While elaborating on their pathway toward degree completion, participants unveiled what they described as an increased intensity in their degree commitment. Five upperclassmen discussed experiencing a relatively weak inclination toward degree attainment initially entering the university. However, they discussed reconsidering attainment as they neared their final years of

undergraduate schooling and noticed a stronger intensity in degree commitment.

Additionally, participants discussed their reaffirmation of degree commitment, but made it contingent on their athletic outcomes. Rodriguez's statement below reflects the pattern.

This starter stated,

As time has gone by, I actually think I should finish with something now, but I need to see what happens this season to really make that decision...I do intend on preparing for the draft...I hope to graduate next year, but that depends on the season and how I feel about my performance and stuff.

Related to athletic outcomes, is participants' health status. Four participants elaborated on their degree commitment and discussed how a change in their orientation toward academic or athletic goals occurred and depended on their physical wellness to play. In short, they interchange or replace commitment to one goal with commitment to another. "Sometimes I'm focused on getting a degree more than playing because as you can see, I had knee surgery so...I'm not sure about this upcoming season...in terms of play...so now I'm concentrating more on school. So, it changes" admitted Joyner—a starter. Even among these four, attending a highly selective university like Green, did not exempt them from experiencing interchanging commitments.

These findings reveal that commitment is fluid and dynamic. Strength in commitment to the educational goal varied and participants made decisions about this "promise" to themselves and others depending upon several factors. Participants' strength of degree commitment was also determined by their physical wellness that allows them to still play (See Figure 3.3). Participants continuously assessed their athletic abilities as they progressed through their college years. They determined their athletic ability to be competitive enough to enter the professional draft and intended on

preparing physically. With this perception in mind, participants attended national camps, or waited for an invitation to the NFL scouting combine⁷ to put their best foot forward at each campus' pro-day⁸.

As participants considered their athletic abilities endangered and temporarily limited by physical injury, uncertainty and doubt about obtaining and performing their athletic goal arose. As a result, they reconsidered their loyalties and replace their strength in degree commitment toward another goal. In this case, participants shifted their commitment toward meeting their educational goal of degree attainment and discussed applying themselves more towards academic efforts. Their decisions about degree commitment and actual interchanging are circumscribed by their football subculture that heavily emphasizes and favors commitment towards their occupational goal. This suggests the notion that these two goal (educational and occupational) are essentially competing goals for students expressing this replacement of goal commitment.

Perceived influence of others on commitment. Participant explanations implied that commitment was not stagnant, but instead, was susceptible to a variety of contextual factors making up participants' reality. As a result, I connect the role important others play in shaping participants' commitment from their perspective. In reviewing the key actors and entities that shaped participants' commitment to degree attainment, three key

⁷ Also known as, National Invitational Camp is a week -long showcase of physical and mental abilities in front of scouts, agents and coaches.

⁸ Major university football programs have a Pro-day where by players engage in similar strength and fitness tests that are typically held at the NFL combine so NFL scouts and coaches can assess their athletic agility and abilities.

influential actors that emerged were a) family members, particularly parents and children, b) student peers on the football team, and c) the NFL as an organization.

Current students discussed their mother, father, or parental figures (e.g. grandmother, foster parents) as motivational factors in their journey toward obtaining their bachelor's degree. In their elaborations, current students discussed having a sense of obligation to complete the degree because degree attainment was an expectation among their family members. With emotion welling, Wayne shared:

Me and my pops been talkin' and he worked hard to get me through high school and move out here for college...I was homeless...dropped out of high school...raising my little sister...We lived in a van and... my high school coach took us in... I owe him and my moms a lot of credit. He says I really need to finish and get my degree to live a good life you know. So I'm doin' it for my moms and pops mostly...I have to get this degree for them. That's what they expect from me at the very least.

All current students stated discussing the importance of degree attainment with family members. Their statements revealed that among parents or parental figures, degree attainment was an important value and motivational goal. They attributed their successful transition into college and orientation towards degree commitment to their parents or parental figures. However, when asked how they believed their parents would react if they left college for the NFL without their degrees, 14 of the 15 students responded believing their parents would be supportive of their decision to postpone degree attainment.

Participants also discussed their teammates as important others, and used terms such as "second family" and "brothers" when referring to them. Degree commitment was valued, but there was a forgiving nature if attainment was not achieved because only

those within their subculture could truly comprehend the choices and challenges embedded within their context. For instance, second stringer, Thompson stated,

Well, these guys are like family. We have each other's back all the time on and off the field and we just spend so much time with each other...share our dreams and cry together...My team mates are a huge influence to me in all areas of my life. I think we also push each other to get through school. Getting the degree is pretty important, but we understand why guys are able to get it done and others aren't and we have to back them up...(some don't get it done) because there are so many distractions, but also we have opportunities that only come along at a certain time in our career...the NFL is one of them. If I fall short, I know (my team mates) are one of the few people that would really get my decision.

As well as people, participants perceived external organizations, like the NFL, to be a source that constructs degree commitment for them. Ten of the 15 participants speculated that if the admissions policy required them to obtain a bachelor's degree, graduation rates for this subgroup of student would likely increase and possibly serve as a motivating factor towards degree attainment. In analyzing the NFL draft eligibility document, one can find that the requirement of a bachelor's degree is absent, and that draftees only need to be three years removed from of high school to enter. As such, educational and occupational goals can become competing factors. Participants, like Joyner in the example below, were well aware of this fact and speculatively acknowledged that better alignment could likely motivate those like them to complete their degree. He said,

If the NFL doesn't say we have to have [a degree] then they don't. That's just the way it is. I *do* think that if [the NFL] made it something we had to do to play, wow! [laughter] honestly, guys would probably work harder to get [their degree] and ...honestly, honestly, our advisors' lives would be a whole heck of a lot easier [laughter].

Others elaborated about their knowledge of the game as a business and attributed low graduation rates for this group to that fact that degree completion doesn't relate directly to what is in the best interest of the NFL as a business.

A starter, Hausen shared,

The game could be a game changer. If [the NFL] said we need to [have a degree] guys would do it and work at it... NFL says they want speed, we work on getting' faster. NFL says they want size, we eat right and lift. If the NFL said we needed a degree, we'd be gettin' it done... But I think it has to do with money. When I came [to college] I really grew up. Yeah this is a game, but it's more a business...The NFL is no different. If they can get talent to make [h]tem the [money] they will do what it takes to get him...I think it cost them money in the long run doing that, but it's a good idea.

This reveals how the NFL, and NFL eligibility standards, shape and influence educational and occupational goals among study participants. As a result, externally related entities seem to have had a powerful influence over participant behavior and their approach to degree attainment. Recalling Secretary Duncan's argument that the NFL admission policy serves as a disincentive for students in college football programs to obtain a degree (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009; The New York Times, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010), my findings suggest his shaming of professional sports organizations like the NFL for their admissions policies may be warranted. According to the participants of my study, the NFL admissions standards covertly convey the message that the degree may not be entirely valued despite the NFLPA website stating just the opposite. On their FAQ page, the NFLPA strongly encourages degree attainment as they connect education and degree completion with better pay in the NFL and cognitive performance associated with athletic play. Under the question: "Why is education important?" The posted answer is,

“Education is crucial for success to become an NFL player or a success at any career. Completing a college degree will not only prepare players for life after football, but it also seems to pay off during a player's career. Players with degrees earn 20 to 30% more than players who don't have degrees. They also have a career that lasts about 50% longer. While there is not one answer for why players with degrees have stronger careers, one theory is that players who show the intelligence, concentration, and mental discipline to complete a degree show these qualities on the field more. Doing well in school from an early age also helps players develop the concentration they will need to memorize plays and avoid eligibility problems in high school and college.”

As they warn aspirants that life goes on after football and should consider their future marketability. Participants may not heed such advice or believe in its applicability to their individual situation.

Former students' reflections on degree commitment. In their initial undergraduate experience, former students reflected on commitment and drew from their college choice experience. Among the vast majority of former students, commitment was comparable to the definition ascribed by their current student counterparts (See Figure 3.2). Commitment was also defined using the terms “promise” and “oath.” Former students introduced another thematic phrasing, “contract with yourself.” Different from current student responses, former students perceived commitment to be a promise to oneself only, as opposed to a promise to oneself *and* others. Middleton represented the majority of the former students' definitions of degree commitment. He said, “I think [commitment] is a contract between your future opportunities and yourself. You owe it to yourself to get it and apply it.”

Former students were also asked to rate the strength of their commitment to degree attainment as undergraduates on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 being a very weak commitment, and 5 being a very strong commitment. Nine of 13 expressed a range

between 4 and 5, and the remaining four, whom were also the stop-outs in this study, expressed a range of 2 -3. Former students that stopped out expressed disappointment in themselves for not completing the degree. In a regretful tone, DiRossi shared:

I admit it. Football was my world. It still is because of what I do [as a local sports radio commentator], but I really haven't gotten over not finishing...I'm actually embarrassed about it. I let the whole [NFL] vision dominant. I was successful, but when my kids ask me about going to college and stuff, I have to tell them that their daddy is a drop out. That's...like...ugh.

Among the four stop outs, two originally attended selective universities. Similar to the findings among current students, attending a selective university did not appear to generate any more or less reported strength in degree commitment. It also did not seem to lead former students to conceptualize a meaning for degree commitment differently than those who attended moderately selective universities.

For those four who stopped out and later returned to complete the degree, commitment had changed. Not how they defined the term, but the reported strength (i.e. number on the Likert scale) of commitment had increased after their re-enrollment. Degree commitment or the nature of the promise changed depending on the need for the degree relative to their current occupation and/or revised occupational goals. I detail this change for those who returned to college to complete the degree, and for those who were considering a return to college, and I provide possible explanations in the post-intercollegiate findings section.

Perceived influence of others on degree commitment. Similar to their counterparts, former student explanations implied that commitment was subject to a variety of contextual factors making up participants' realities. Again, I connect the role

important others play in shaping participants commitment from the perspective of former students. The most perceived powerful actors in shaping former students' orientations towards degree commitment were a) coaches, b) professional players in the context in which they aspired to be (e.g. NFL), followed by c) their parents.

Overall, former students appeared to look up to their college coaches and regarded them as father figures. According to the majority, coaches strongly encouraged degree attainment and some coaches even articulated a purpose for completion. Anthony recalled,

(Coach) was consistent and adamant about graduating with our degrees so he reminded us a lot about how important that was and how it was pretty much our "key to a life with opportunities." He was honest and cared about what happened to us on and off the field, in the classroom, and at home you know...he was a lot like everyone's second dad.

Additionally, former students who finished their degree discussed attributing their commitment rating of 4-5 on the Likert scale and ultimately, their degree attainment to their coaches' encouragements. Barnett stated, "(Coach) left a footprint for sure and was really the reason why I was able to pull it together...stuck with it, and finished my degree. So I would say a four (on the scale)." Messages of encouragement resonated among former students and influenced their commitment to completing their bachelor's degree during their eligible intercollegiate time frame. From their explanations and accompanying emotional energy, the need and value of a degree, as proclaimed by a well respected and central individual, certainly shaped former students' strength and seriousness of their degree commitment. Furthermore, such messages could have also contributed to their self perception that degree completion was feasible for them since

they perceived their coaches to be attentive to their academic performance and positive promoters of degree attainment. This is evident in Barnett's later elaboration regarding the role his coach played in his degree attainment, "He took an interest in us, and speaking personally, he made me feel like graduating was important and that, well, not only did he expect me to do it, but that he thought I could do it."

Former students' social contacts that eventually made it to the NFL and secured positions on team rosters, were identified as the next most influential actors shaping their degree commitment. Interesting was the fact that every former student discussed having a close, personal contact in the NFL. Every former student who graduated with their bachelor's degree within five years discussed a contact within the NFL with whom they attended college before or were related to. Anthony reflected on his experience with a former teammate who went on to play in the NFL:

[My friend] was pretty inspiring. Actually, it was his advice a lot of times that I really took to heart to get me through college... [He] would remind me how important it was to graduate, regardless of the future I was hoping for with football... He was a source of strength when I wanted to quit on college altogether and I think he saw it has his obligation to prepare me for the worse because football just doesn't happen for everyone who wants it so you need to prepare for the worst or at least have a back-up plan... Well, I couldn't carry out my back-up plan without my degree if football didn't work or when it was time to retire if I did get to enjoy an NFL career.

Anthony's example is one of eight former student recollections among those who graduated with their degrees within five years. It is apparent that previous relationships with former teammates, and particularly those who went on to play in the NFL and graduated with their degrees, were well respected and valued. As a result, the advice and guidance from such contacts to reinvigorated former students' original commitment to

degree attainment. Particularly interesting is the aspect of NFL contacts actually serving as a positive influence on degree attainment.

Dissimilar are the experiences of a few stop outs where NFL contacts were found to also serve as a negative influence on degree attainment. Despite an overall sentiment of coaches and NFL contacts as revered influential figures and promoters of degree attainment, 4 of the 13 former students did not receive their degree. These four also expressed receiving the message about the importance of degree attainment from coaches, but admit that such a message did not eclipse messages from friends or relatives playing in the NFL. These four discussed their intense desire and anticipation to begin a career in the NFL at all costs. This desire appeared to be further fueled as they engaged in continuous discussions with close friends and family with NFL careers. A recent NFL entry, but college stop out, O'Rielly said:

It doesn't matter what the hell people say to you...about graduating. I was committed to having a career in the NFL. I felt like only my friends- I had friends in the NFL so- I felt like only those who were playing and went through what I went through, and made the decisions I had to could possibly understand...My best friend is playing for the Chiefs and he's two years older than me and just been through it all... The more I talked to him, the more I was torn about finishing (college) first or just going back later. I think that the more and more I surrounded myself with my friends who made it, the more I wanted it. I didn't care about (graduating) anymore, I just didn't care you know. I had one foot out the door.

To add, a sense of loyalty to friends and relatives with NFL ties among these former students also emerged. Those assisting or advising them with strategies for improving their athletic skills, and NFL business acumen, appeared to foster a disinterest in degree attainment, and invigorated their drive for the NFL. For instance, Lolamanuala introspectively explained,

I was working with trainers and had a few contacts in the NFL by way of my cousin. He played, back in the day, for the Raiders, but I got so wrapped up in it all. I feel like I lost sight of school a little bit...advisors,... the coaches, my mom were all telling me to hang on and finish my degree, but I didn't listen...and I started feeling bad for wasting my cousin's time... He talked to me so much about what to prepare for [in the NFL]... to only blow his advice off... It's like train and get better or stay in school. I couldn't see why I'd do that and disrespect him.

Unsurprisingly, the role of parents influenced how committed former students were towards degree attainment as they considered the “adults” involved in their day-to-day intercollegiate experiences. Like current students, former students discussed viewing their coaches as father figures with whom they recalled spending copious amounts of time with. For former students who left college early for the NFL draft, even they recalled their parents as having a considerable and positive influence on their degree commitment, but ultimately they made the decision to stop out for their chance in the NFL.

From participants' definitions and elaborations, commitment is complex and dependent on various factors: health status, perceived occupational opportunities, and desired time to completion matters. Furthermore, the norms and values of participants' college communities are important and influence participants' conceptualization and level of commitment for both educational and occupational goals. Given their perceptions, it is evident that this group of participants is highly integrated into a type of “NFL subculture” within their college community that strongly shapes their commitment to both goals. Such community context is further illustrated in participants' decisions to remain or depart from college for an NFL career. In the next section, I explore how

participants framed the mental process when deciding whether to continue to pursue their degree or to stop out in greater detail.

Decision Making: To Leave or Not to Leave for the NFL without a Degree

Process and considerations among potential stop outs and sop outs. During my study period, three current students, all starters, where in the midst of making the decision to forego their remaining year(s) of eligible play and disrupt continuous undergraduate enrollment (which would halt degree attainment) to officially enter into the NFL draft. I termed these students, “potential stop outs.” Four former students, also all starters, did leave college without their bachelor’s degree to enter into the NFL draft. Both current and former students who stopped out or who were potentially going to stop out, articulated weighing the pros and cons of their decision. Both potential stop outs and actual stop outs shared factors that went into their contemplation and ultimate decision that included: a) the perspective and innate desire to capitalize on the rare and lucrative career opportunity in the NFL, b) consideration of their individual field statistics, c) decision perspectives from their family, coaches, trainers, associate athletic directors, friends and observations/messages from media coverage, and d) an anticipation of easy re-entry into undergraduate education (See Figure 4a).

Capitalize on the opportunity. All seven participants stated their understanding that reaching the ranks of play in the NFL was an enormous feat that only very few enjoy. Both groups expressed the intense desire “to take advantage of the opportunity” that is available to only 224 young men nationally per draft year. Current student and starter, Carey stated, “You have to believe you can do it...you have people and family out there

that kinda expect you to do great things and you just have to deliver and answer the call if you get the opportunity to go pro.” Current students in particular, discussed responding to intense team, campus, community and media pressure to be a “success story” as a contributing reason for their decision to leave early for the NFL.

Consideration of individual football statistics. Six of these 7 discussed weighing if staying an additional season would benefit their initial NFL earnings and signing bonus potential. They discussed positing the idea that if they were to stay another season, they could possibly improve their football statistics (i.e. average number of yards per carry; number of successful field goals) and thus, potentially increase their base salary or draft stalk. Former student, Sanchez reflected, “There’s a lot of thought put into this...I was thinking that if I stayed my last year, and if I could get my field goal percentage up, I could get drafted in the second or third round.” They also described feeling torn about the decision to leave early, but ultimately they made the choice to not risk physical injury by playing an additional season solely to improve their individual statistics. Sanchez went on,

Then, on the other hand, I was getting concerned about the possibility of getting hurt if I did stay another year and just blowing the whole thing. That is what did for me- thinking about screwing up this once in a life time opportunity by getting greedy and trying to improve my draft appeal so I just decided to leave while I was on top of my own game for the NFL.

Collecting advice from important others. These seven all discussed consulting with various actors in their life to consider the diverse view points of others and general guidance regarding their decision to depart early. Participants described parents, coaches, athletic trainers, friends in the NFL, athletic directors, and academic advisors specifically

assigned to students participating in athletic programs all opining. These seven described this decision as particularly painstaking and the most important decision of their young life time. For example, DiRossi stated,

It was the most difficult decision I had to do in my entire life. It was grueling...I turned to everyone I cared about and who I thought really cared about me and knew what my capabilities were. I needed people that I felt were on my team and had my best interest at heart and would tell me the truth...I spoke with our Associate Athletic Director of Public Affairs, coach, my mom and dad, my grandma.

Advice between parents was not always harmonious. Instances of conflicting views between mother and father arose according to five participants. Conflicting views were between the long term consequences of not completing their degree and lack of marketability outside football versus the immediate capitalization on a rare opportunity. They went on to express additional stresses stemming from the tension between parents and described the anxiety and they felt deliberately going against the advice of one parent. A sense of betrayal was described by others. Rodriguez, a starter expressed,

To a degree I feel kinda bad actually because the topic has caused some fighting between my folks and no matter what I do I'm going to make one of them disappointed because like my mom thinks I should leave early...and my dad thinks I should finish up or 'take care of my business with the books' [chuckle] as he says.

Absent from their list of consultants were faculty and major/academic discipline advisors, and tutors. This group of campus actors and their perspectives regarding the decision to remain or depart was not solicited by the seven participants. I can only speculate that in this instance of decision making, participants appeared to seek out the advice, guidance and input from those they felt relatively confident that they would favor

them leaving college early. In other words, perhaps participants' advice seeking patterns emulated going the desired path of least resistance.

Anticipated ease of re-entry. Similar to the vast majority of overall participants, the three current students making their decision to depart from college for the NFL appeared to further rationalize their decision by stating their assumption that college was a viable option at a later point in time. Again, Carey stated, "oh college, you know, school it's there for me, and it's always going to be something I can come back to after the NFL if I don't finish...I think it'll be easy to get back into it...I have support here from my advisers and I will be able to afford my last couple of credits on my own." For them, returning to college at a later time could have served as a way to justify early departure from college for the NFL draft. Given the data revealed by former students in my closing section regarding the challenges of re-entry, this assumption could be problematic as they did not articulate anticipating re-entry challenges. Moreover, although important, their focus regarding re-entry appears to be centered on the financial means to facilitate re-entry as opposed to their successful persistence and ultimately, degree attainment. Communication of a more developed understanding of re-entry is absent from their narratives.

In summary, numerous factors were considered in the decision making process of the three current students in the middle of the choice and for the four former students who had elected to depart college early for the NFL draft. Consideration of these factors and the ultimate orientation towards the decision to depart, suggests that this decision is complex and carefully calculated. This decision appears to be subject to their immediate

situation and careful consideration of where they want to be, in an occupational sense, in the future.

Process and considerations among graduates. All starters during their intercollegiate attendance, 9 of 13 former students also had NFL as primary aspirations. Only two former students within these nine realized their dream of playing in the NFL and completing their bachelor's degree before leaving for the NFL. These nine expressed contemplating leaving college early for a perceived NFL career, but they decided not to leave. These nine graduates shared a few dominant themes with the potential stop outs and actual stop outs previously reviewed. Those shared themes were: a) the consideration of their individual field statistics, and b) perspective from family, coaches, trainers, associate athletic directors, friends and observations/messages from the media. Two differences emerged in graduates' described choice to remain enrolled in college to complete their bachelor's degree before departing from college (See Figure 4b). Those differences are reviewed below.

“Risk” versus “capitalization.” Graduates discussed perceiving leaving college before degree attainment, specifically for the NFL, as more of a risk, as oppose to “capitalizing” on an opportunity. Graduates discussed acknowledging what they described as “painful reality” that football would come to an end for them at some point. As such, they expressed planning for the end or a failed attempt at the NFL. Barnett reflected,

coming to terms with the end of football was depressing, but I knew it was going to happen one day...I didn't want to leave college with any regrets and I see it like, if I left early with no diploma, [pause] I mean, that to me is a waste of time...and I were to leave early for the pros, that would be a real risk because I'm

not sure about how easy it would be to get back into the swing of things or if I'll have the drive to go back.

In their planning, graduates used the terms “risky,” “a gamble,” and “high risk decision making” when describing their experience and perception of early departure for the NFL.

Anticipation of a difficult re-entry. Graduates described observing family members, friends, and trusted consultants go through the process of returning to college after an extended leave. They explained utilizing the re-entry experiences of others in order to inform their choices about leaving college early. Hoyt admitted,

My brother had just gone through this and watching him struggle trying to get back into school after taking a ‘time out’ –that’s we call it—it’s not worth it...He lost his motivation and the stuff they work on in study skills class...I watched him struggle and I didn’t want to go through that. I just wanted to be done and then move on to the NFL if it be so.

After considering the experiences and advice of others close to them, they expressed nervousness in losing study skills, time management, knowledge, and motivation. As such, they anticipated re-entry to be a challenge academically and thusly, opted to complete their degree before pursuing other endeavors.

In summary, two important differentiating factors emerged in graduates considerations to remain or depart from college for the NFL from their stop out counterparts. What set them apart was a rather apprehensive orientation embedded in their decision making. First, graduates’ descriptions demonstrate an awareness of the uncertainty in their future and thus, a perception regarding early college departure for the NFL as a “risk” as oppose to a “capitalization.” Elaborate descriptions of their pragmatic considerations regarding the inevitable end to their football careers, and plan for a life without and/or after football. Second, a dissimilar perception regarding re-entry into

college emerged. They articulate observing and learning from others' experiences to inform their direction, approach, and ultimate decision.

Given participants responses, making the decision to depart from college for the NFL appeared to be more than just black or white. Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) remind us that on and off campus actors and affiliations also play a role in students' social integration and thus, degree commitment. Findings suggest that these participants essentially operate and have developed relationships within a subculture consisting of a community that highly values the dominant occupational goal of playing in the NFL. Integration into this subculture drastically shapes their outlook on college completion and ultimately, their decision to remain or depart for the NFL. In a traditional framework, degree acquisition is the logical and obvious stepping stone to a given occupational goal. Clearly, this is not the case here. Findings suggest that educational and occupational goals partially compete.

Messages of Celebrity. The majority of participants from both groups discussed feeling like a celebrity on campus and within their surrounding communities. Participants noted being cognizant of their hyper-visibility on (and off campus) because they were on the football team. Such socialization is important in ascertaining their context and if and how it shapes their self-perceptions. Supporting Adler and Adler's (1987) concept of inflated sense of self, participants essentially conveyed being socialized into a college campus culture that places students on football teams in a position of superiority and adoration. Being put on such a pedestal by not only the campus, but greater community, and knowing how celebrated and revered they were, could add to their elevated sense of

self. Ultimately, this elevated sense of self could give rise to their belief that they must be unique, special, good at what they do, and perpetuate unrealistic career aspirations. Likewise, with the intense coverage of college football, the media played a significant role in facilitating prominent profiles for study participants and those like them. This discussion is most common among current and former students of starter status, but also expressed by the majority of second string current students regardless of school selectivity. Rodriguez illustrated this point.

My mom records games and she, well, this is bad because they always tell us to rule out the media, but she means well, she...tells me some of the stuff the commentators are saying and she keeps a sound bite record. I'm working with someone to get a highlights reel done for the pro's and it matters what they are saying about you out there... I see. I hear what's being said.

Similarly, Carey expressed experiencing celebrity and a heightened awareness of the media and fans around him. He stated:

It's crazy...you see people you don't know wearing shirts with your name saying 'hi' like your friends. I'm like OK, I don't know you, but OK... When ESPN was here for Thursday Game Day, and anchors fight to talk to me...they say things like, 'people see a bright future for you in the NFL, blah, blah, blah.'...That's pressure and sometimes I don't know what to do with that... I have a reputation of being vicious and I need to keep that up for the team and for myself... You're in school still, do total strangers know what high school you went to, height, weight, major, plans after [college]?.. Are you on magazine covers?... Is Jesse Palmer talking about you?...I wouldn't say its normal.

Similarly, Ross inferred that he was living an atypical college experience from his non- intercollegiate student peers and intercollegiate peers in other sports. Ross stated, "Because of who I am I think live a totally different life than other students and even [other] 'student-athletes,' but I have opportunities like the NFL that 99% of those people don't either." In addition to recognizing his own celebrity, and consistent with his

occupational goals, he perceived that he had a very unique and viable occupational option playing in the NFL.

Some participants distinguished pro's and con's related to their hyper-visible college experience. For example, current student, Albertson admitted, "It ain't always cool to be me because when I screw up big time out there it's humiliating, I'm embarrassed sometimes when I go to class...people talking about you, you know...stuff like that adds a lot stress." Former student, O'Reilly, mirrored a similar theme recalling:

[I]t wasn't always a red carpet. This one time when I was out and about town and we just came off a loss... and man, I mean [city] people are fans, too, but they'll let you have it... in public...it came with the territory, but in some ways it prepared me for what I thought the NFL could be like.

From observations of the academic and career services centers dedicated to students in intercollegiate athletic programs, facilities were segregated from the remainder of the student body with the exception of one site: the selective university, Green. Autographed posters of the university teams, season schedules, and retired jersey replicas were visible in the study center and not limited to the sports hall of fame areas. Given these items, the décor of the physical space could add to the internalized messages student had about themselves, their perceived celebrity, athletic presence, and overall value they, primarily as athletes, bring to the university. Performance, reputation, and status on the field appeared to play a visible and prominent role in their college experience that should not be ignored. Such visual cues and socialization could mold their beliefs and attitudes and thus, contribute some explanation regarding self confidence in their athletic ability, and orientation towards degree attainment and purpose for college.

The campus community, broader community, and media appeared to construct celebrity for this group. Consistent with Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) participants expressed believing their college experience to be anything but normal. These experiences may reinforce the message that they are highly and mostly regarded for their athletic contribution. Findings challenge us to think about the messages circulating around them, and how the internalization of these messages structures their associations and disassociation with the broader campus community. Experiencing celebrity from these students stand point could make them feel disassociated with the student body that does not have this status. This would further lead them to them to remain closely tied to a more constricted group of students, also with celebrity, to identify with.

Similarly, celebrity appeared to contribute to their self-perception and in turn, influence their perceived occupational trajectory. Messages communicating expectations of greatness in the NFL allowed for participants to entertain the idea that perhaps the NFL *did* await them? Perhaps they were *that* special, indeed?

The Post-Intercollegiate Experience

Simons, Van Rheenen and Covington (1999) have noted that accounts focus on the few success stories of students leaving college early for the NFL and thus, weaken students' motivation to succeed academically. As such, I purposefully avoid such coverage, and instead dedicate my final core section to reviewing the experiences of those who were unsuccessful with degree attainment, short lived NFL careers, or entirely unsuccessful NFL career.

Given this section's focus on unrealized degree attainment, I highlight the particular the stories of my study's four stop outs: Lolamanuala, DiRossi, O'Rielly and Sanchez. These former students did not achieve their bachelor's degree during their intercollegiate attendance and originally attended moderately selective institutions. One of these four, Lolamanuala, also failed to be drafted or signed on as a free agent to an NFL team and continues to pursue his NFL career. Another former student, Sanchez, recently re-enrolled at South University to complete his undergraduate studies and was set to graduate the winter of 2011 and considering graduate school. The remaining two former students entered the NFL. One, O'Reilly, was ultimately drafted, but released from his team after his second season, and the other, DiRossi, was also drafted, but released from his team after pre-season play.

Coping with falling short of educational and occupational goals. DiRossi, O'Reilly, and Sanchez discussed the moment they came to terms with the end of their NFL pursuits and set a time frame from which to re-start their football career, try out again, or accept its end. When describing coming to terms with the end of their NFL careers, these three stop outs referred to the process as something comparable to experiencing the death of a loved one and going through the various stages of grief until they met acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Upon accepting the end of their NFL pursuit, it was then that they were able to revisit additional talents and interests, and searched to redirect themselves toward new occupational goals.

Among these four former students, three explicitly expressed feelings of anger about their failed NFL endeavor and regret about their decision to leave college early.

They expressed resentment for not completing the degree and described wondering how and if a degree could have helped them remain employed or competitive when their football careers were over. The dialogue with a relatively recent stop out is reviewed below:

Researcher: What do you think about your decision to leave early?

O'Rielly: I knew (a degree) was important and my heart was in the right place, you know... but when you have this opportunity and you've been dreaming about the NFL, people can tell you until their blue in the face to graduate and all, but...I was going to take advantage and make that leap you know. At the time, I really, truly, I mean *absolutely* believed in my abilities to be successful [in the NFL] so of course I thought I made a good decision. Obviously, I'm not singing that tune anymore... and I really regret it.

Researcher: Regret what exactly?

O'Rielly: [Long pause] you know, the decision [pause] I don't want to say school was a waste of time, but my approach I guess was wasteful. I regret focusing so much on playing and skating by school.

Researcher: And what does "skating by" look like?

O'Rielly: Um, like, doing the bare minimum. Getting just enough units to get to the next year and staying eligible [to play]. There's no way I was thinking about "hmm should I actually try harder to actually do something after football, cuz I really was gonna have one [laughter] or so I thought, but, um, it was nowhere on my radar that I should have been planning alternatives and thinking about stuff like getting a masters degree...It was like a fog and no one could get me out of this delusion. I wouldn't just let that dream die.

On a similar note, DiRossi stated,

Well, yeah I could say I was drafted, but I really did not have much of a career [in the NFL] that I can showcase. Honestly, I walked away 6 units shy of my degree and I just got lucky to know someone who got me in the radio business...I, ah [revealing some frustration], it clearly wasn't the smartest decision I've ever made and I regret not finishing now.

Researcher: Why?

DiRossi: I guess it's more about embarrassment, a little bit, and some of it is 'cuz I don't know how long the radio thing is going to last and what I can do afterwards without [a degree].

DiRossi, Sanchez, and O'Rielly revealed frustration and uncertainty in their future and potential contributions. It is after experiencing a failure to obtain their initial occupational goal of reaching and having a successful career in the NFL that these stop outs reflect and recalibrate their occupational goals. Given the change in circumstances and new context, their failure to launch an NFL career called for these former students to draw into question their abilities and how they were going to progress through the rest of their lives.

Lolamanuala was the only exception to such sentiments. At an earlier time he re-enrolled at the same public university he engaged in his intercollegiate years to complete his undergraduate degree. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in completing his degree, and stopped out of his academic program yet again. At the time of the study, Lolamanuala had chosen not to re-enroll a second time to complete his degree in the near future, but did make it a point to state that he would consider re-enrolling at a much later time. In the mean time, he maintained a job as a waiter while he continued his training for the NFL in hopes of acquiring a free agent signing in the future. The determination in pursuing his NFL career remained strong even after being three years removed from college and no luck breaking into the next level of play. Unlike those who were unsuccessful in achieving their NFL goals, Lolamanuala was unable to reconcile his lack of athletic achievement: demonstrating low self-efficacy or misjudgment of his athletic abilities. Furthermore, he was reluctant to articulate a timeline to assess his progress

toward his NFL goals and possibly revise his occupational goal. When asked the same question about his feelings on withdrawing from college early for the NFL, Lolamanuala stated, "I'm OK leaving [school] on the back burner for now. It will be there, but my body and my chances are only going to hold up for so long...I need to take advantage of my youth and physical talent while I've got it." In his elaboration about what keeps him motivated to continue with his NFL goals, despite three years of persistent attempts and lack of admission, his reasoning is based not on his athletic abilities to be successful in this arena, but his perceived outstanding work ethic and sheer desire to be a part of the NFL. "I haven't come this far and worked this hard for nothing... I mean, I just believe, you know, you gotta believe there's a place for you there and I do," he said. If I apply Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief, I can deduce from Lolamanuala's narrative about his journey toward the NFL that he is in the first stage of denial. As a possible defense mechanism from which he could be enacting in order to avoid an uncomfortable truth, he remains with a self perception that his athletic prowess and physical build are sufficient to gain access to and promise success in the NFL. There is an inability to cope with reality and ascertain evidence from his previous experiences to reassess his situation.

Taking the discussion beyond the (un)acceptance of failure and into their future direction, stop outs discussed their experience re-entering college or their contemplation of re-entry as well as the feelings associated with this consideration. This is reviewed in the following section.

Unanticipated re-entry challenges. DiRossi, Lolamanuala, O'Reilly, and Sanchez expressed feeling underprepared in writing skills, problem solving, and because

of their undergraduate grade point averages, they expressed anxiety about re-enrolling, and for one, being admitted into graduate school. Sanchez shared,

Your time [in the NFL] comes to an end...and when I went back to finish I realized how behind I was...owning my restaurant I wanted to see what I needed to do to get my MBA, but whew, [laughter] the credits,... the testing it's like trying to get into college all over again...I had no idea.

Feelings of embarrassment were also expressed by these stop outs as they discussed considering a return to complete their undergraduate schooling. O'Rielly admitted,

I'm pretty young so friends I've had in classes know I didn't graduate and that I made the choice to leave [college early for the NFL] so thinking about going back is kinda embarrassing [giggling]. It's like coming back to your old stompin' ground when you were a bad ass, people looked up to you, you know, and now you come back with your tail between your legs. But if I go back, I'm going to have to get over that feeling.

In their efforts to begin the re-enrollment process stop outs discussed disappointment with assistance and support from student services at their original university. From their previous experience as students playing college football, participants detailed how student services tailored for their needs, appeared to take meaningful and personal interest in them, during their eligibility years. Upon returning and seeking help with the re-entry experience, former students transitioning into returning students, found that assistance with managing academics was not easily acquired and that the atmosphere was found to be unwelcoming. DiRossi retorted,

You know what really sort of pisses me off is that [pause] when you are there everyone loves you and you have all of this support to get through classes, and writing resumes and stuff, but when you want to go back and need help just getting started and how to sort of process some of the feelings you have trying to finish (your degree), the support isn't there or it could be better—a lot better... I

didn't expect that from them...(Advisors) said I could come to them if I needed to get back here and they'd help out, but that, nope, no, (the help) is not there.

This finding is surprising given that with the APR policy, teams receive credit for returning students who complete their degrees. It is counterintuitive to neglect returning students when their degree attainment could work for the team and institutions best interest in relationship to NCAA compliance and regulation.

Additionally, financing emerged as an issue for three of the four stop outs seeking to re-enroll. Lolamanuala, unsuccessful in breaking into the NFL entirely, discussed experiencing financial hardship in covering the cost of his remaining tuition without an athletic scholarship or any other type of aid. He had not received any academic awards to cover tuition costs and discussed having to work to finance his first return to college. He said,

I've tried to come back, but it really comes down to being able to pay bills and train so I can stay in shape and... be available for camps..and scouts... It's been difficult to balance work and school and training so it's more busy than when I was [in college] a few years back... I don't really have enough for tuition at the end of the day.

DiRossi and O'Rielly, who did not have relatively successful careers in the NFL - cut from their teams within two seasons- discussed planning on using income received from their NFL contracts to finance the remainder of their undergraduate career. However, they shared their belief that given their lack of efficient financial planning and poor spending habits, covering tuition expenses would be a hardship if they were to re-enroll. For instance, DiRossi admitted,

I have been out of the [professional] game for six years now, and at first, the money was pretty overwhelming... My family was working class and never did the whole financial investing things and stocks and savings...so I think I never

really got a good grasp of how to be smart with it...I did see a financial manager... by the advice of my agent and some other guys on the team, but I had no idea what he was talking about and I felt so stupid in front of him that I ended up blowing the whole thing and now [pause] I'm sort of, not living pay check to pay check, but I don't have much to so for my time in the NFL. I think, that if I could do things differently, I would, I would have made better decisions about money when I was younger... because of that, I think covering the rest of the money it would take to finish my degree: it would hit me pretty hard in the pocket.

It is important to note that from field observations at each site, only the single highly selective institution, Green University, had an observable re-entry program specifically tailored to assist former students who have exhausted their intercollegiate eligibility without completing their degree. From on-campus observations and the visible pamphlets in the student services center, this degree completion program was dedicated to assisting former students in intercollegiate programs with re-entry, developing a reasonable time line, and financing options by coordinating with the program's director advisors. Given the results of participants' re-entry challenges, such programs could be extremely helpful to this group and those like them.

Reconsideration of degree commitment at re-entry. With the exception of Lolamanuala, those considering re-entry described a stronger sense of urgency towards finishing their degree and transitioning on to a new career direction. Although numerically there was no change on the Likert scale or actual definition in commitment, most noticeable among stop outs was their elaboration on a new and more serious approach towards degree attainment. "Now that playing football isn't really on my radar, I feel like coming back (to school to complete the degree) is something I think is easier to focus my energy on 100%. I have more energy the more I think about doing it....like a

focused energy.” said O’Rielly. Elaborations also feature the importance of a congruent relationship between educational and occupational goals. In describing his reconsideration of enrollment, Sanchez said:

I get excited thinking about (returning to college), but like I said, there’s that connection I don’t think I had when I was younger...I mean, thinking about my restaurant business... now I think my major should match that to make me better at what I do.

Sanchez connects his new occupational goal with his educational goal; renewing his sense of commitment to the educational goal. Sanchez’s comments suggest that alignment of occupational goals and educational goals could further drive degree commitment. Given a change in context and no NFL on the horizon, participants perceived a renewed sense of degree commitment.

Ascertaining the Meaning of College for Participants

The first component to my overall research question sought to explore the meaning of college for both current and former students in Division I FBS programs who aspire to hold careers in the NFL. From participants’ descriptions of their college choice processes, how they defined degree commitment, how they perceived occupational options, and their decision making process to remain or depart from college for the NFL (for those faced with that option), I was able to gather the meaning of college for them. Responses from current and former students suggest that the predominant meaning of college can be understood as a four pronged concept: a) a mechanism from which to extend athletic careers, b) is a place to primarily refine athletic skills, c) a forum from which to gain the necessary exposure and social contacts needed to transition into yet another level of play, and finally, d) a place to attain a degree at some point in their adult

life. In this case, *meaning* is informed by participants' initial purpose for college enrollment, internalized time to completion standard (if any), and perceived feasibility of obtaining their occupational goals. The true meaning of college for the majority of participants is further crystallized by those sharing their decision to remain or depart from college for the NFL draft. In short, college could mean different things to different people. As such, it is important to understand meaning as complex, and relative to context and perceptions.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With Browning et al.'s 2010 call at AERA for educational researchers to investigate agency and decision making among students in intercollegiate athletic programs in mind, the purpose of my study was three fold: a) to qualitatively explore educational and occupational goals of students in high revenue generating sports like Division I FBS programs, b) to explore college choice to better understand the meaning of college and degree commitment for this student group, and finally, c) to explore the agency of this group to understand their decision to remain in or depart from college for the NFL.

According to Welman and Kruger (1999), “phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved” (p. 189) and how people make meaning of their experiences. My study is the first to take an in-depth qualitative look at degree commitment as perceived and defined by these students in order to make sense of their experiences. Designing this study to include students’ lived experiences allows for clarification, and depth and richness beyond the numerical data found in previous persistence studies (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Kamasoko & Pemberton, 2001). Such a design also takes readers through participants’ thought process, and provides a glimpse into their perceived reality. Study results demystify and explain the high degree commitment and low graduation rates found in quantitative results regarding degree commitment, such as that of Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007).

I review my research questions and summarize key findings in this section. I then connect my findings with existing choice and departure models and demonstrate how my study expands on both of these models.

Summary of Findings

Purpose of attendance. Given current students' occupational goals, I sought to understand what the purpose of college attendance was. All interview participants expressed aspiring to a career in the NFL regardless of their actual talent levels as defined by their position on the team roster. Being that the NFL occupational goal appeared to be endemic to the reality participants are situated within messages about their athletic talent from coaches and teammates can explain how this shared occupational goal remains prevalent throughout students' college careers. Current students described making choices based on their athletic pursuits. For them, the purpose of college attendance was to extend their athletic career, build athletic skills, and acquire an undergraduate degree sometime during their adult life.

Former students from Division I FBS programs were included in the study and analyzed to explore their decision making process and degree commitment given their ultimate occupational outcomes. Given their past occupational goals, I sought to understand what the purpose of college attendance for former students from Division I FBS programs with NFL aspirations who encompassed a varied set of post-college trajectories. Former students' articulations were parallel to those of current students' descriptions. The choice to attend and where to attend was driven by athletics pursuits.

Reflecting on their college experience former students discussed wanting to extend their athletic career and build their athletic skills in preparation for an NFL career.

For those who did not complete an undergraduate degree and played in the NFL, departing college without a degree was not perceived to be a risk, but rather as something that could be delayed for an indefinite amount of time. For former students who had completed a degree and played for the NFL, the opposite occurred where degree attainment within a specific time frame (e.g. 5 years) was perceived as ideal. Early college departure and delayed degree attainment was seen as a risk, and accompanied by a fear of difficulty with the re-entry process and experience. Finally, for those who did not complete a degree nor play for the NFL, but were in the process of re-entry or considering re-entry into college, their descriptions of re-entry revealed various challenges that included financing issues, and poor support in re-enrollment services by their former academic support centers.

Findings support Bowen & Schulman's (2001) argument that the central role athletics plays in current students' goals after college and decision making among students in intercollegiate athletics is often driven by their athletic orientations. Findings also support Dumond, Lynch and Platania (2007) that football related factors reflect a type of athletic prestige and intense national exposure that is extremely attractive to students as they engage in their college searches. When considering previous choice models, examining findings from this study using Perna's (2006) model allows for a greater understanding of participants college choices. Perna's model (2006) is appropriate in that focusing on habitus, and social context highlights how various layers of context

inform students' choices. Findings reveal that participants' habitus includes an intense value in playing football and an extreme love of sport that drives their college choice and destination decisions.

Social and community context. Tinto's (1993) argument states that increased social integration leads to increased commitment and finally, an increased likelihood of persistence. For Tinto (1993), departure from college was a longitudinal process wherein students' decisions to persist were determined by the quality of ongoing interactions between precollege characteristics, like initial commitment, and the dynamics of on-campus environments, such as academic and social integration. What is closely analyzed is the college community from which participants are socially integrated into. Findings revealed that participants are socialized into an athletic subculture that prioritizes the NFL commitment instead of degree commitment. In contrast to students who socially integrate into a campus subculture that connects degree attainment with occupational goals and may promote degree completion, students in this study experience integration differently. Instead, students in this study are integrated into a subculture that values their current athletic performance and professional goals rather than their educational goals and degree acquisition in preparation for alternative pathways if professional sport goals are not attainable.

I sought to understand what went into the decision to leaving college early for the pro circuit among current students and former students who had stopped out to pursue their NFL dreams. Current students in the midst of making the decision, whom I term as potential stop outs, described making the decision to leave college early for the NFL as

one of the most challenging decisions they had to make in their young lives. Findings revealed that potential stop outs appear to make this particular decision without haste. Each of them described consulting with important others within their social context. Current students consulted parents, coaches, administrators, and those in the NFL social circle who had insight into the organization. Their decisions are shaped by many and by their own perceptions of success. For them, this decision was complex and depended on how they reconciled messages about their athletic ability, chances of having a successful NFL career, and the feasibility of college being a perpetual option. The latter message turned out to be concerning given the findings from former students in my study who had expressed unanticipated challenges in their attempt to return to college.

Compared to former students in my study who graduated with their degrees, former students who had stopped out did not perceive putting degree attainment on hold for an NFL career as a risk, but rather, they perceived it as a capitalization. In the decision making process, similar to current students, stop outs discussed struggling with the decision. They consulted with family, coaches, administrators, and contacts in the NFL to make what they perceived and interpreted to be an informed decision.

Extending the meaning of degree commitment. Building on Tinto's (1993) line of thought, my study describes how degree commitment was perceived by students in Division I FBS programs with NFL aspirations. I explored what went into it, who, and what shaped it in order to making sense of the fluidity and complexity of commitment as determined by these participants. Moreover, I sought to understand how current students

with NFL aspirations articulated commitment to degree attainment relative to the NFL admissions policy.

Traditionally, degree commitment has been discussed as a concept that was strong or weak or measured by a Likert scale. This is particularly the case within academic literature addressing degree commitment and students in Division I FBS programs (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Thinking about commitment solely by a unit of measurement severely limits our understanding of persistence. I use Tinto's (1993) theory as a basis to connect social integration and commitment. His theory is implemented as a platform from which to investigate the importance of degree commitment and further develop our understanding of commitment by examining how participants conceptualize commitment. Although my study is not the first to explore degree commitment among students in intercollegiate athletics my study improves on this approach by revisiting how we think about commitment.

Findings from my study suggest that commitment is fluid and contingent upon their view of the probability of achieving or at least working towards their professional football goal. Findings suggest that a time dimension to degree attainment exists among this group of participants. Some participants stipulated a commitment to completing their degrees within a 5 year period. For those who did not state a timeline, I argue that it may not have necessarily been a case of wavering commitment, but rather a lack of immediate commitment to their educational goal. In other words, for them, the lack of a timeline in attainment surfaced. Additionally, in his discussion of commitment, Tinto's (1993) model is based on the idea of a singular goal: degree commitment. My study further expands

Tinto's (1993) model and reaffirm's Hyatt's (2004) observation by providing evidence that two goal commitments exist: educational (degree) and occupational (sport) goals. Furthermore, as commitment interchanged and was contingent on various factors, these goals appeared to coexist and compete. Previous models have neglected to consider professional goals into the choice and persistence equation for students. When considering professional goals, participants articulated the perception that the degree goal commitment was an opportunity that could be postponed whereas the NFL goal could not. This suggests another time dimension aspect, but it is relevant to occupational goal commitment and not just degree goal commitment.

Descriptions of key actors involved in shaping current and former students commitment to degree attainment were solicited. The top four key actors for the collective group of participants were: a) students' family members such as parents and children, b) peers on the football team, c) coaches, and d) contacts active or who were active in the NFL. Current and former students shared internalized messages from these important others. Their descriptions were evidence that others close to them who function within their everyday life as well as organizational messages contributed to their definition of commitment and shaped their commitment levels to their educational goals and to an extent, their occupational goals as well. Based on my findings, important others inside and outside the walls of their respective universities were identified by participants as influential actors. As a result, integration is a compilation of various actors within and outside the campus community who greatly shape the orientations and decisions of this group. The circle from which these students ensconce themselves, make decisions and

derive their sense of self had implications on their direction. Participants ultimately made decisions to attend college and remain or depart from college for the NFL based on the messages they received about commitment, and their ability to be successful in the NFL.

How degree commitment among former students with NFL aspirations or lived NFL experiences, was also investigated. Former students described degree commitment similar to that of current students, but with the emphasis on the promise being to themselves rather than extending the promise to include others. When asked to define commitment and if it had changed for those re-entering undergraduate studies, the description was no different. Findings support Cope and Hannah's (19875) argument that educational and occupational goals are the most important factors in determining persistence. Although they argued such goals were to be the single most important factor in determining persistence, findings provide an additional dimension by highlighting the importance of a congruent relationship between educational and occupational goals.

Implications and Recommendations

Agency and the central role of self-efficacy.

Drawing from Deil-Amen and Tevis' (2010) multiple concept approach to frame agency among current and former students in Division I FBS programs as I consider the relationship between the decisions students make about goal commitment and their perceptions. Their capacity to engage and make decisions is defined by their educational and occupational goals, layers of context, and self-perceptions at play. Agency is bound and limited by the contextual factors of habitus, participants' "situated context," and self-efficacy. With these combining concepts, Circumscribed Agency can assist us in

understanding the primary role students self-perceptions play in their decisions about degree commitment that could further inform college choice, and departure behaviors for other subgroups. It is apparent that the institution and messages of the high value they place on students' athletic contributions couple with the constraints imposed by recruitment, APR, and media coverage shape the decisions, perceptions and aspirations of this group.

Below I outline possible pathways that can extend and enrich the work presented here. In doing so, I connect previous discussion points with implications on high school and undergraduate advising, and policy.

Implications for research and policy.

College choice. Perna's (2006) sociological model is an appropriate and helpful in explaining college choice for this group of students. First, as challenges to previous empirical results on college choice for students in athletics emerged in my study (Dumond et al, 2007), results beg for further investigation into the differences in choice and destination among various student groups within athletics. Particularly useful would be studies at the high school level, as high schools feed into the college system. This would allow researchers to gain a better comprehension of their aspirations, expectations and choice. Additional research on the development and shaping of occupational and educational aspirations among students in high school athletics could also add insight into college choice and destinations. As an additional nuance, researchers could consider how and if the athletic recruitment process for students seeking to continue engaging in athletics at the college level plays out for those in high revenue generating sports.

Investigating the unique factors such as the university recruitment experience could provide further texture and depth to our understanding of how the higher education context shapes students college choice processes, what messages the institution conveys that could give rise to their self-perceptions, and how the choice process may look different for this group or similar to groups that also share regulated recruitment standards.

Departure. With NCAA policies like APR designed to improve graduation rates, a unique and important approach to studying policy would be how such policy is interpreted and experienced by students participating in intercollegiate athletics. I challenge researchers to supplement empirical studies on the effectiveness of APR on graduation rates by exploring the views and understanding of such policies among today's students engaged in intercollegiate athletics and to note any differences by sport in particular. Understanding how they internalize and experience such policy could add much needed depth into what motivates and challenges this group of students' to complete their degrees. Policy makers should take particular interest in students' perspectives as they craft revisions, new initiatives or consider collaborating with professional organizations to perhaps drive the importance and utility of an education and degree attainment.

Re-entry. Based on my findings, college matriculation was commonly perceived to be a perpetual opportunity wherein most current students anticipated a relatively easy transition. Given the accounts of the four stop outs who had re-entered or considered re-entering, the anticipated ease is concerning given that current students expressed this

expectation. Stop outs illustrated various challenges with the re-entry process. Given these stated challenges, further investigation into the experiences of stop outs would provide useful insight about the process of re-entry and additional challenges for this group and others.

None of the former students who had fallen short of degree completion had attended the highly selective institution, Green University, in my study. As a result, I was unable to gather data about the experience of those utilizing this re-entry program. More exploration on similar dedicated programs could prove useful to other universities hosting intercollegiate programs given the expressed re-entry apprehension and challenges among former students in my study.

Overall, the “NFL” subculture norms and values, and the institutions that support them, directly and indirectly were important factors in how these students made decisions about college and tailored their perspectives about college and their occupational goals. It is evident that within this subculture, alternative plans and the reality of life without football may not be adequately addressed. Findings revealed that students’ messages from coaches, teammates, the recruitment and college experience fostered a culture that highly values their athletic contributions and prowess. A more in-depth investigation into any current approaches student centers use to counter balance these messages and their effectiveness could prove useful.

Providing insight into the orientation and mobility behaviors of students in athletics, Hoberman (1997) highlighted the role sports plays within the Black culture and found that Black students in college football programs appeared to have forgone

mainstream routes towards upward social mobility and status attainment. These findings suggest that there is a prevailing mentality and cultural push within particular subgroups to aim for the NFL in order to obtain status. Closer examination of the racial and socioeconomic status of students in Division I FBS programs may be warranted in order to acquire an even broader understanding of the additional factors shaping the choice and persistence behaviors of students like those in my study.

Implications for Practice. As nonacademic factors such as educational and occupation goal commitment takes shape and continue to change, they clearly play an important role in how students in Division I FBS programs perceive their abilities, consider alternative career options and make decisions while in college. Evidence from my study suggests that it may serve athletic advisors interfacing with students in Division I FBS programs well to gain an understanding of these factors so as to best guide them through their trajectories. From such knowledge, they can realize how they, as advisors, are a part of the college community that socially integrates groups like my participants and thus, influences their perceptions and decisions. This could also be extended to high school counselors working with high school students in football programs given the development of their educational and occupational goals at this time. Knowledge of how these goal commitments, self perceptions and various contextual factors at the high school level that shape the decision making process for students in football programs and for others. A “scared straight” approach about the reality of their odds and importance of planning alternative plans needs to be more prominent for groups like those in my study.

Overall, addressing the experiences of current and former students' in Division I FBS programs to advance this area of research, my study examined the subjective perceptions of this distinctive group to better understand college choice, persistence, and departure among them. Foregrounded in a scholarly approach, I am able to offer a possible answer to Secretary Duncan's question: "What are they doing at you institution?" When considering study participants and their lived experiences, they are in college for several reasons and with a possible purpose that is much different than their athletic counterparts that do not have the NFL as a possible option. The answer is best captured by examining the meaning of college for this group of students. In investigating this, I found that those participating in my study attended college primarily with the purpose of developing their athletic skills, and extending their athletic career so as to follow an NFL pathway. Students in Division I FBS program are not the only case. Similar occupational goals and somewhat similar professional draft rules are present for the NBA organization. As a result, Secretary Duncan's question reaches out to other groups that are worthy of investigation as well. Applying this framework for investigation on male students in Division I basketball programs could build on these findings and perhaps additional nuances could further inform our knowledge about degree commitment and students' contexts. Furthermore, this study provides a framework for understanding the choice and persistence behaviors of other students on campus whose professional goals also do not require an undergraduate degree (i.e. dance, music performance).

TABLE 1: RECRUITMENT RESULTS FOR CURRENT STUDENTS IN DIVISION I FBS PROGRAMS

Participating Sites	Survey Distributed to Potential Participants	Responded	Expressed Interest in Interview	Actually Selected to Interview
South University	115	7	7	5
Rollo State	81	23	8	5
Green State	111	9	6	5
Total	307	39	21	15

TABLE 2 CURRENT STUDENTS IN DIVISION I FBS PROGRAMS

School Selectivity	Pseudonym	Class Year	Depth	Ethnicity	Occupational Goal 1	Occupational Goal 2
Moderate	Rodriguez	Junior	Starter	Hispanic	NFL	None
Moderate	Thompson	JC Transfer Junior	Second	White	Police	NFL
Moderate	Kandela	Sophomore	Third	Pacific Islander	NFL	None
Moderate	Wayne	Senior	Starter	Black	NFL	Family Counselor
Moderate	Washington	Freshman	Third	Black	Pharmacist	NFL
Moderate	Reid	Senior	Starter	Black	Motivational Speaker	NFL
Moderate	Ross	Senior	Starter	Black	NFL	None
Moderate	Albertson	Junior	Starter	White	Dentist	NFL
Moderate	Carey	True Junior	Starter	Black	NFL	None
Moderate	Hausen	Sophomore	Starter	White	NFL	Marketing
Highly	Jankowski	Freshman	Third	Black	Detective	NFL
Highly	O'Shaughnessy	Sophomore	Third	White	Grad School	NFL
Highly	Brown-Jenkins	Senior	Second	Black	Business	NFL
Highly	Joyner	Junior	Starter	Black	NFL	Business
Highly	Dean	Junior	Second	White	Teacher/ Coach	NFL

TABLE 3 FORMER STUDENTS IN DIVISION I FBS PROGRAMS

Former Conference	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Years out of undergrad career	Graduate	Current Occupation	Played in NFL
Pac-12	Barnett	Black	9	Yes	Grad School	No
Pac-12	Anthony	Black	18	Yes	Teacher/HS coach	Yes
Pac-12	Johnson	Black/White	9	Yes	Administrator	Yes
Pac-12	Hart	White	4	Yes	Advisor	No
Pac-12	Hoyt	Hispanic/Black	5	Yes	Advisor	No
Pac-12	Sanchez	Hispanic	30	Yes Returned later	Business Owner	Yes
Pac-12	DiRossi	White	8	No	Radio Personality	Yes
Independent	Middleton	White	9	Y	Business Owner	No
Pac-12	O'Reilly	White	1	No	NFL	Yes
Pac-12	Larson	White	8	Yes	Assistant HS coach	No
Pac-12	Hill	Black	18	Yes	Assistant College coach	No
Pac-12	Lolamanuala	Pacific Islander	3	No May return	Waiter/training	No
Big 10	Clark	Hispanic/Black	3	Yes	Assistant Coach	No

FIGURE 1: INFORMANT CIRCLE: RECRUITMENT OF FORMER STUDENTS IN DIVISION I FBS PROGRAMS

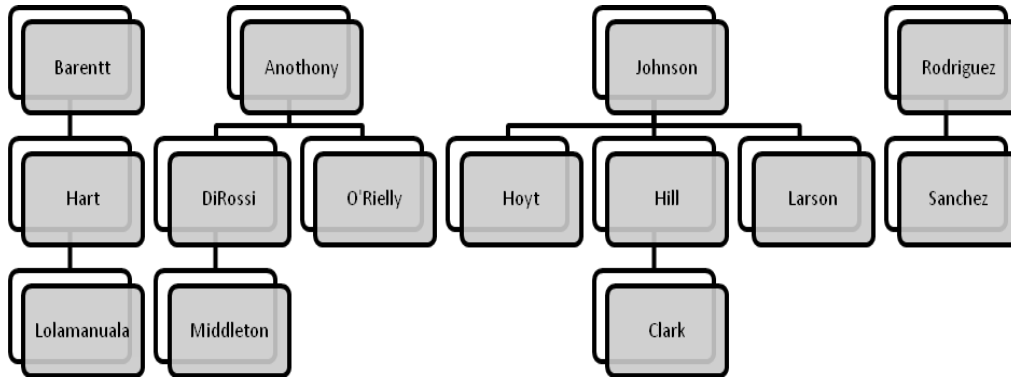


FIGURE 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CIRCUMSCRIBED AGENCY

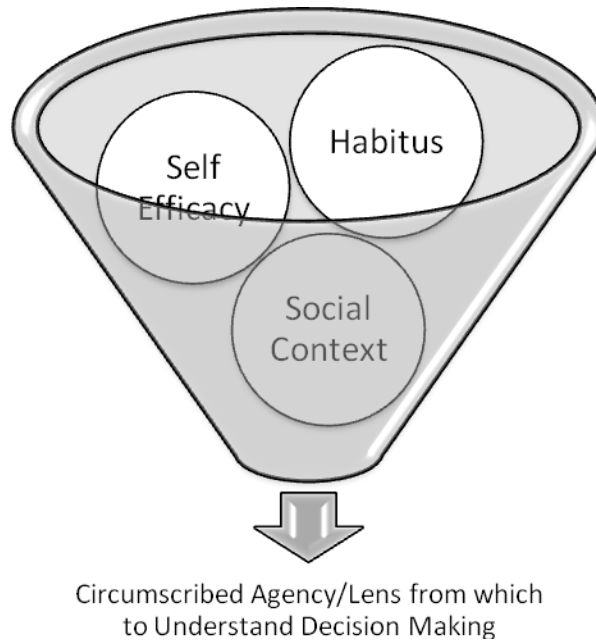


FIGURE 3.1: COMPONENTS GOING INTO DEGREE COMMITMENT AMONG CURRENT STUDENTS

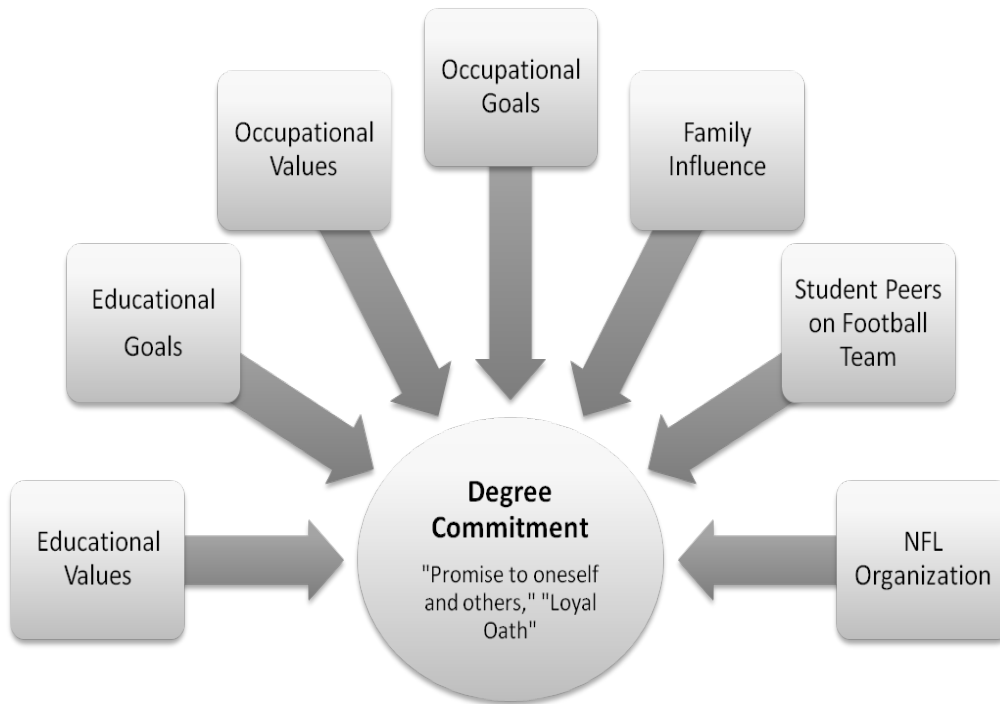


FIGURE 3.2: COMPONENTS GOING INTO DEGREE COMMITMENT AMONG FORMER STUDENTS

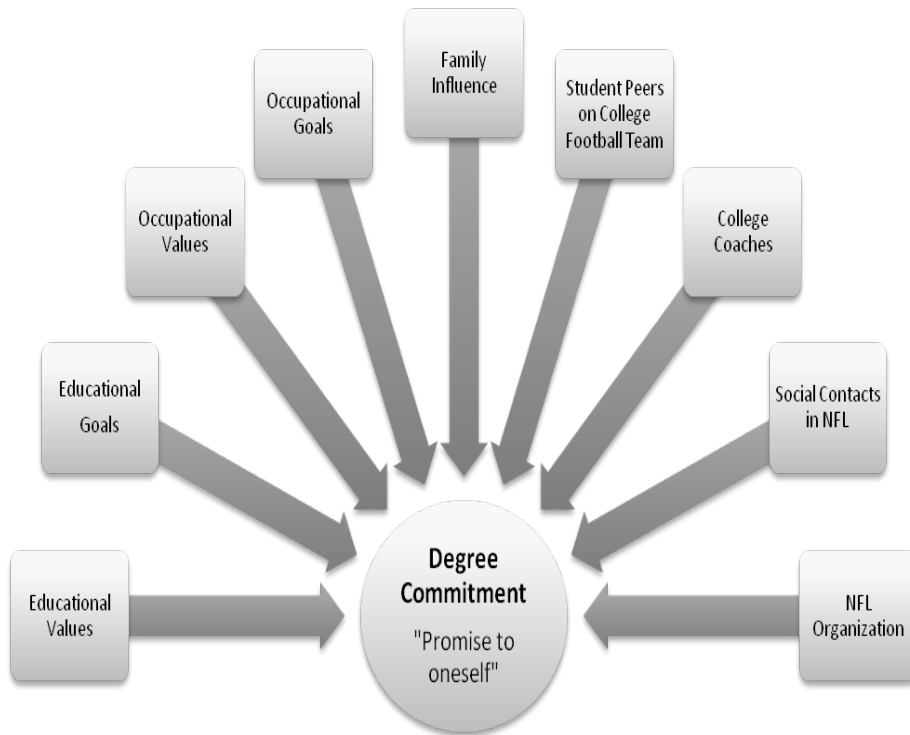


FIGURE 3.3: PROCESS AND CONTINGENCIES OF COMMITMENT AMONG PARTICIPANTS

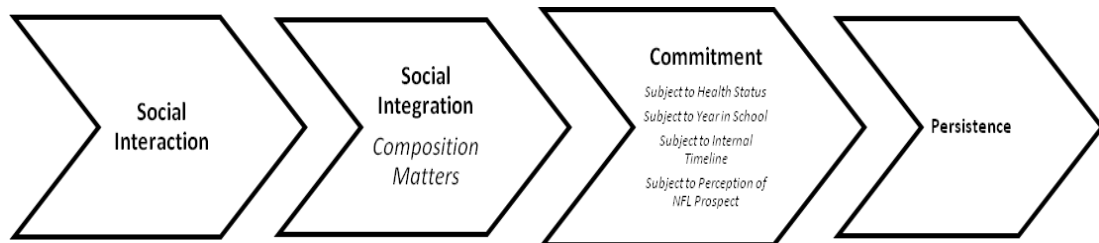


FIGURE 4.1: DECISION MAKING FACTORS: STOPPING OUT FOR THE NFL



FIGURE 4.2: DECISION MAKING FACTORS DEGREE COMPLETION PRIOR TO THE NFL

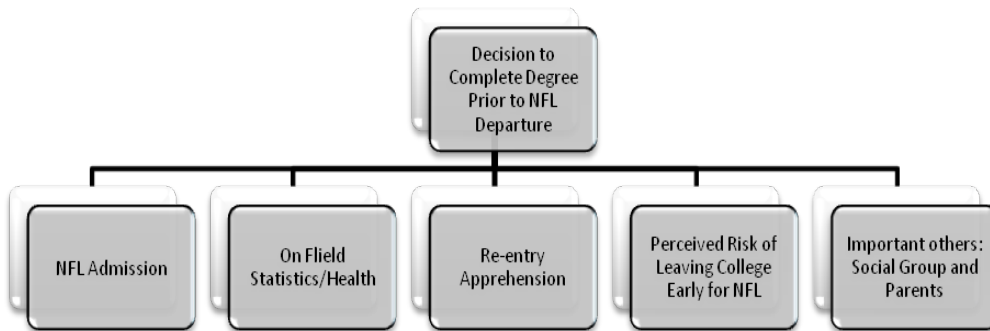
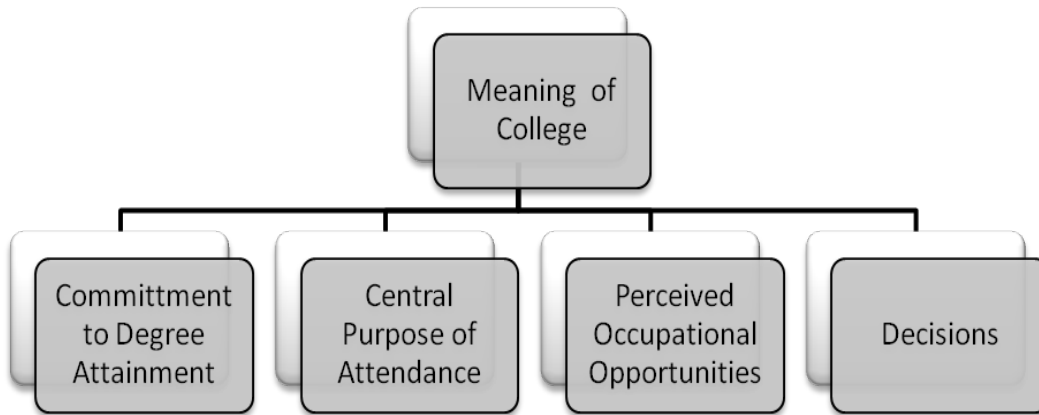


FIGURE 5: DERIVING THE MEANING OF COLLEGE FOR PARTICIPANTS



APPENDIX A: SURVEY EMAIL AND QUESTIONNAIRE

To be distributed to freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior student athletes in football by email via academic center advisor.

Title of email: Study on NFL hopes and college degrees

Body of the email will say:

Dear student athlete,

I am conducting a study on college football and the NFL. Specifically, I am examining how important finishing a college degree is for football student-athletes at Division IA programs given that the NFL does not provide you with an incentive to do so. I am also interested in understanding the influential people or role models in your life whom have motivated you to attend college and hearing about your post college job hopes.

If you are interested in participating in this study please complete the 5 question survey so I may follow up with you and schedule a personal interview so I can hear more of your story. You will be able to excuse yourself from the study at any point. You are not obligated to participate in this study by the university, athletic department, academic center, football program, the NFL or the NCAA. This would be on a volunteer basis. However, everything possible will be made to work around your busy schedule to set up one interview in January. To remain in compliance of NCAA regulations you will not receive any form of compensation for completing this survey and participating in interview. Your name, number, position or any other possible factors that may identify you will remain confidential. Your answers will remain private and anonymous throughout the study and the final published product.

By replying to this survey you are allowing the possibility of being contacted by your athletics academic advisor NAME for one follow up interview. Again, your name, university, and conference will be kept anonymous throughout this process and final write up.

Thank you for your interest.

Researcher,
Lupita Martinez
gmartin1@email.arizona
520-730-5003

Survey content

- 1) Is playing in the NFL a goal for you?
 - Yes, very important to me
 - Yes, kind of important to me
 - Yes, not sure if I can make it though, working on skills

- No, not at all interested in the NFL
- 2) Which race/ethnic category best describes you? *Check **all** that apply to you.*
- White
 - African American
 - Hispanic
 - Pacific Islander
 - Asian
- 3) Where on the depth chart were you during the 2010 season/roster?
- Starter
 - Second string
 - Third string
 - Not sure
- 4) What year are you in college academically?
- 1st year
 - 2nd year
 - 3rd year
 - 4th year
 - 5th year
- 5) Which apply to you? *Check **all** that apply*
- Offensive player
 - Defensive player
 - Special Teams player

- Please enter your Name for follow up

Last:	First:
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR CURRENT STUDENTS IN DIVISION
I FBS PROGRAMS

Ice breaking question to establish rapport, flow and topic-What role has athletics played throughout your life?

Pre-college experience

- 1) How did you know you were good enough to play football at a Division IA level?
Probe: What signals, conversations or activities were cluing you into your athletic abilities? Was there a certain game, play or position that turned your level of play around?
- 2) Let's talk about your family. Did anyone close to you go to college or was familiar with the college admissions process and recruitment process?
- 3) Who were the people, and this could include yourself, who played an important role in your decision to attend college and play here? What discussions did they have with you about this?
- 4) What were you looking for in "the right" college for you? In other words, what was most important to you about the university you wanted to study and play for?

College experience

- 5) Now that you are here is it what you expected and wanted?
Probe: course work, course work load, student services, and athletics separately. Are they satisfied with their experience?
- 6) Do you feel like you are part of the general university population community or feel more a part of your football family subculture? Can you give me an example of when you felt isolated or alone if ever?
- 7) Do you think college life is different for student athletes in football than compared to the other sports and general students? How, can you give me an example about the experience?
- 8) When you came to college what were some of your goals athletically or academically? Have you met them or are do you see yourself making progress on them?
Probe about who has helped with develop the goals of fulfill them?
- 9) Can you tell me what your major is and what you think you can do with that after college?

Commitment

- 10) On a scale of 1-5 how committed are you to finishing your degree? 5 being extremely committed and 1 being not at all.
- 11) On a scale of 1-5 how likely do you think you are of actually finishing? 5 being extremely likely and 1 being not likely.
- 12) Considering your future, can you describe how important (*or unimportant*) it is to you that you finish your degree? Why?
Probe: Verbal promises to family, to self, advisers, others.

- 13) How has this drive or motivation (*or lack thereof*) for finishing a degree changed since you first entered college if it has?
- 14) How important is earning a degree for your future job prospects?
- 15) Would you consider leaving college early without your degree to enter the draft or a try at free agency? Tell me about when and why you started making this consideration?
- 16) Have you meet with a career counselor yet and expressed this interest? If so, how did she/he advise you?
- 17) I understand there are restrictions on practice hours per week during the season and off-season, but in general do you think you personally, spend more time on practicing, in the weight room, thinking about, or talking about football or do you spend more time on classroom assignments, discussion, study group, tutoring, meeting professors in office hours, or academic advisers? Why do you feel like you have to or want to spend more time on this?
- 18) How important is it to your family that you finish your degree? Why is or isn't it? How do you know?
 Probe about conversations with parents, siblings, significant others. Do father and mother have opposing feelings about it? Do they remind you during the holiday breaks, off season, etc? Do you have children you need to support?
 Probe about others who may find it important or not to finish the degree, peers, professors, coaches.

NFL Aspirations

- 1) If the NFL does not require it, and you think you have a real chance getting in, why would you stay in college after your third year of play?
- 2) You've expressed an interest in going to the next level of play: why do you think this is a real possibility for you?
- 3) Does the topic of the NFL, who wants to go and who thinks they can go come up in the locker room? Do you give each other a hard time about it or help each other out with contacts, or training strategies?
- 4) What activities have you done or will be doing to improve your chances? (i.e. pro day, IMG pro training academies).
- 5) How does your family feel about this interest?
 Probe about significant others like academic advisors, professors, girlfriends, etc.
- 6) Do you have friends or contacts in the pro-circuit that you have had conversations about this choice? If so, what was your last discussion about with him?
- 7) Has there been a particular role model or mentor that stands out in your mind? Why does he/she stand out?
- 8) What is so appealing to you about being an NFL player?
- 9) If you don't make it to the NFL, do have an alternative plan? If so, what is it?
 Probe: who they discussed this plan with if at all?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to add about your college experience, chances at the pros, or finishing college?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FORMER STUDENTS IN DIVISION I FBS PROGRAMS

College Experience

- 1) When you went to college, (*for those re-enrolling: Before you re-enrolled*) was college what you expected and wanted?
- 2) How was college and the football program was presented to you during your recruitment?
Probe: course work, course work load, student services, and athletics separately. Were they satisfied with their experience? Media guides?
- 3) Did you feel like you were a part of the general university population community or feel more a part of your football family subculture? Can you give me an example of when you felt isolated or alone if ever? Can you give me an example of when you felt like you were part of the university community?
- 4) Do you think college life was different for student athletes in football than compared to the other sports and general students? How, can you give me an example about the experience?

Commitment

- 5) On a scale of 1-5 how committed were you to finishing your degree? 5 being extremely committed and 1 being not at all. *Give them time to explain if you feel an explanation is coming on.*
- 6) On a scale of 1-5 how likely do you think you are of actually finishing? 5 being extremely likely and 1 being not likely. *Give them time to explain if you feel an explanation is coming on.*
- 7) Can you describe how important (*or unimportant*) it was to you that you finish your degree? Why?
Probe: Verbal promises to family, to self, advisers, others.
- 8) Did the drive or motivation (*or lack thereof*) for finishing a degree changed since you first entered college if it has?
- 9) How important was earning a degree for your future job prospects?
- 10) How important was it to your family that you finish your degree? Why is or wasn't it? How do you know?
Probe about conversations with parents, siblings, significant others. Did father and mother have opposing feelings about it? Did they remind you during the holiday breaks, off season, etc? Did you have children that you needed to support while in college?

Post College

- 11) What is it that you do now for employment or have you returned to school?
Probe about process of re-enrolling, graduate school, finding a job.
- 12) Do you have any regrets about college (or your decision to leave early if they did)?

- 13) How did the NFL work out? How do you feel about it?
- 14) (Use as applicable to participant)*Would you consider re-enrolling in college? Why?
- 15) What is your current plan in terms of work (or returning to school; finishing school)? Probe about new educational goals if returning to school or job choices.
- 16) What advice would you give current student athletes as they build on their post college plans especially those wanting to leave early for the NFL?
- 17) Is there anything else you would like to add about your decision, your experience and what you may be thankful for or resentful of now? Is there anything you would have done differently or again?

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