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## Chasing "Plan A": Identity Development of First-Generation College Student-Athletes

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**CHASING “PLAN A”: IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF  
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT-ATHLETES**

by

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B.S. Texas State University, 2014  
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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2016

## **ABSTRACT**

Student-athletes competing at the university level face a unique set of stressors, pressures, and experiences. While all students will inevitably face difficulties transitioning from high school to post-secondary education, collegiate athletes bear the burden of balancing at least two demanding public roles, student and athlete, along with other interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, familial ties, and connections with teammates and coaches. The current study examines the identity development of college student-athletes and the challenges they face as they transition into and through their involvement in higher education and intercollegiate sports. This project in particular focuses on how the gendered experiences of student-athletes affects their identity development through the lens of Identity Control Theory. The data, drawn from in-depth interviews with 19 Division 1 first-generation student-athletes, explore how student-athletes balance their multiple roles, and thus negotiate their athletic performance, academic concerns, autonomy, and potential stereotypes. It is vital to determine the best practices for first-generation student-athlete success in order to promote positive socialization and encourage college completion through an understanding of what programs can better support student-athletes as students, athletes, and individuals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes competing at the university level face a unique set of stressors, pressures, and experiences. This elite population of students is not only expected to perform in the athletic arena, but also in the classroom. The NCAA (2014) reports that over 460,000 student-athletes compete in 23 registered sports in colleges and universities across the country, with participation rates steadily on the rise. While all students will inevitably face difficulties transitioning from high school to post-secondary education, collegiate athletes bear the burden of balancing at least two demanding public roles, student and athlete, along with other interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, familial ties, and connections with teammates and coaches.

Previous research on collegiate student-athletes has demonstrated that participation in athletics can have a significant impact on their academic and social experiences, bearing both positive and negative consequences. Intercollegiate student-athletes must arguably negotiate pressures to perform both academically and athletically at a higher level, which has been shown to incite greater psychological and social strain (Harrison et al. 2009). The student's athletic identity is more likely to become salient (or in other words become more relatively focal) if it is of central importance to the individual and representative of the role or behaviors they perform most consistently (Williams 2007). Thus from an identity theory perspective, which seeks to link the self to society, student-athletes' identity development and role-identity salience can be complicated by their competing identities of student and athlete (Yopyk and Prentice 2005). Student-athletes can also be heavily influenced by the external influence of their team, which ranges from their teammates to their coaches, athletic administrators, and NCAA representatives,

who all play integral roles in shaping their opinions and social identity (Ashforth and Mael 1985; Druckman et al. 2014).

However, research on student-athletes is seemingly extremely limited, particularly in comparison to the public attention focused on this population. The majority of studies on college-level student-athletes that relate to identity and academic performance have predominately explored stereotypes of athletes and expectations on them, while the available research on student-athletes in higher education is generally limited to quantitative, and often cross-sectional, studies. It is therefore important to understand how student-athletes perceive these pressures in order to better understand influences on their transition into college and their aspirations. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has yet to be a study focusing on first-generation student-athletes at the Division 1 level. The present research will expand upon the existing body of work by examining comparative data between first-generation athletes of two academic cohorts, incoming first years and rising third years, in order to examine negotiations of their college experience and their identity development.

The current study will seek to explore the identity development of college student-athletes and the challenges they face as they transition, due to their involvement in higher education and intercollegiate sports. The research aims to understand how student-athletes balance their multiple roles, and thus negotiate their athletic performance, academic concerns, autonomy, and potential stereotypes in relation to their role identities. Furthermore, the investigators seek to explore students' identity development as related to enabling their personal view of successful transitions through their college career in relation to family, peers, athletics, and academics. It is vital to determine the best practices for first-generation student-athlete

success in order to promote socialization and encourage college completion through an understanding of what programs can better support student-athletes as students, athletes, and individuals.

Identity Control Theory offers an ideal framework to analyze this complex population, as it examines how the person, role, and social identities of the individual stem from the social structure and how these identities interact. Existing studies have examined gender identities on the basis of Identity Control Theory within marriages (Stets and Burke 2005; Burke 2006) and the workplace (Stets 2005). However, it remains understudied how gender affects the three identities laid out in Identity Control Theory: the person identity, or self-concept; the role identity that connects to each of the individual's roles; and the social identity based in their community. The present study aims to fill this conceptual gap in the literature on ICT through the example of first-generation student-athletes. This population is ideal because they enact both formally and publically defined identity roles. Likewise, it has been established that they experience identity conflict as they constantly negotiate these roles, therefore their strategies for identity management will arguably be more visible than those of traditional students (Comeaux and Harrison 2011). Prior research has also established that there are differences between male and female student-athletes. Although the researcher began by looking for similarities across student-athletes, the differences across genders were far more pronounced; through analysis gender came to be understood as critical to identity development processes across the person, role, and social identities as they transition through college.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will begin by covering the theoretical foundations of the study, Identity Theory, followed by a more in-depth look at Identity Control Theory, which is used as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The remainder of the section will connect the theoretical framework to relevant literature on student-athletes; as literature on this population is limited, the review will draw from the sociology of sport and sport management to ascertain the needs and challenges of collegiate athletes. Finally, literature from the sociology of education will be drawn from in order to establish the characteristics and conditions of first-generation college students in the United States.

### *Identity Theory*

Social identity theory is based in the symbolic interactionist line of research. Works regarding social identity characteristically take either an interactionist (Ashforth and Mael 1989) or a structural symbolic interactionist approach (Hoelter 1983). The present research falls under the tradition of structural symbolic interactionism; while SSI is typically quantitative, this study will contribute to the existing body of research using a qualitative perspective within the tradition of identity theory. Gender, class, ethnicity are just a few notable examples of structures that have been shown to influence social actors' behavior and thus their identity and roles; these structures affect the social experience and the social actor's way of thinking. Identity theory also contends that one's identity is contingent upon affiliation and identification with a social group, which can in turn offer self-esteem, distinctiveness, and legitimacy (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Two of the leading researchers in identity theory, Stryker and Burke, have devoted a large body of work to examining both internal processes of self-verification and external factors, such as the link between social structure and identities. The current work will draw from Stryker and Burke's

definition of identity as a “reference to parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker and Burke 2000: 284). At its core, identity theory sought to explore why people chose one course of action over another when faced with multiple sets of role expectations attached to various positions (Stryker 1968; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000). Identity theory holds to “the vision of persons possessing as many selves as groups of persons with which they interact” (Stryker and Burke 2000: 286); in other words, the individual enacts a self for every group or social network they are involved in.

Furthermore, social actors rank their identities by salience. Identity salience can be defined as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (Stryker and Burke 2000: 86). Thus, social actors are more likely to make behavioral choices that match and uphold their most salient identity. The salience is evidenced by the individual’s devotion to that particular identity’s role relationships and is reinforced by the number of people who are holding the individual responsible to that identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). However, prior commitments can be amended by new social relationships, thus altering the salience of existing identities. In his work on college students, Stryker and Serpe (1987) found that incoming students choose to join organizations that match the identity that was most salient to them before they entered the university, as they already understand the roles and behaviors attached to that identity and have others holding them to that identity. For example, it is likely that student-athletes transitioning from high school to the university form their first meaningful relationships at the university with teammates, who share a common salient identity.

Alternatively, another strain of identity theorists linked role expectations to internal forces. In his work with Reitzes, Burke (1981) posited the notion that identity and behavior share a dynamic relationship based mutual meanings. From this approach, behavior is oriented toward the situation and the actor's goals in order to match the standard (or in other words, expectations common to the cultural framework). In the case of collegiate student-athletes, these students have an array of goals they are expected to fulfill, including meeting the minimum GPA requirement in order to compete, earning a starting position on their team, and winning athletic titles. Burke's model would suggest that student-athletes' behavior and expression of their identity is more highly contingent upon their personal goals and self-meanings than those imposed by external sources, such as teammates or coaches. This research will draw on both Burke and Styrker's complimentary schools of thought to explore how extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors affect identity development across sport affiliation.

### *Identity Control Theory*

Another branch, Identity Control Theory (or ICT), builds on the foundation of Identity Theory with a particular focus on the relationship between identities. ICT suggests that each of an individual's multiple selves correspond to a role-identity and that each "self" has its own meaning; in turn, meaning facilitates the connection between behaviors and identities (Burke 2004). From the ICT perspective, meaning has been defined in terms of symbols and signs that provoke denotative and connotative responses; connotative responses are typically considered to be affective or associative actions, while denotative responses are those that are more overt reactions to stimuli (Burke 2006). Burke (2004) conceptualized personal identity processes as a cybernetic control system in which perceived meanings are regulated in order to be verified through communication with others. Burke's cybernetic control system is comprised of four

main elements: the identity standard, input, comparator, and output (Turner 2012). Each identity invokes a set of standards and people regulate themselves in order to match perceptions with this identity standard (Stets and Tsushima 2001; Burke 2006); thus, from this perspective, behavior is goal-oriented. Inputs refer to the perceptions and opinions of others, while interaction with the comparator is used to determine if the responses of both sets of actors are in agreement and ultimately results in the production of a set of outputs (Burke 1991; Turner 2012). ICT connects micro and macro social processes by relating actions, or outputs, of identities that affect micro symbols to macro social structures, namely age, gender, race, and class, which can guide individual identities (Burke 2004). This theoretical perspective also treats the self as an active, autonomous agent that vacillates between these micro symbols and macro structural processes of the self (Burke 2004). Together Burke and Stets (2009) classified three types of identities: a person identity, which is defined as the individual's self-concept; a role identity that depends on a specific role in a given situation; and a social identity that is tied to group involvement (Turner 2012). These identities all interact with one another and are not mutually exclusive in any given social interaction. Therefore, more than one identity can be salient to the individual. This research applies Burke's perspectives of the three identities but will also refer to the complimentary thoughts of Stryker to help make sense of differences across sports and use them to understand the transitional experiences of first-generation student-athletes.

### *Exploring the First-Generation Student-Athlete Experience*

The following literature has been incorporated to help connect the theoretical framework of Identity Control Theory with the population of first-generation student-athletes, who present an ideal population due to their susceptibility to identity conflict. At the time of writing, there is a noticeable lack of studies on first-generation student-athletes. Thus, the present study draws

literature from two distinct areas in relation to student-athlete specific research: research on sport taken from both sport management and the sociology of sport (due to the field's limited nature); and the sociology of education. Prior research has not explicitly analyzed these two in conjunction with one another. However, bringing together research that as of yet has remained sequestered will assist in identifying the unique stressors, challenges, and needs of first-generation student-athletes. Furthermore, it serves the purposes of identifying the differences between the stress factors and experiences of first-generation non-athletes and first-generation student-athletes and how these differ between genders.

Research within the sociology of sport has been extremely restricted in regards to student-athletes. While there are a few notable sociologists who have taken up this research area, including D. Stanley Eitzen, Ben Carrington, and Doug Hartmann, much of the prominent research has been contributed by scholars from the field of sport management, such as Eddie Comeaux (2011), C. Keith Harrison (2002; 2009), and Brandon Martin (2007; 2010).

Researchers have generally favored quantitative methods over qualitative research. Additionally, previous scholarship has been primarily concerned with issues of gender, race, and class from a primarily structural position as opposed to a qualitative gender identity theory perspective (Hartmann 2012; Carrington 2010; Comeaux and Harrison 2011; Stone, Harrison, and Mottley 2012). There is also a distinct lack of studies that focus solely on first-generation student-athletes, who face a unique set of challenges that could differ from those of teammates whose parents completed college. Additionally, a large portion of the existing scholarship is generally concerned with stereotype threat (Stone 2012; Hively and El-Alayli 2014; Dee 2014).

Nonetheless, there are a select number of researchers that have attempted to examine the identity formation and development of student-athletes. The following review of the literature also takes

a closer look at studies examining the divergent gendered experiences of student-athletes at the college level.

### *Identity Formation, Management, and Conflict of Student-Athletes*

Like Stryker and Burke, scholars investigating the social dynamics of student-athletes have also drawn on the works of Mead, Blumer, and other seminal interactionist texts. Identity theory examines the individual's coherence with a given group, or in the case of athletes, with their team. According to Ashforth and Mael (1985), the individual's social identity can be derived from their organization, occupation, cohort, or other group. In this manner, the student's additional role as an athlete factors in to their social identification. Furthermore, social identification with the group incites student-athletes to personally experience the successes and losses of their team, eliciting personal suffering and feelings of failure (Ashforth and Mael 1989: 21). On the other hand, identification increases with the group's prestige and directly correlates to self-esteem (Ashforth and Mael 1989). In addition, collegiate competitors are faced with the added stress of balancing multiple demanding roles: student and athlete (among others). Time constraints imposed by these competing identities is understandably a chief concern for student-athletes, who must bear a similar course workload to traditional students, on top of team practices, weight training, conditioning, and traveling throughout the academic year for games. Recent studies by Settles (2002), Lewis (2010), and Comeaux and Harrison (2011) have cited interference between the demands associated with the student and athlete roles to be a source of distress for elite collegiate student-athletes.

The identity formation of student-athletes is also affected by social context. Previous scholars have invoked the "spiral of silence" theory, which asserts that individuals who

experience social pressure will assume the opinions of those they seek approval from (Druckman, Gilli, Klar, and Robison 2014). Student-athletes are heavily influenced by their “team,” which ranges from their teammates to their coaches, athletic administrators, and the NCAA, who all play integral roles in their athletic success and future careers (Druckman et al. 2014: 2). Druckman et al. (2014) believe that these forces influence the opinions of their athletes and consequently become their primary frame of reference once they transition to college. Finally, the opinions of classmates and viewers also influence the identities of athletes. A large portion of the recent literature on this population has been devoted to studying stereotype threat. Collegiate athletes are often negatively stereotyped by traditional students and faculty as being less intelligent – in other words a “dumb jock” – and therefore unworthy of their perceived privileges; this negativity puts added pressure on the athlete’s performance, in turn provoking greater psychological and social strain (Harrison 2002; Harrison et al. 2009).

Prior research suggest that athletes are prone to accept the socially constructed label that arises from the perceptions of their peers. However, the literature shows that male and female student-athletes face contradictory stressors, stereotypes, and pressures in their experiences within competitive sports (Dworkin and Messner 2002; Miller et. al. 2005; Messner and Solomon 2007; Hively and El-Alayli 2014). Prior research on psychological priming has demonstrated that male and female athletes undergo contrasting motivational processes regarding the linkage between their academic and athletic identities, as the athletic identity prime served as a source of self-affirmation for males, while females responded negatively when primed as a “scholar-athlete,” which would suggest that they are inhibited by the threat of their stigmatized athletic identity (Harrison et al. 2009). Similar work by Hively and El-Alayli (2014) also reported that female college student-athletes performed worse than men in athletic tasks when

induced with stereotype threat based on gender difference. The findings from these studies would suggest that female student-athletes are more prone to accept the attitudes and perceptions of others in regards to their academic and athletic abilities, which in turn decreases their productivity and performance in both arenas.

In addition to their dual role as a student and an athlete, women in intercollegiate athletics must also negotiate their feminine identities as they navigate a traditionally masculine environment (Dworkin and Messner 2002). Female athletes face barriers to entry from the start, as they are deterred from sports that defy traditional norms of femininity (Harrison and Secarea 2010). For instance, women in competitive sports display a muscularity, aggression, and physical power, all of which are features that stand in stark contrast to the historical conventions of the passive, demure ideal woman. The negotiation of femininity does vary in its forms and extent across women's sports; for example, the large bows commonly worn by softball players stand in stark contrast to the unadorned uniforms of female basketball players (Ezzell 2009). Researchers have posited that participation in sports could be perceived by other members of society as tomboyism, or in more extreme cases, homosexuality, hence the idea that female athletes are "lesbians" (Knight and Giuliano 2003). As a result, female athletes often feel the need to emphasize their femininity (Harrison and Secarea 2010). Females in this public role experience a constant pressure to be conscious of their body image. Steinfeldt and associates (2012) recently reported that female student-athletes are proud of their athletic physique on the court, yet conflicting societal expectations to be petite and conventionally attractive was harmful to their overall self-esteem.

However, while recent studies have found that women participation in intercollegiate athletics can influence low self-esteem in female athletes, others have contradicted this notion. These findings are at odds with earlier work that indicates that female student-athletes report higher levels of conformity to traditional masculine norms and that their athletic participation is not significantly related to body esteem (Steinfeldt et al. 2011). On another level, revealing uniforms common to a number of women's sports, such as volleyball and tennis, can cause participants to feel sexually objectified. Content analyses have shown that both print and digital media representations of female athletes are typically much more sexualized than those of their male counterparts and designed to please a predominately male viewership (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993; Billings et al. 2002). Thus, it can be inferred that additional work on gender is needed due to these conflicting findings in past research. Currently, there are no known studies on first-generation student-athletes at the Division 1 level, representing a specific gap in student-athlete research. Therefore, it is necessary to review research on traditional first-generation students in order to examine their characteristics and the conditions affecting them in order to better understand the target population of the present study.

### *The First-Generation College Student Experience*

First-generation students are those whose parents did not complete a four-year degree, although one or more of their parents may have completed some college (Unverferth et al. 2012). Estimates on the enrollment rates of first-generation students range anywhere from 24% to nearly 50% of the total amount of students currently enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States (Unverferth et al. 2012). Previous research has indicated that first-generation students are typically racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants, low income, part-time students with children who are often above the age of 22, live off campus, and work more hours

(Chen 2005; Unverferth et al. 2012; Winograd and Rust 2014). First-generation students are also believed to be less prepared for college on multiple levels: on average their academic scores are lower, their financial resources are limited, and they are not equipped with the knowledge of what to expect once they enter the university (Unverferth et al. 2012). Thus, their need to acquire the financial means to support themselves prevent them from exploring extracurricular activities and engaging in the campus community. Research has shown that first-generation college students feel socially and emotionally marginalized at their postsecondary learning institutions (Francis and Miller 2008; Housel and Harvey 2011). This unique set of challenges can prove to be a hindrance towards degree attainment. First-generation students have lower retention rates, take longer to complete their degree plan, and are less likely to attain a Bachelor's degree at all (Chen 2005; McMurray and Sorrells 2009; Olson 2014). Consequently, many scholars and universities alike have classed first-generation college students as an "at risk" population on campus (Martinez et al. 2009; Aspelmeier et al. 2012)

Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, and Bogard (2012) relay that first-generation students express receiving less support from their parents financially, academically, and emotionally, although their parents are most commonly the main motivational factor behind their decision to attend college. These findings are consistent with other studies that have identified family influence as a primary predictor of first-generation students' pursuit of postsecondary education (Blackwell and Pinder 2014; Olson 2014; Tate et al. 2015). While some scholars argue that first-generation students are the living embodiment of the American dream of upward social mobility (Gofen 2009), others view the classification as an impediment. Wildhagen (2015) goes so far as to assert that the social construction of the first-generation category in fact hinders the students'

success at the micro level and is perpetuated to serve the macro interests of the educational institution.

Education scholars have advocated the implementation of outreach, mentoring, and enrichment programs designed to target the specific needs of first-generation students (McMurray and Sorrells 2009; Unverferth et al. 2012; Winograd and Rust 2014). These appear to be very similar to those services and programs offered to student-athletes as a part of their association with their university's athletic department, including advising, frequent tutoring sessions, academic planning, and career development. Personal knowledge of the academic services program gained through the research process here also revealed that these resources are highly encouraged and in some cases required to be utilized by student-athletes. However, many students in need of assistance do not seek help either because they are unaware of the existing services that may be available to them or due to what Winograd and Rust (2014) deem the "self-stigma for academic help-seeking" in which at risk students fear negative external and internal judgements. Therefore, while first-generation student-athletes are afforded a host of resources, traditional first-generation students who do not participate in sports lack these academic resources and the sense of community ingrained in the team atmosphere. These trends beg the question: is being a first-generation student-athlete even more stressful or is participation in athletics a protective factor for first-generation students? The current research will delve into this unanswered question and lend insight into how participation in intercollegiate athletics affects academic and social experiences from the perspective of Identity Control Theory. The discussion will also go into more areas of potentially applicable and additional research questions spawned by this pilot study.

### *Place in the Current Literature*

In contrast to the undersized existing body of work, this study will apply Identity Control Theory in order to examine how students construct self- and public identities, including how they negotiate their public identities differently according to social context. Crucial to identity theory and role salience is an understanding of how student-athletes balance their multiple social roles and perceived responsibilities to these varying roles. The present research aims to use ICT to gain further insight towards the unique social, athletic, and academic pressures and opportunities first-generation college student-athletes encounter in order to better understand how their identity develops under these complex circumstances. Existing studies have examined gender identities on the basis of ICT within the workplace (Stets 2005) and on aggression in marriages (Stets and Burke 2005; Burke 2006). However, these have focused primarily on identity verification (Stets and Burke 2005) and self-regulation of emotions (Stets and Tsushima 2001). Thus, it remains understudied how gender affects the three identities laid out in Identity Control Theory: the person, role, and social identities. The present study aims to fill this conceptual gap in the literature on ICT through the example of first-generation student-athletes. This population is ideal because they enact both formally and publically defined identity roles. Likewise, it has been established that they experience identity conflict as they constantly negotiate these roles, therefore their strategies for identity management will arguably be more visible than those of traditional students and more salient to them.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to help address the gaps in the literature on the identities of first-generation college student-athletes, this research utilizes semi-structured interviews with first-generation student-athletes in their first and third years of college to offer comparative data across sport, age, and gender and explore any overlaps in their experiences. Interviews were conducted across the Summer and Fall 2015 semesters, while data was analyzed in the Spring 2016 semester. The following details the research questions, sample demographics, data collection strategies, and analysis.

### *Research Questions*

The present research was guided by the following research questions:

- How do student-athletes manage their “student” and “athlete” identities as they transition through college?
- What influences student-athletes’ goals through their collegiate transitions?
- What are forms of role management by first-generation student-athletes? Which of these forms of identity management are most helpful or detrimental to a successful transition (based on the individual’s personal definition of success) into college by first-generation student-athletes?

### *Participants*

A total of 19 first-generation student-athletes were interviewed from July 2015 to September 2015. The sample is comprised of 12 incoming first year student-athletes who had matriculated in Summer 2015 and 7 third year student-athletes. The sample was recruited from a large, suburban southeastern university through a joint effort with the university’s academic

services for student-athletes. Participants meeting the criteria were recruited by their advisers (who are assigned to one or more specific sports, depending on size of the team) and interviewed one-on-one on a voluntary basis following adviser meetings or at the completion of study hall sessions arranged by ASSA with one of two researchers; interviews were completed predominantly by the author here, although three were held by an advising researcher. The researcher explained to recruits that they were contacted because they identified as a first-generation student on their ASSA entry survey (meaning their parents did not obtain a four-year degree), were either in their first or third academic year, and were at or over the age of 18. Likewise, they were each told that they were able to opt out of the study at any time should they not wish to participate. At the time of the interview, the researchers collected demographic information and preferred contact information for each participant; this identifying information was kept separate from other information and transferred into a password protected document. Table 1 (below) reflects the assigned pseudonym, sport affiliation, gender, age, year in school, ethnicity, and income level for each respondent.

Table 1 - Demographic Characteristics

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Sport</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Year in School</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Class (Income)</b> |
|------------------|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Adam             | M Basketball | Male          | 18         | First Year            | African American | Average               |
| Angelica         | W Soccer     | Female        | 19         | First Year            | Hispanic         | Below Average         |
| Danielle         | Softball     | Female        | 18         | First Year            | White            | Average               |
| Derek            | Football     | Male          | 18         | First Year            | African American | Average               |
| Eric             | M Basketball | Male          | 18         | First Year            | African American | Above Average         |
| Jessica          | Softball     | Female        | 18         | First Year            | White            | Average               |
| Justin           | Football     | Male          | 18         | First Year            | Biracial         | Average               |
| Kevin            | Football     | Male          | 19         | First Year            | White            | Average               |
| Kyle             | Football     | Male          | 19         | First Year            | White            | Above Average         |

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Sport</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Year in School</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Class (Income)</b> |
|------------------|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Maria            | Volleyball   | Female        | 18         | First Year            | Hispanic         | Below-Average         |
| Raul             | M Soccer     | Male          | 18         | First Year            | White            | Average               |
| Sandra           | W Basketball | Female        | 18         | First Year            | Other            | Average               |
| Desiree          | W Basketball | Female        | 20         | Third Year            | African American | Below Average         |
| Adrian           | Football     | Male          | 20         | Third Year            | African American | Average               |
| Amber            | W Basketball | Female        | 21         | Third Year            | Hispanic         | Average               |
| Brittany         | W Tennis     | Female        | 20         | Third Year            | White            | Above Average         |
| David            | Baseball     | Male          | 20         | Third Year            | White            | Average               |
| Jacob            | Baseball     | Male          | 19         | Third Year            | White            | Above Average         |
| Phillip          | Baseball     | Male          | 20         | Third Year            | Hispanic/White   | Average               |

### *Data Collection*

IRB permission was gained prior to the start of the study and consent forms were distributed to all participants (see attached for Approved Consent Form). Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were held by one of two female researchers at a secure location on the university campus. This allowed the interviewer to ask all questions from the interview guide, but in the order most fitting to the interviewees' responses. Interview questions were based on the study's primary objectives, including participants' stated aspirations; perceived challenges and support in their transition into college; interactions with family, peers, academics, and sports; and how they are managing these relationships and responsibilities through this transition. Questions were adjusted throughout the interview period as needed to probe on relevant topics in order to meet conceptual gaps in that data. Interviews were slated for thirty minutes, but the majority were closer to forty-five minutes, with some reaching over an hour. Each interview was

audio recorded, with the respondent's permission, and saved to a password-protected computer accessible only by the co-investigators.

### *Data Analysis*

Transcriptions were performed in a rolling manner, as interviews were completed. To maintain confidentiality of the data and protect participants, all names and identifiable information were replaced by pseudonyms. Preliminary analytic memos were taken between interviews to devise potential themes and diagram concepts; thus the research process simultaneously engaged data collection and analysis as interviews were conducted over time in a process of constant comparison. These were used to notate emergent themes, compare and contrast between cases, brainstorm additional questions for consideration, and otherwise point out any conceptual gaps. These notes were combined with codes taken from the interview data to raise categories to concepts. Although manual line-by-line coding was considered, the data lent itself better to coding for patterns or incidents, as responses tended to follow a narrative format; therefore, initial interviews were coded in chunks. Hence, "chunking" allowed for derivation of themes within the context of each individual interview. Emergent themes from the initial interview data were revisited in secondary, focused coding in a search for the repetitive codes to be raised to categories. Furthermore, the researcher remained close to the data in order to allow key concepts to arise organically. The researcher then moved on to axial coding to identify primary concepts that informed the findings. Constant comparison was utilized in the analysis across interviews and the aforementioned literature to elevate data from categories to empirical and theoretical contributions. Primary findings originated from this process of constant comparison and organized used Peter Burke's division of identities.

## **FINDINGS**

These findings provide insight into the construction of student-athlete identities through their transitions in and through college. The comparative data between college first years and third years demonstrate that identity is crucial to the athletes' development as they evolve from high-school athletes to elite competitors at the college level. The analysis was developed from Stryker and Burke's (2000) line of work that treats identity as the parts of the self that are attached to the multiple roles played by the student-athlete. The analysis investigates how the three types of identities – the person, role, and social identities – are at play with one another and independently. Burke's division of identities into these three types drives the organization of the analysis. Yet, Stryker's external emphasis is complimentary to understanding differences across sports. Identity Control Theory was also employed to understand the goal construction of first-generation student-athletes, which in turn highly affected their transition process through college. The analysis adopts the perspective that identity and behavior are goal-oriented, thus the researcher examined what the students' goals were, and used that to define their identity construction processes. To begin, goals were defined by the students and then studied closer in an attempt to discern what influenced the goal creation and the obstacles in achieving those goals. The researcher began by looking for similarities across participants and if differences were found, looked to determine what helped to explain these differences. Gender in particular was shown to have a structural influence on how student-athletes manage their person, role, and social identities as they transition through college.

The comparative data between first year students and third year students revealed that the goals set by the individual athletes affected their actions as they transitioned throughout their college careers and in turn reflected their person, role, and social identities. The researcher puts

forth that the main goal is success in sports. The paths they use to achieve this goal are: communication, the use of their bodies as a machine, and the aim of playing professionally to mark the pinnacle of success. Thus, their identities are heavily affected by their performance in the athletic arena. On the contrary, women do not relate their goals for success in athletics in the same way, but rather prioritize goals that relate to social support and financial stability. Female first-generation student-athletes set a goal of using their participation in intercollegiate athletics to achieve a degree with the ultimate aim of attaining a career that will meet their financial needs. However, while their sport can function as a venue for social support in the form of their team, concerns surrounding body image, representation, and career goals present obstacles that differ from those of their male counterparts. Yet, the data show that parents are integral in the goal construction and identity management across all athletes.

As a whole, first-generation college student-athletes are primarily concerned with: (1) finding a place within their newfound community; (2) defining their career goals in preparation for life after college; and (3) negotiating their dual student and athlete identities, which are often at odds with one another. We can understand these themes according to the three types of identities defined by ICT. First, in relation to social identity, communication between teammates, or their community, proved to be the most important aspect of constructing social identity as students transitioned into college. Second, student-athletes also had two distinct role identities, that of the student and that of the athlete; teammates, coaches, and parents all held students accountable for the responsibilities associated with their roles and influenced their career aspirations as they prepared to transition out of higher education one day. Third, the person identity was hampered by the conflicting identity roles of “student” and “athlete,” which were

difficult to separate. However, the lived experiences of male and female student-athletes differ significantly, which reveals that the aforementioned processes are all extremely gendered.

### *Social Identity - Creating Community*

Communication with teammates was the primary finding related to social identity. However, there were gender differences. This process provides an excellent illustration of ICT's cybernetic control system at work: as first year students matriculate, one of the first things they do is to identify the identity standard set by the team; the perceptions of their team members serve as the input, while their interaction compares the meanings of the two to determine how they differ; this results in the output, or the behavior common to this unique community.

*Communication.* While prior research has argued that finding a place within the university community is a major obstacle for traditional first-generation students (Francis and Miller 2008; Housel and Harvey 2011), the student-athlete lifestyle structured by the Athletic Department fosters a team atmosphere in all aspects of life. Student-athletes eat, sleep, practice, and study together; as a result, team members spend virtually all of their time with each other. The first-generation college athletes sampled in this study appreciated this team-oriented standard of living and articulated that it made the transition from high school to college much easier for them. Yet, the transitional experiences of the young men and women interviewed here diverged across gender lines. Males tended to focus on: evolving into independent individuals and thereby becoming “men” as they say (both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others); fitting in with the team and interacting with other people of different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds; and meeting athletic demands as they adjusted to playing at a higher level. Communicating with team members proved to be a key concern across ages, especially for

particular sports such as football and baseball. For example, Kevin, a junior on the football team, was apprehensive about the “unknown” when he first transitioned to the university, including adapting to new personalities on the team:

Transitioning from high school where you knew everybody and everything was common, then you come into the unknown. You don't really know anybody on the team or the coaches... You're kind of anxious because you don't know what to expect.

Kevin's teammate, Adrian (who was recruited from out-of-state), described his initial concerns upon entering college in the following way:

Would I be able to interact with other people, being an out-of-state student?

Would I be comfortable being so far from home? In football we have to communicate. We see each other more than half of the day, so we have to talk to one another.

Nevertheless, the upper class students indicated that they were able to build relationships with their teammates rapidly; each of the athletes interviewed, regardless of sport, also stated that the majority of their friends were either teammates or other student-athletes. For instance, Raul confirmed “most of my friends are on the team,” while Amber stated, “I have friends from my classes, but most are athletes, yeah.” This trend could be explained by Stryker and Serpe's (1987) assertion that transitioning students are naturally drawn to those who share common salient identities.

*Bonds.* Interestingly, this level of cohesion within the team appeared to differ between sports. Some, such as soccer and tennis, can be understood by the internal focus, in which expression of identity is more contingent upon personal goals and meanings. Others were more concerned with external influences, namely coaches and teammates; baseball and football proved to uphold Stryker's external model. All of the members of both the baseball team and the football team that were interviewed (eight in total) cited the closeness they developed with their team. Kevin went on to assert that he relied on his teammates, stating, "Your teammates get you through things because you know they're going through the same experiences and you can talk to them about it." Likewise, when asked about his teammates, Justin went so far as to say "I love those guys." Curiously, this bond of brotherhood was less evident among other team sports, such as basketball and soccer; members of these teams did not have organic discussions of bonds, despite spending roughly the same amount of time with their teammates.

*Family.* On the other hand, the primary points of interest for women were often individual goals, such as degree attainment and maintaining a high GPA throughout their academic career. Female student-athletes also sought out a family in their team, and for many participants like Angelica (first year, women's soccer), the "family-oriented team" was a chief motivating factor in their decision to attend the university when faced with other offers. However, the comparative data between the first year and third year students showed that all of the aforementioned concerns appeared to decrease in importance as the students aged and became comfortable in their surroundings; this transitional process was often quick, as third year students like Adrian, Kevin, and David expressed that they felt right at home within a matter of weeks.

### *Role Identity - Defining Career Goals, or “Plan B”*

ICT defines a role identity that depends on a specific role in a given situation (Burke and Stets 2009). Thus, in the case of student-athletes, they have both a “student” and an “athlete” role identity. The greater part of the first-generation student-athletes in this study identified their sport as their “job” while in college. Thus, their role identity as an athlete rested heavily upon their performance in this arena. Coaches and teammates surrounding the student-athletes ensured that they were a multitude of people holding them accountable for this public, high-pressure role. Sport also became an important status in long-term goal construction and consequently affected transitions through college. However, the students’ parents were integrated into their role management by reminding them of their student role and keeping that facet of their identity salient, as well.

*Goal Construction.* Gender proved to be imperative as first-generation student-athletes defined their career goals and post-college transitions because it influenced their commitment to sports. Overall, men’s stories of their transitions into and through college constructed a commitment to being an athlete, whereas women’s narratives suggested they treated their transitions through college as an ongoing role change into a college athlete as only one step in the transition into a new role identity outside of “athlete,” as they did not perceive equal opportunities in maintaining the athlete role after college. In this way, men’s transitions revolved around the maintenance and planned perpetuation of an athlete role identity while women’s transitions can be understood as ongoing preparation for role changes. Thus, the two groups described either an inclination towards “Plan A” (continuing their sport professionally) or “Plan B” for job insurance once their playing careers came to an end. The distinction between “Plan A” and “Plan B” across genders has been researched previously, most notably by Kathleen Gerson

in her work on families and the workplace; this population was also comprised of young adults speaking about their parents, career aspirations, and plans for marriage. In “Falling Back on Plan B: The Children of the Gender Revolution Face Uncharted Territory,” Gerson (2010) explains that both men and women craft a “Plan B” if they find that “Plan A” appears unrealistic.

However, responses from young adults in this study show that female student-athletes are more inclined to resign themselves to this alternative than males, who cling to dreams of going pro.

The young women in the sample expressed the gender barriers that are tied to being a female student-athlete. As a group, this half of the sample perceived fewer opportunities than their male counterparts in both the intercollegiate and professional sporting worlds. While the majority of the male participants stated they had aspirations to play their sport at the professional level, the young women were far less inclined to follow this path, and consequently chose to pursue other careers within the realm of sports (namely physical therapy or sports broadcasting) because they saw these as their only viable options. Therefore, arguably such perceptions of limited professional opportunities in turn affected their transitions through college because it decreased the salience of the athlete role identity and increased their academic role identities; this can be seen in their emphasis of academics as a required path to develop a perceived future professional identity.

*Plan A.* The female student-athletes all had plans for careers after college, or a “Plan B” as it was often called. Alternatively, the majority of males expressed desires to play their sport professionally. This was especially pronounced among baseball players, as Phillip, David, and Jacob (all juniors) named going pro as their primary aspiration, or “Plan A.” Phillip in particular was eager to get drafted in his junior year, which would in turn prompt an expedited transition

out of college and the denial of college completion. Phillip prioritized getting drafted over degree attainment and only had eyes for “Plan A”:

I just want to do really well in baseball. I’m trying to get drafted this year. So if I do get drafted, that will be me viewing myself as being successful in college.

Right now I just want to focus more on baseball.

Jacob, another junior baseball player, confirmed his desire to get drafted and that his goal was to “pitch well enough to go in the draft and not have to come back for my senior year.” Other athletes who were in pursuit of “Plan A” were football players like Adrian and Justin in addition to soccer player Raul. In these ways, the perceived opportunities to be drafted and play professionally affected their transitions through college, as their athletic role identity took precedence. In particular, for student-athletes who expect or minimally construct a goal of getting drafted while in college, athletic identities increase in salience, both in the process of developing their professional goals and, in part, due to the fact that they may lack the college graduate label in the future.

However, there were exceptions to the majority. Football player Kevin articulated that although he dreamed of playing in the NFL since childhood, he knew he needed a backup plan due to the limited longevity of a football career:

I definitely want to get a degree because I know athletics don't last a lifetime.

You've gotta have something to fall back on once you're done playing football.

But as far as what I want to do for a living, I want to play in the NFL if that's a possibility.

*Plan B.* Contrariwise, there was a small number of female participants who alluded to this “Plan A” track the males often spoke of, but regarded this path more as an unrealistic dream because it was simply unfeasible. Those young women who named going pro as a slight possibility recognized that they would make far less money in a marginalized league. Accordingly, playing professionally was only on the radar of the women’s basketball and newly emerging softball players, specifically first years; juniors on the other hand had already resigned themselves to more practical career choices, and were in the process of developing a professional identity that could be employed in such arenas. Jessica, a first year softball player, explicated that professional softball opportunities are still fairly new and thus is less significant to the viewing public. She explained, “They do have professional things out there. I mean, we don’t make as much as like baseball players or football players but it’s still that next step.” As a case in point, Jessica still favored a career in sports broadcasting because she believed she would have a higher chance for success and financial stability if she took that route. The majority of female athletes, including Brittany, Danielle, and Maria followed this trend, while Amber was ready to transition out of the realm of sports through a career either in the military or as a police officer. Thus, the researcher found that perceived opportunities to play in pro leagues affected the relative importance of the athlete identity over the student identity (and vice versa), in addition to prompting the development of a professional identity for those who were in preparation for role change after college.

*Parental Influence.* Parents were another integral factor in the academic and career goal construction throughout the student’s college transition, from choosing the university to making the grades that will one day earn them their diploma. As a result, parental influence is apparent in the student’s role identity as they hold them accountable for this role and encourage their

children to make the student role a priority. The matter of parental influence became readily apparent at the start of virtually every interview when the participants were asked to describe their support system. Both male and female participants described their parents as their biggest fans or earliest coaches when probed. Men and women both discussed their scholarships, however they ways in which they viewed them differed across social class. As the majority of the first-generation student-athletes in this study reported coming from either “Average” or “Below Average” economic backgrounds, the significance of financial support is understandable. Many stated that their decision to attend the university was based heavily on the opportunity to attend a Division 1 school on an athletic scholarship, and thus ease the financial burden placed on their parents. This concern upholds issues discussed by traditional first-generation students (Unverferth et al. 2012), but for student-athletes this may influence their role identities as their scholarships are based in upholding two associated role identities—they must both uphold a certain GPA (student role identity) and performance level (athletic role identity). Thus, their stories reveal how the scholarship provides relief in their transitions yet also pressures for the need to uphold both identities. For example, upperclassman Kevin affirmed, “It’s a relief to me to know I don’t have to make my dad or anybody pay out of pocket for me to go to college. Scholarships are hard to come by, especially full ones.” Women’s basketball player Desiree went so far as to state that her greatest achievement was “Getting a scholarship, a full ride scholarship, and not having to have my momma pay for it, because she don’t have a job, so that meant a lot to me.” Other participants echoed similar statements about their proudest accomplishment, such as Adam, who said “Probably not making my parents have to pay for college and getting a scholarship.” Conversely, the few students who reported coming from “Above Average” income

households discussed their scholarships more as a merit, due to the fact that they lacked the financial obstacles of those with less privilege.

However, the discussion of parents soon vacillated to the realm of academics, where their influence appeared to be strongest. While prior research has suggested that the parents of traditional first-generation students are typically less involved and offer less social and academic support than those of continuing students (Petty 2014), the parents of these first-generation student athletes appeared to be very mindful of their children's academic record. Interview data from the present study suggest that maintaining a solid academic record and the aim of college completion was often more important to the parents than the student; a number of respondents believed that this was due to the fact that their parents were never able to attain a college degree themselves and wanted better for their child. Prior research has suggested that this source of pressure is consequently more concentrated for first-generation student-athletes, who are charged with the task of living up to the lofty goals set by their parents, in addition to those they wish for themselves (Lohfrink and Paulsen 2005; Wang 2014). The following quotes elucidate the effect parents played in the goal construction (and consequently the identity construction) of their young athletes:

Jessica: They like encouraged me to like get out, because they didn't really have a college like degree I guess you can say. My dad like tried, my mom tried, but in that generation I guess their parents didn't encourage them to go, they just encouraged them to go to work every day. So they wanted me to have that degree to be better than them.

Eric: Yeah, the academics is very important to them... they push me pretty hard in academics since I was little so if I didn't have my grades right, I could never play.

Jacob: I have super high standards for academics just because of the way my parents were about it.

Adrian: My mom, she wanted the best for us. I wanted to show her that I could be the best at I could possibly be by going to college.

These quotes reflect the respondents' universal desire to maintain their parents' approval and exceed their expectations. This pattern would also suggest that their parents are a large factor in their person identity in addition to their role identity, as their opinions are at the root of the student's self-concept.

#### *Person Identity - Negotiating the Student-Athlete Identity*

The conflicting identity roles of "student" and "athlete" appeared to be an obstacle for these young adults when it came time to define their person identity. The researcher ascertained that the greatest challenge for first-generation student-athletes came in negotiating their dual roles as student and athlete. These varied in importance across gender and sport. When asked whether they identify more as a student or an athlete, the participants of this study often had difficulty separating the two. A slight majority of participants expressed that more time was spent "being an athlete," although the sizeable minority believed their time was spent equally between athletics and academics.

*Self Image.* Undeniably, prioritization of athletic demands over academic demands (and vice versa) underwent a constant process of negotiation, although it is worth noting that males across teams were more inclined to rank their sport above their schoolwork. The packed schedules of the students sampled left little free time; respondents had to pencil in time for themselves between practice, weight lifting, drills, team meals, class, and homework. Expectedly, even time spent away from the books and the gym was spent with teammates. Hence, the “athlete” side of the student’s identity is practically omnipresent. Likewise, the first-generation student-athletes took immense pride in their role as ambassadors of the university through their athletic endeavors. As first year football player Justin stated, “You definitely feel proud when you have that UCF name on your shirt and to have people walk around and know who you are.”

The student-athletes interviewed here explained that they are taught to be conscious of their public image; this message is ingrained through the various branches of the Athletic Department, from coaches to advisors to representatives who monitor their social media outlets. Upperclassman Kevin acknowledged that “The spotlight is always on athletes so you’ve gotta watch what you do and say in public.” Raul, a first-year men’s soccer player, also felt the pressure to represent the university in a positive light, stating, “I have a responsibility for myself and for the club and the university to be respectful.” When questioned about how students who do not participate in sports may view athletes on campus, Raul expounded, “I don’t want to sound cocky, but they may look up to someone that’s a student-athlete.” Thus, it can be inferred that their athletic identity extends beyond the field, court, or pitch, to the campus as a whole. Once again, we see how being a student-athlete is more of a job than a hobby to these elite competitors, who take their work very seriously. Here, we can see how their role identities

extend to their person identities. As they primarily associate as an athlete, then their transitions are influenced by the need they feel to consistently act in a particular way that is representative of their definition of a successful athlete. They then work to match their public persona with these perceptions to uphold an identity; while other students may perceive transitions through college as a time for self-exploration and even a time to let loose (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), student-athletes define this time in college as one to represent the university, affecting their expressed personal identities.

*Public Image.* While both male and female athletes were conditioned by the university's Athletic Department to be conscious of their public image, the two continue to be consumed and portrayed differently in the media. The issue of body image arose organically in interviews and appeared to factor heavily into the student-athlete's identity and self-conception. Prior research has claimed that media representations shape the gender norms and boundaries for male and female student-athletes alike (Kimball and Freysinger 2003). Participants openly discussed their bodies as objectified, but saw that as the nature of competing at a high level like Division 1 intercollegiate athletics. However, although prior research suggests media representations influence both men and women student-athletes, male participants in this study did not view this proclivity as a negative, but rather chose to look at their bodies as a product or a machine.

The young women expressed greater sensitivity to being objects of visual consumption. Furthermore, the female athletes cited their sports receive less recognition than their male counterparts, along with less funding, less media coverage, and fewer fans as trials they encountered. Building from this, they connected the attention they received to what can be understood as a form of objectification. The following comments from Desiree, a women's

basketball player, shed light on this theme and allude to the female athlete's need to perform their femininity:

I don't think the media really cares about girl athletes, so it's kinda different...

Unless they got on tight shorts, or they look good, they don't care about them. I guess they find it boring, it's just not as exciting as the men's sports... If ESPN tweets about a WNBA game, they'll be like, "Who cares, who cares?!"

Angelica, a women's soccer player, interconnects this objectification to funding:

Obviously, males get more fans so they get more money. That's every school, in college and high school. It's visible, you can see that the men get better gear or have a better locker room. Especially football, football has everything! I'm like okay, what about us?!

In these ways, women understood men's sports as receiving greater attention, with the results leading to women feeling an individualized pressure to control their appearance to gain that attention. This is a stark contrast to the process of men's sports already gaining more attention and then reaping the benefits of such attention to further support their outward appearance athletically. The perspectives of the female athletes and the lack of discussion of such issues by male athletes would suggest that male athletes do not have to concern themselves with funding or attracting fans, as they are already drawn to men's games and therefore they are afforded more attention. Yet ironically, women have to worry about how their appearance will affect their support despite the fact that they feel they are fighting a losing battle when it comes to media and fan interest.

### *A Unique Case in Point*

The data from the sample provide a wealth of information and yielded many interesting trends. However, one negative case deserves a deeper look. Each of the athletes was asked “How has being a first-generation student affected your college experience?” While the vast majority of students were unable to cite any differences between themselves and other college students, only one hinted at her first-generation status being salient to her identity. After taking a brief pause to reflect, she was able to elaborate on the challenges she faced being the first in her family to attend a university. Angelica meets many of the standards that typically denote traditional first-generation college students: she is a female, a member of an ethnic minority, and was raised in a lower income household. Additionally, she is the daughter of immigrant parents who hail from a small country in South America and speak very little English, which sets her apart from any other respondent in this study. As a result, the application process rested solely on her shoulders:

I did all the applications basically myself because my mom and my dad don't speak English too well... I guess I've been pretty independent since we moved to the United States.

While Angelica was not the only immigrant included in the sample (Raul's family had emigrated to the U.S. from Spain), Angelica's situation was unique in that her parents did not speak English at home. When she described her “typical Hispanic parents,” she stated that she was motivated to go to college because she saw how her parents struggled to attain a manageable lifestyle without degrees. She stated, “My parents sacrificed so much. My success in college would be the outcome that they wanted.” Angelica also indicated she feels she has to be more responsible for herself than non-first-generation students. For example, she is charged with managing her

own finances and cannot rely on her parents to provide support in that regard. It is worth noting that Angelica was the one member of the sample who identified with many of the struggles that are common to the first-generation student experience. The intersection of her race, class, and gender in addition to the obstacles she faced as the daughter of immigrant parents made Angelica more aware of her first-generation status than the other members of this sample. Thus, being first-generation was central to her identity and part of her status, just as her gender was. Another factor that potentially makes Angelica's first-generation status more salient to her is her sport. Soccer is considered to be a more affluent sport than baseball, basketball, or football. In contrast to other soccer players, Angelica is the only first-generation first year student on the team and comes from a relatively low economic class, as she self-reported. However, she still managed to become enveloped by her community and form bonds with her teammates from different ethnic and economic backgrounds.

## DISCUSSION

The following discussion section will review relevant findings and potential future research avenues prior to concluding the study. These particular findings serve to highlight the gendered experience of student-athletes. The current data demonstrate how gender differences factor in to athlete identity and the perceived inequalities that continue to taint the playing fields between men and women. Likewise, the data from this study demonstrate that both schools of thought in Identity Control Theory are relevant among the present sample, although they differ among sport affiliation and gender.

As we see in Burke's conception of Identity Control Theory, behavior is goal-oriented. The analysis was driven by Burke's division identities, as the data show how Burke's three types of identities are all at play in the lives of college student-athletes and can be used to understand their identity negotiations through their collegiate transitions. At the forefront, the student-athlete's person identity and role identity are strongly tied to his or her performance in the athletic sphere. Success on the pitch, court, or field is consistently vital to the student-athlete's self-concept and self-worth. This trend follows Burke's model, in which the actor's goals match the standard set by the environment and their peer group. Furthermore, first-generation college athletes enact two distinct role identities: the student and the athlete. These identities have been known to come into conflict with each other of the course of the academic year, especially as the student is faced with the challenge of prioritizing between athletic demands and academic requirements; understandably, this effect is exacerbated when the student is in-season, and thus differs each semester by sport. Finally, the social identity is also grounded in the team; nearly all of the student-athletes sampled stated that all of their friends were athletes as well and that they spent the vast majority of their time with their teammates, from eating breakfast with them, to

going to class and practice with them, to living with them. This strong sense of community is particularly vital to first-generation student-athletes, as first-generation students as a whole are known to experience seclusion and often need increased support. This pattern is consistent with Stryker and Serpe's prior research that suggests that meaningful relationships are fostered by a common salient identity.

Differences were most apparent between genders, rather than race, or class, although differences between sports emerged within gender variances. Race did not emerge as a salient status to the group on the whole; only two of the three Hispanic participants (both female) alluded to their race in discussing their families, but no participant cited their race having an effect on their college transition and experience. However, class did appear to factor in to students' motivations and goal-making behaviors. Those students who came from lower economic backgrounds were motivated to accept their recruitment offer based on the financial value of the scholarships they were offered in order to assist their parents, whereas those whose families had higher incomes regarded their scholarships more as an award, or sign of their athletic and academic merit.

While Burke's model is key to this analysis, Stryker's external emphasis is complimentary to understanding differences across sports, particularly among men's sports. Student-athletes often described internal pressures, as most held themselves to a high standard, but they all expressed confidence in their ability to rise to the challenge. On the other hand, meeting teammates' and coaches' expectations presented significant external pressures to negotiate in their daily lives. Intriguingly, those who were more inclined to pursue "Plan A" were members of the more "cohesive" teams who upheld Stryker's external model, which holds that

behavior and goal construction is more heavily contingent upon external sources. In the case of these football and baseball players, their sport is not only their motivating force, but also their career aspiration. Their teammates and coaches connected to that sport look to them to uphold that part of their identity and encourage them to pursue a path in professional sports. Likewise, given their larger fan base, more people view them as athletes first and hold them accountable for this role, which prompts them to strive to maintain this salient identity. Future research could be conducted to explore if this trend relates more strongly to the culture of the teams, or if it is due to a selection effect.

Another interesting theme to arise from the data was the propensity of student-athletes to view their participation in athletics as a job. For some, the game quickly became more about work and less about enjoyment. As one basketball player put it, “It wasn’t fun no more. It’s business now.” This appeared to become more pronounced as the athletes advanced in their college careers. In some cases, the grueling nature of college athletics made participation less gratifying. For instance, Amber, a junior women’s basketball player, became disillusioned with the sport over time. In keeping with prior research, athletic identity appears to be more salient to males, whereas females are more likely to identify as a student first. One reason why the athlete role is less salient to female student-athletes is because they perceive fewer opportunities to play professionally, and therefore know they will have to give up that part of their life in the near future. Although women may share the commitment to the athlete side of their identity, it may also be less salient because fewer people both within their primary network (family, friends, coaches) and without (in other words, the viewing public) hold them accountable to that identity than male athletes.

Despite advancements made in the wake of Title IX, female athletes (both at the university and professional levels) are marginalized socially and financially in comparison to male athletes (Messner and Solomon 2007). Furthermore, female athletes are often stereotyped as masculine or unfeminine. Current research has shown that female athletes feel the need to perform femininity; this is largely due to media representations, which “have a great influence on the creation and maintenance of societal norms of gender and the activities that are considered to be appropriate for females and males” (Kimball and Freysinger 2003). As a result, female athletes appear to be more conscious of their body image. Data from the current study are consistent with these trends, as participants relayed perceptions of objectification, sexualization, and marginalization within both collegiate athletics and the media as a whole.

The data posed here beg the question: Does first-generation status or socioeconomic status make more of a difference? The present study suggests that participation in intercollegiate athletics can serve as a mediating factor against the stressors of traditional first-generation students. While prior research has shown that first-generation scholars who do not compete in athletics report feelings of marginalization and isolation within the university, the student-athletes who comprised the current sample expressed a strong sense of community that stemmed from the team atmosphere they are ingrained into from the outset of their college careers. Furthermore, the athletes interviewed here made use of the many academic resources that were afforded to them and appeared to be more inclined to ask for help than traditional first-generation students. One first year student, Raul, observed that student-athletes have “many more benefits” and “ways around things” than other students and was grateful for the resources at his disposal. Thus, the student-athletes in this study as a whole did not find that being first-generation affected their college experience (with the exception of the negative case).

## **CONCLUSION**

First-generation student-athletes remain a lamentably understudied population. This study has taken necessary steps forward in bringing more recognition to this group and further comprehension of their transitional, motivational, and social processes. Additionally, this research was unique in its theoretical orientation by studying first-generation student-athletes through the lens of Identity Control Theory, and thus adds to that theoretical body of knowledge. The findings presented here can be used to discern the issues affecting first-generation student-athletes and how these differ across genders. Consequently, this study presents not only theoretical and empirical contributions, but can also be used to consider the best practices that can be used in supporting increased college retention. The data would suggest that male and female student-athletes might require programs tailored specifically to their needs and diverse learning communities. It is necessary to continue to investigate first-generation student-athlete identities and their lived experiences in order to better serve them not just as students, but as unique human beings with complex needs.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although the present study was limited by sample size and scope, there are a plethora of directions future research could take to expand the present body of knowledge. Forthcoming studies would benefit from interviews with traditional first-generation students to serve as a comparison group to those that compete in athletics. In this manner, research could continue to explore the various motivational factors and community building strategies of first-generation undergraduates. Likewise, comparative data could be drawn from a smaller university or HBCU and a larger state university with a prestigious athletic program in order to see how the findings from this sample associate with others and thus draw larger patterns. Finally, future research should continue to explore the implications of Identity Control Theory within this target population in order to better understand how identities function under the given social structure. Peter Burke has himself recognized that there are three unresolved issues in ICT concerning “(1) the origin of identity standards; (2) the correspondence between the perceptual inputs of identity relevant meanings in the situation and the identity standard...; and (3) the conditions that activate identities” (2004: 574). This research attempts to infer where the identity standards of first-generation student-athletes arise and how these are activated as they transition through college. However, additional work is necessary to continue to investigate these complex processes.

**APPENDIX:**  
**IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

## Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Amanda K. Anthony and Co-PI: Alexandra D. Warner**

Date: **July 06, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 07/06/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Identity Development of First-Generation College Student-Athletes  
Investigator: Amanda K. Anthony  
IRB Number: SBE-15-11371  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kanielle Chay" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

IRB Coordinator

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