

ABSTRACT

NEELEY, BETHANY CHARLENE. The Lived Experience of the Female Collegiate Student-Athlete and Holistic Wellness at a Power 5 Division I Institution. (Under the direction of Dr. Kyle Bunds and Dr. J. Aaron Hipp).

Mental health problems are rising among college students and the prevalence of student-athletes facing these issues has gained significant increased recognition in recent years. Student-athletes are often viewed as a healthy subpopulation on college campuses, yet are faced with additional challenges and stressors than their non-athlete peers that can ultimately compromise their holistic wellness. Specifically, female student-athletes may be more susceptible to mental health issues than their male counterparts and evidence suggests that gender perspectives of the student-athlete experience are different. While mental health is only one aspect of wellness, it is often linked to other aspects of an individual's well-being. Using the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness as a framework, this qualitative study aimed to examine the interconnectedness among various dimensions of wellness to better understand the lived experience of the female student-athlete. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (n=20) to explore their perceptions about the factors of the student-athlete experience that impacted their holistic well-being, in addition to understanding the areas of support they utilized within the institution's athletic department. A deductive data analysis was used to code participants' responses into themes and subthemes related to the second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) of the model. Although experiences varied by participant, the overarching themes were all factors negatively affecting one's well-being, including pressure, coach-athlete verbal communication issues, and freshman year blues. When participants did experience these challenges, they described a sense of support, particularly the support of their teammates and athletic trainer that helped them cope with the demands of the student-athlete

lifestyle. By examining the female collegiate student-athlete experience, practical suggestions in meeting the identified wellness needs of current female student-athletes and enhancing the overall student-athlete experience were shared with the athletic department and furthermore, current gaps in literature on student-athlete wellness were addressed.

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The Lived Experience of the Female Collegiate Student-Athlete and Holistic Wellness at a
Power 5 Division I Institution

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Bethany grew up in Greentown, Indiana, where she and her twin sister, Brittany, won numerous state championships, set five track and field state records combined, and graduated high school as two of the best female distance runners that the state has ever produced. They both went on to represent their home state and run cross country and track and field at Indiana University. After two years of adversity and unforeseen circumstances, Bethany decided it was time for a much-needed change and transferred to NC State University to finish her undergraduate degree and running eligibility for the Wolfpack. Within that year of transferring universities, she lost her grandmother to cancer, tore her plantar fasciitis and was injured for the first time in her life, moved away from her twin sister, and left her home state for Raleigh, North Carolina. Throughout these hardships, she became passionate about the well-being of the student-athlete, outside of their sport, and realized that life was so much more than just running circles around a track. In 2017, Bethany graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Sport Management and immediately transitioned to the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management master's program at NC State University to use her own personal experiences as a female student-athlete to guide her research interests. Ultimately, she hopes that her research will inspire others to prioritize the student-athlete mental health and holistic wellness and enhance the overall student-athlete experience.

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TERMINOLOGY

Female student-athlete: For the purpose of my study, I refer to female student-athlete as a college student who is an American member of a varsity athletic team at the institution. She is in her third or fourth year of eligibility.

Indivisible Self Model of Wellness: An evidence-based model of wellness, emerged from factor analytic studies based on an earlier wellness model, the Wheel of Wellness; exemplifies holism as the foundation of human wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Lived experience: “A representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject’s human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” (Given, 2008, p.1)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): A non-profit member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes; regulates athletes of 1,117 institutions and conferences (Fletcher, Benschhoff, & Richburg, 2003).

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972: Federal law that applies to all education institutions that receive federal funds; Three basic parts of Title IX as it applies to athletics (i.e., participation, scholarship, other benefits) (NCAA, 2018b)

Wellness: Refers to a holistic approach to life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind and spirit are integrated in a purposeful manner with a goal of living life more fully (Myers et al., 2000).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Today's college students are suffering from an epidemic of mental health issues and evidence suggests that this population is more stressed than ever (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015). According to the 2016 American College Health Association- National College Health Assessment, approximately 31% of men and 40% of women in college reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function in the past 12 months (American College Health Association, 2016). On college campuses today, college student mental health and well-being is a major concern for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff (American Council, 2018). While mental health is only one aspect of an individual's well-being, a holistic approach to wellness focuses on the interaction and interdependence among many aspects of wellness (e.g., mental, physical, emotional, financial, social), all factoring into the development of a total person. Holistic wellness¹ refers to the maximum functioning of an individual that integrates the mind, body, and spirit as opposed to measuring individual components of functioning (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000).

Within higher education, the role of student well-being has recently been discussed as a core outcome that colleges should pay attention to, as well as ways that colleges can promote their students' well-being (Wexler, 2016). An overarching goal of the Healthy Campus 2020 Initiative is to promote quality of life, healthy development, and positive health behaviors on college campuses (American College Health Association, 2012). Within this population of college students, research is needed to better examine the wellness factors that play a role in a student's holistic wellness and overall college experience.

¹ For the sake of this study, holistic wellness and well-being will be used interchangeably.

Subpopulation of Student-Athletes

One subpopulation of college students that has received increased attention related to mental health and well-being are student-athletes. Collegiate student-athletes are often viewed as a healthy subpopulation to college students and perceived to reap the benefits of free education, unlimited academic support, clothing, elite coaching and training facilities, strength and conditioning, sport nutrition and medicine advice and travel expenses (Osborne, 2014). However, due to recent suicidal deaths of high-profile collegiate student-athletes (e.g., Madison Holleran, University of Penn track and field female student-athlete; Tyler Hilinski, Washington State football quarterback), more attention has been focused on the mental health and well-being of these athletes as there is more to being a student-athlete than only physical preparation and performance (Brown, Hainline, Kroshus, & Wilfert, 2014). These deaths, among other factors, started shaping the discussion around mental health in collegiate athletic departments.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has prioritized their efforts in understanding the concerns of their student-athletes and currently cited student-athlete well-being as their highest priority (Brown et al., 2014). The national governing body has released a best practices guide for understanding and support student-athlete mental wellness, yet with no required universal protocol, it is in the hands of each university to decide how to approach supporting student-athlete mental wellness.

Research indicates that 10-15% of student-athletes have clinical needs significant enough to warrant counseling services (Parcover, Mettrick, Parcover, & Griffin-Smith, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007), as compared with the campus wide averages of 8% to 9% reported in the 2005 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors (Gallagher, 2005). In fall of 2018 at the Power Five Division I university utilized in this study, 40% of student-athletes were utilizing their sport

psychologist (Tim, personal communication, November 30, 2018)². While mental health is only one aspect of wellness, it is often linked to physical health (Brand, Wolff, & Hoyer, 2013) and other aspects of an athlete's well-being. For example, Jacklyn Oleksak, a recent collegiate student-athlete who played softball for more than three years before quitting her team and transferring, stated: "Even when your brain needs a break, sports never stop. There is no such thing as a ... mental health day. We are supposed to be able to balance athletics, schoolwork, and a social life, which is so difficult" (Barcella, 2017).

Student-athletes are considered a special population due to their atypical college experience (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Osborne, 2014; Rubin, 2016; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). These athletes are faced with similar developmental challenges as their non-athlete peers and additionally have to respond to the challenges and opportunities of collegiate athletics. Additional challenges include balancing the dual role as student and athlete, time demands, physical demands, travel schedule, identity conflict, the pressure to win, and career adjustment issues (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Injuries are also often an unavoidable part of sport participation at the collegiate level (Kerr et al., 2015).

All of these factors contribute to the overall student-athlete experience and can potentially have serious implications on a student-athlete's well-being. With these realities due to their participation in sport, it is no surprise that student-athletes exhibit lower levels of overall wellness when compared to the rest of the collegiate population (Beauchmeim, 2014).

The unique nature of the student-athlete population presents challenges and stressors that can compromise their holistic wellness. More specifically, evidence suggests that gender perspectives of the student-athlete experience are different (LaFountaine, 2009; Schaal et al.,

² All participants that provided information in this study are anonymous throughout this entire thesis.

2011). Female student-athletes are constantly balancing the performance benefits of muscularity with the conflicting societal ideal of femininity and beauty, potentially creating different pressures for them to perform (Brunet, 2010). Patricia Allen, executive director of medical services at Summit Behavioral Health, stated: “I think a lot of female athletes try to achieve in a different way. There’s more pressure on them to be strong, successful, competitive, healthy, and resilient” (Barcella, 2017).

Furthermore, when looking at the broader viewer of higher education in the United States, it is important to note that although student-athlete well-being has commonly been discussed, this issue is often overlooked by the sole athletic performances of the teams. According to Pascarella (1999), “the public’s image of an institution as well as its attractiveness to prospective students are often influenced by the performance of its athletic teams” (p. 1). The popularity and impact of intercollegiate athletics within the United States higher education system is obvious. Institutions benefit from media coverage of major college sporting events, which can increase enrollment and improve the overall image of the university. Despite that, questions continue to arise regarding the growth and development of student-athletes as more than just athletes (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Watson and Kissinger (2007) also found that the tremendous amount of responsibility and high expectations placed on these young student-athletes can result in questions regarding their growth and development outside of their sport. Therefore, using a holistic wellness model, the experiences of the female student-athlete will be studied to examine the interconnectedness among the various dimensions of wellness to better understand the student-athlete as a total person.

Holistic Wellness

This study adopts the Myers et al. (2000) definition of wellness as a “holistic approach to life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind and spirit are integrated in a purposeful manner with a goal of living life more fully ...[and] is the optimum state of health and well-being that each individual is capable of achieving” (p. 252). Wellness can be thought of eating healthy and exercising regularly for athletes (Anderson, 2016), but viewing wellness holistically focuses on the interaction and interdependence among many aspects of life. In this study, holistic wellness will be used as a foundation to explore the lived experience of the female student-athlete through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WEL; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) provides a framework, commonly used in higher education and counseling, for treating student-athletes holistically. This strength-based, multidimensional approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of various dimensions of an individual’s life (e.g., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) that comprise total wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

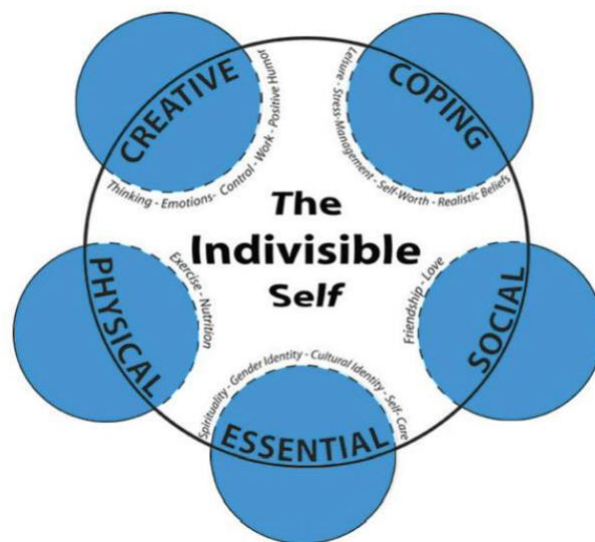


Figure 1: The Indivisible Self: An Evidence-Based Model of Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Though wellness has various definitions and constructs, this broader context model extends beyond physical well-being and implies a holistic approach to understanding wellness by examining the total person. The IS-WEL model was created with Total Wellness as the single higher order factor at the core of the model, followed by five second-order factors that make up the Indivisible Self and each of these factors is comprised of additional sub factors (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). This model can be used to gain a more complete understanding of the individual aspects of wellness that influence a female student-athlete's collegiate experience. Interview questions will be developed using the second order factors of this theoretical framework. For example, Ferrante and Etzel (2009) found that student-athletes who have a strong identification with their athletic role may have a more difficult time coping with various life stressors (e.g., coping with injury, relationships, time management). Questions can be developed using the Coping Self second-order factor to examine the coping practices female student-athletes use when dealing with various events throughout their student-athlete experience.

Statement of Problem

Due to the demands of athletic participation, student-athletes may be more susceptible to mental health issues that ultimately can result in declined overall well-being. Growing literature illustrates that collegiate student-athletes face unique stressors and challenges, including time demands (e.g., NCAA GOALS, 2017; Sack & Gurney, 2016), academic concerns (e.g., Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Rubin, 2016), identity conflicts (e.g., Gayles, 2015; Ferrante & Etzel, 2015), mental health concerns (e.g., Lopez & Levy, 2013; Sudano & Miles, 2017) and career adjustment issues (e.g., Brown, Glastetter-Fender & Shelton, 2000; Saxe, Hardin, Taylor, & Pete, 2017). Time is often seen as a major barrier to academic success, as student-athletes are

often finding themselves struggling to manage their dual academic and athletic roles (Adler & Adler, 1987; Broughton & Neyer, 2001). The athletic culture can hinder identity development, potentially creating distress for student-athletes when their collegiate athletic career ends and they must adopt new life and career goals (Despres, Brady, & McGowan, 2008). The culture of athletics may also inhibit student-athletes from seeking help to address mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress), as there is often a public stigma as being viewed as weak if athletes express any kind of mental health issue (Lopez & Levy, 2013).

Recently, numerous systematic reviews on various aspects of mental health among collegiate student-athletes have been conducted (Breslin, Shannon, Haughey, Donnelly, & Leavey, 2017; Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018; Rice et al., 2016), yet none have studied only female student-athletes. Furthermore, the existing literature pertains to various dimensions of wellness as opposed to total holistic wellness of the student-athlete. Few studies have focused on holistic wellness and even fewer have targeted collegiate student-athletes, specifically female student-athletes and experiences that affect their personal well-being.

According to a 2016 study, approximately 30 percent of surveyed female student-athletes showed signs of depression, compared to just 18 percent of surveyed male student-athletes (Barcella, 2017). Female student-athletes may be more susceptible to mental health issues than their male counterparts, yet it is unclear why (Ingeno, 2016; Schaal et al., 2011). Research targeted on the female student-athlete population has heavily explored the prevalence of eating disorder within the female athlete population (Joy, Kussman, & Nattiv, 2016; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004), yet incorporating aspects of holistic wellness has typically been ignored. Therefore, this proposes a need to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the female student-athlete in relation to holistic wellness to effectively serve this population. For this study,

lived experience will be defined as “a representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject’s human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” (Given, 2008, p.1).

Additionally, few studies have assessed the overall wellness of current collegiate student-athletes using the IS-WEL model (LaFontaine, 2007; LaFontaine, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). However, all were quantitative studies and none targeted specifically upperclassman female student-athletes. Upperclassman are able to self-reflect and share their thoughts on the different experiences of their collegiate athletic careers. Watson (2015) recently proposed the IS-WEL model as a potential treatment approach to use when working with student-athletes, as it is consistent with other student development models, stating: “Counselors who apply this model are able to identify individuals’ strengths and particular dimensions and use these strengths to improve functioning and overcome deficiencies in other dimensions” (p. 34).

A holistic wellness approach aims to enhance the student-athlete as a total person, ultimately encouraging a healthy approach to life. In addition to the strength of empirical support of the IS-WEL model, its foundation of direct implications for counseling provides a strong theoretical framework to help athletic departments address the unique attributes of collegiate female student-athletes. Each of the five second-order factors provide a framework for meeting the evolving needs and addressing the challenges faced by student-athletes.

Purpose of the Study

Using a semi-structured, qualitative research approach, this study aimed to explore the lived experience of the female upperclassman student-athlete in relation to holistic wellness, in hopes that athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff may gain a deeper understanding into the lives of current female student-athletes and how the interaction of different experiences

as a student-athlete can lead to a state of optimal well-being. Many people contribute to the student-athlete experience ranging from coaches, athletic trainers and sports medicine staff, athletic administrators, academic support staff, sport psychologists, nutritionists, to faculty, family, and teammates. This study sought to reveal some information about the areas of support female student-athletes are currently utilizing and provide recommendations about how to continuously support the evolving needs of this population. Lastly, this study is significant in that it is filling an apparent gap in the extant literature in addressing wellness with collegiate student-athletes.

Key themes of wellness among female student-athletes were analyzed. Findings were given to the athletic department, along with practical suggestions on how the findings of this study may be used in meeting the identified wellness needs of respective female student-athletes in order to create a healthy, positive student-athlete experience. Lafontaine (2009) suggested that addressing the wellness challenges student-athletes are faced with can lead to a more beneficial student-athlete experience, both athletically and as a total person. Using the IS-WEL model as a theoretical framework, this study aimed to examine the lived experience of the female student-athlete and holistic wellness at a Division I Power Five Institution. This research study addressed the following questions:

Research Question 1: What factors of the student-athlete experience impact various aspects of a female student-athlete's well-being?

Research Question 2: What areas of support within the athletic department impact a student-athlete's well-being?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the student-athlete population is defined, followed by a summary of the female student-athlete experience and the unique challenges faced. A subsequent section briefly discusses the time demands, academic concerns, identity conflicts, mental health concerns and career adjustment issues of the student-athlete population. Next, a definition of wellness is given and an overview of the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-WEL) is examined. Literature involving student-athlete wellness is then reviewed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the presented literature and a discussion of the need for a study on understanding holistic wellness among collegiate female student-athletes.

Student-Athlete Population

A student-athlete is a participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by an educational institution, whose enrollment was solicited by a member of the athletic staff or other representative of athletic interests with a view towards the student's ultimate participation in an intercollegiate athletics program (Fletcher, Benshoff, & Richburg, 2003; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Watson, 2005). Of the various national organizations that govern athletics at two-year and four-year colleges and universities, the NCAA, a member organization with rules and policy established by and voted on by member institutions, is the largest of collegiate athletics (Fletcher, Benshoff, & Richburg, 2003). Student-athletes competing in the NCAA attend institutions classified as Division I, II and III, based on the number of gender-specific sports offered, capability of hosting a specific number of competitions at a home facility, the average attendance at the home sport facilities, financial awards offered to athletic programs and other specific requirements (NCAA, 2016b).

More than a half-century ago, the NCAA utilized the term “student-athlete” to deny athletes employee status (Watt & Moore III, 2001). Student-athletes are considered amateur athletes, meaning they are not compensated for their sport participation. However, they can receive scholarships to pay for their postsecondary education in exchange for their athletic participation. The NCAA governs the eligibility of student-athletes to receive athletic scholarships as well as regulates scholarship rules once the scholarship has been given (NCAA, 2016b). These rules include the enforcement of standards to promote academic success and retention (e.g., graduation rates), restricting the number of student-athletes who live together on campus and enforcing the strict time demand rules for student-athletes (Gayles, 2009).

Participating in intercollegiate athletics is an experience that provides student-athletes with an opportunity to excel in a sport they love, while building an educational foundation for their future. Proposed benefits of sports participation for athletes include: raising educational aspirations, encouraging successful academic achievement, fostering social integration and acting as an agent for upward social mobility (Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978). The NCAA’s recent data indicates that 90% of student-athletes credit their college athletic experience with having a positive impact on increasing their personal responsibility, honing their teamwork skills and enhancing their work ethic (NCAA, 2016a). A high percentage of student-athletes also reported that college sports has had a positive effect on their leadership skills, their values and ethics, self-confidence, time management, understanding of diverse cultures, study skills and commitment to volunteerism (NCAA, 2016a). In addition to a college education in the form of an athletic scholarship, student-athletes can reap the benefits of academic success, student assistance funds, academic and support services, medical care, elite training opportunities, healthy living training and lectures, exposure and experiences, and preparation for life. Recent

research indicates that more than 82% of Division I student-athletes are earning their degrees, a higher rate than their non-athlete peers (NCAA, 2018a).

The experiences of student-athletes are dependent on the athlete's division classification, sport, ability, and their other identities (e.g., race, gender). Each of these differences and the interactions of these various identities may result in various ways of defining and experiencing being a student-athlete. The unique nature of collegiate athletics as a cultural phenomenon can create substantial challenges on the overall student-athlete experience. A growing body of literature on the student-athlete experience illustrates the challenges and negative aspects associated with the athletic culture.

Female Student-Athlete Experience

Historically speaking, the average number of female student-athletes has significantly increased since the signing Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (NCAA, 2018b). Prior to the passing of Title IX, sports were believed to be too rough and women too frail to compete in competitive sports in college (Brunet, 2010). Title IX changed the world of women sports, stipulating that “any educational program or activity that receives federal funding cannot discriminate on the basis of sex” (NCAA, 2018b, p.1). Before Title IX, one in 27 girls played sports. Today, two in five girls play sports (Rothman, 2017). According to the NCAA, in the 2015-16 academic year, 211,886 women participated in collegiate sports in the United States, representing a 25% increase over the previous decade (Rothman, 2017). Title IX has played a huge role, legislatively, in promoting female athletics at the collegiate level.

Literature on women and sport is very mixed, suggesting both positive and negative links between the two. Research continues to suggest many positive benefits of physical activity and sport for girls, such as increased self-esteem and body satisfaction (McLester, Hardin, & Hoppe,

2014). At the collegiate level, female student-athletes are a unique population with many unique stressors and if not handled appropriately, these stressors can lead to the female student-athlete compromising their well-being. Research on the female student-athlete experience heavily focuses on the health of female student-athletes, both physically and mentally. Unique consideration of the female athlete and the prevalence of eating disorder in sport have been continuously studied (Joy, Kussman, & Nattiv, 2016; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo, & Gross, 2016). Female student-athletes are constantly balancing the performance benefits of muscularity with the conflicting societal ideal of femininity and beauty (Brunet, 2010).

Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter and Reel (2009) found that female athletes suffer from eating disorders, most of which experience symptoms that are subclinical but problematic. Disordered eating, defined as “clinical and subclinical eating disorders and patterns of weight control behaviors” (Greenleaf et al., 2009, p. 489), is one of the main health concerns for female student-athletes. This could be due to the fact that the sport environment heightens body and weight-related concerns, including factors such as pressure from coaches, social comparisons with teammates, team weigh-ins, performance demands, physique-revealing uniforms, and judging criteria (Greenleaf, 2002). Most estimates, attempting to capture the prevalence of clinical eating disorders and disordered eating among female student-athletes, fall between 14 and 27%, which are elevated rates when compared to the overall female student population (Greenleaf et al., 2009). However, more recent literature (Shriver, Wollenberg, & Gates, 2016) highlighted that female college students report a higher prevalence of disordered eating symptoms than their student-athlete counterparts, yet the female college athletes appeared to have better emotion regulation skills than non-athletes. Brown et al. (2014) suggested that female collegiate student-

athletes eating disorder rates are only higher than regular female college students in sports with aesthetic, gravitational, or weight class demands (e.g., gymnastics, cross country). Kong and Harris (2015) identified these sports as “leanness focused” and found that athletes from leanness focused sports than non-leanness focused sports (e.g., basketball, softball) reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction and greater disordered eating symptomatology regardless of participation level.

Furthermore, recent studies have found that females are at an increased risk for developing mental health disorders. Females are more likely to experience stress than male student-athletes (LaFontaine, 2009). Female college students have higher rates of depression than males, and one in four student-athletes show signs of depression (Wolanin et al. 2016). When examining the depressive symptoms in NCAA Division I collegiate athletes, Wolanin et al. (2016) found surveyed female student-athletes had a statistically significant higher prevalence for clinically relevant depressive symptoms than males, 28.1% vs 17.5% respectively (Wolanin et al., 2016). Schaal et al. (2011) observed similar results, finding that female athletes were more likely to be diagnosed with a psychological disorder than their male counterparts.

Academically speaking, graduation rates published by the NCAA have consistently shown that female student-athletes complete degrees at higher rates than their male counterparts. This may be in part that men have far more opportunities to play professional sports and therefore, have less incentive to complete college. Findings according to a new analysis based on the Gallup-Purdue Index, suggest that female former student-athletes outperform other college graduates on important career and life outcomes (Busteed & Ray, 2016). The Gallup-Purdue Index is a “large national study of college graduates that measures whether graduates achieve “great jobs” and “great lives” by evaluating their workplace engagement and overall life well-

being, among other outcomes (Busteed, 2016, p.1). As demonstrated in the reviewed literature, female student-athletes may experience sport differently than male student-athletes, suggesting that there is a need for in-depth exploration of the experiences of the collegiate female student-athlete and their holistic wellness.

Unique Challenges Faced by Student-Athletes

Student-athletes are faced with the same developmental challenges and stressors as their non-athlete peers, yet must also manage several unique challenges associated with their athletic participation that can lead to compromised well-being. Student-athletes are considered a special population due to their atypical college experience (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Osborne, 2014; Rubin, 2016; Simons et al., 2007). Parham (1993) identified six demands or challenges confronting student athletes: (a) balancing athletic and academic endeavors; (b) balancing social activities with the isolation from athletic pursuits; (c) balancing athletic success or lack of success; (d) balancing one's physical health and injuries; (e) balancing several relationships, including coaches, parents, family, and friends; and (f) dealing with the termination of one's athletic career. Previous literature on time demands, academic concerns, identity conflicts, mental health concerns and career exploration issues, all of which are factors that contribute to the overall student-athlete experience, will be briefly discussed in the subsequent sections below.

Time demands. Since 1991, a student-athlete's participation in countable athletically related activities has been limited to a maximum of 20 hours per week for NCAA Division I member institutions, yet student-athletes often devote more than 35 hours per week (e.g., practice, travel, film sessions, strength and conditioning, training room treatment, team meetings) to their sport (NCAA GOALS, 2017). Sack and Gurney (2016) stated, "A major problem with this system is that coaches heavily manage the lives of college athletes, and time demands do not

include many “voluntary” hours athletes are expected to give to their sport” (p.1). Time is often seen as a major barrier to academic success, as student-athletes are often finding themselves struggling to manage their dual academic and athletic roles, specifically when their sport is in season (Gayles, 2015; NCAA GOALS, 2017). Ayers et al. (2012) found that 86% of student-athletes missed classes due to athletic conflicts while in-season, yet the number of athletic practices missed due to academic obligations averaged less than one per semester. The NCAA Research Office recently examined time spent on athletics and academics, finding that current Division I student-athletes are reporting more time devoted to both athletic (i.e., 34 hours per week in-season in 2015 versus 32 hours per week in-season in 2010) and academic pursuits (i.e., 38.5 hours per week in-season in 2015 versus 35.5 hours per week in-season in 2010) (NCAA, 2016a).

Academic concerns. Despite having high-quality academic support service programs to assist student-athletes with managing academic and athletic tasks, the demands of managing both roles can be difficult to balance. The majority of student-athletes carry a full load of courses (i.e., at least 15 credit hours) and must stay above 12 credit hours to maintain their NCAA eligibility (Meyer, 2005). Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) found that approximately 52% of student-athletes stated that they had not spent as much time on all aspects of their academic work as they would have liked, with 80% of them citing athletic commitments as the main reason.

Additionally, academic clustering seems to be more prevalent within intercollegiate athletics, as student-athletes are susceptible to taking different classes or majoring in a different field than desired due to athlete status. Case, Greer, and Brown (1987) defined academic clustering as a practice by which institutions and athletic department academic support units funnel student-athletes to specific majors for the purposes of maintaining eligibility. This

practice is operationally defined as having 25% or more student-athletes from one team in a single major (Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010) and often results in the misalignment of major and career aspiration. Fountain and Finley (2011) found that 11 of 12 universities in the Atlantic Coast Conference clustered their Division-I football players into one major. This is consistent with other researchers that found that student-athletes were advised to take less rigorous classes in order to remain academically eligible (Ayers et al., 2012; Parsons, 2013; Schneider, Ross & Fisher, 2010).

Lastly, the intersection of race and academic performance in student-athletes, particularly Black male student-athletes, has largely been explored in the literature. Several researchers have determined that Black student-athletes are underprepared for college, but are heavily recruited for their athletic ability (Fuller, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2017; Hawkins, 2010; Rubin, 2016). Furthermore, since the majority of high-profile athletic opportunities are at predominately White institutions (PWIs), black student-athletes are often isolated from the rest of campus. Despite being overrepresented within collegiate athletics at these institutions, there are numerous complexities of being a Black student-athlete at PWIs in the United States (e.g., stereotypes, exploitation, racism). A recent study examining graduation rates of Black male student-athletes at all Power 5 institutions found that 59% of the universities graduated Black male student-athletes at rates lower than Black undergraduate men who were not members of intercollegiate sports teams (Harper, 2018). Fuller, Harrison, and Bukstein (2017) found that African American male college athletes who responded negatively to a poor athletic performance were more likely to have lower levels of academic self-concept. As Brenneman states, “This research sheds a light on a critically important issues and one that universities must continue to address as they commit to more diverse and inclusive campuses” (2018, p.1).

Identity conflicts. In today's higher education system, student-athletes often struggle to balance student and athlete roles as they are labeled as athletes first and students second (Gayles, 2015). Student-athletes often identify their self-worth with their ability to perform in their sport. The athletic culture can hinder identity development, creating role conflict for student-athletes and distress when their collegiate athletic career ends and they must adopt new life and career goals (Despres et al., 2008). Previous research has suggested that over identification with the athletic role can have a detrimental effect on the student-athlete's academic, social and personal development and ultimately, their sense of holistic wellness (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993).

Ferrante and Etzel (2009) found that student-athletes who have a strong identification with their athletic role may have a more difficult time coping with various life stressors (e.g., coping with injury, adjustment to college and athletics, relationships with intimates, peers, and coaches, grief and loss, time management, career searching and competitive pressures). Marcia (1966) describes identity foreclosure as a premature commitment to an occupation without engaging in exploratory behavior. Participation in intercollegiate athletics may hinder student-athletes to explore careers outside of sport, and consequently, promote identity foreclosure or an affinity to prepare only for careers in sport (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) suggest that it is imperative for counseling professionals to be aware of how one's athletic identity influences how a student-athlete addresses these challenges.

Mental health concerns. Recently, the NCAA has prioritized their efforts in understanding the concerns of their student-athletes. When student-athletes were surveyed and asked their primary challenges from a health and safety standpoint, the greatest response was student-athlete mental health and wellness (Brown et al., 2014). In spite of that response, the

culture of athletics may inhibit student-athletes from seeking help to address issues such as anxiety, depression, stress associated with the expectation of their sport and the everyday stress of dealing with relationships, academic demands and adjusting to life away from home (Brown et al., 2014). A study by Lopez and Levy (2013) identified public stigma, such as “being seen as weak” and “teammates finding out about one’s use of counseling”, to be a major contributor to athletes avoidance of seeking psychological services. The culture of athletics tends to discourage athletes from expressing any kind of mental health issue, as it is often viewed as a weakness. Student-athletes may also be accustomed to working through pain or may not have developed healthy coping mechanisms to deal with failure (NCAA, 2016a).

A study by Yang et al. (2007) found that student-athletes can experience greater prevalence of symptoms of depression than their non-athlete peers. However, López and Levy (2013) found lack of time to be one of the main barriers to student-athletes seeking mental health or counseling services and prohibits them from achieving their own wellness goals. Such additional demands (e.g., time demands, physical demands, travel schedules) may put student-athletes at a greater risk for experiencing physical and psychological health problems. Etzel’s (2006) study found the following:

Student-athletes reported that although they are generally invested and absorbed in their daily experiences, they often lose their passion for sport, feel exhausted, get less than needed sleep, contract illnesses easily, eat rather poorly, “party hard” (binge drink), feel isolated from the campus mainstream, struggle with in-and out-of-sport relationships and generally present with various symptoms of overtraining (p. 521).

Sports-related injuries can also have a substantial impact on the long-term health of student-athletes. Injuries are often an unavoidable part of sport participation and for some student-

athletes, the psychological response to injury can trigger or unmask serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating and substance use or abuse (Brown et al., 2014). The NCAA (2016a) states, “Coaches and athletic departments must build a culture of support that makes the student-athlete feel comfortable with expressing their concerns without feeling they will be labeled or stigmatized as a person with mental problems” (p. 34).

When the student-athlete begins to feel consumed with trying to meet everyone’s expectations regarding their performance, without a strong sense of self, they may start to engage in unhealthy activities (e.g., overtraining, substance use, eating disorders) in an effort to cope. In 2017, Sudano and Miles found that almost 98% of Division I athletic trainers reported seeing anxiety in their student-athletes and 70% have seen symptoms of suicidality. However, student-athletes are less likely to seek support than their non-athlete peers due to stigma, time constraints or negative perceptions of help-seeking behaviors (Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; L6pez & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2005). Although student-athletes may be at an increased risk for mental health problems, the awareness and support of the psychological well-being of student-athletes is a topic gaining attention in the world of intercollegiate athletics. In recent years, colleges and universities are devoting more resources and education to student-athlete mental health and well-being.

Rather than hide from the stigma, student-athletes are now speaking up. The NCAA cites awareness as the most important first step to a more educated approach to mental health and also provides mental health best practices and recommendations in four main areas (Brown et al., 2014). Supporting the psychological well-being of student-athletes allows these young adults to reach their maximum potential in both their athletic and academic commitments. However, there are still vast differences between NCAA member institutions in terms of practice. Kroshus

(2016) recently studied the variability in institutional screening practices related to collegiate student-athlete mental health, finding that only 39% of NCAA member institution respondents had a written plan related to identifying student-athletes with mental health problems. With no required universal protocol addressing student-athlete mental wellness, it is in the hands of each university to decide how to approach supporting student-athlete mental wellness.

Career adjustment issues. Lastly, there is evidence that many student-athletes experience serious adjustment crises during athletic retirement (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Regardless of how a student-athlete's career ends (e.g., retirement, graduation, injury), the transition into adult life can be rough, simply because many student-athletes do not have a post-athletic career plan in place. Most student-athletes do not want to think about a reality that does not include the game that they have dedicated their entire life to playing. Werthner and Orlick (1986) proposed that sports involvement is an actual living and loving relationship for athletes, and the end of that affiliation marks the loss of an important relationship. One of the most frequent experiences post athletic retirement is the sense of emotional loss with separation from significant others, particularly coaches and teammates (Murphy, 1995). In addition, student-athletes are also more susceptible to having career adjustment issues. As a result of time constraints within collegiate athletics, student-athletes are typically less prepared to make career decisions than non-athletes (Brown et al., 2000; Smallman & Sowa, 1996) and may have to restrain from all work experience or career exploration until after their athletic career is finished. A recent study targeted the transition of senior female student-athletes, finding that many of the participants felt anxious and confused about what to do and who they were during their senior year (Saxe et al., 2017) However, many found meaning through passing their experiences on. If the female student-athletes reflected and felt as though

they were able to learn from these experiences, help someone else from their experiences, or pass down their newfound knowledge to their teammates, their experience seemed worthwhile (Saxe et al., 2017).

Holistic Wellness

The roots of wellness date back almost 2,000 years ago when Aristotle offered a scientific explanation for health and illness and defined a model of good health in which one seeks for “nothing in excess” (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Only within the past two decades has a new paradigm in health care emerged in which mind, body and spirit are seen as integral and fundamentally inseparable to understanding both health and wellness (Larson, 1999). Wellness provides the perspective for understanding human functioning and how individuals choose a way of life in order to live life more fully (Myers et al., 2000). Perceptions of holistic wellness have been linked with increased happiness in early adolescent and college students (Granello, 1999; Mahon, Yarcheski, & Yarcheski, 2005). From a counseling perspective, (Myers et al., 2000) offered the following definition of wellness:

A way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community. Ideally, it is the optimal state of health and well-being that each individual is capable of achieving (p. 252)

While various definitions and numerous models of wellness currently exist across multiple disciplines, this broader context extends beyond physical well-being and implies a holistic approach to understanding wellness by examining the total person.

Wellness is a method of conducting oneself in a manner that allows one to reach their maximum potential as self-defined (Dunn, 1961). The term “wellness” is now most frequently

associated on college and university campuses with programs designed to increase the health and well-being of the student population (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). A holistic wellness approach in counseling provides a framework for improving the quality of life and overall development of college students (Hermon & Hazler, 1999). The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness and its relation to student-athletes will be reviewed.

Theoretical Framework

Wellness has been theoretically conceptualized by several researchers (Ardell & Langdon, 1989, Hettler, 1984; Myers & Sweeney, 2004; Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000), however the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness will be used in the current study. The IS-WEL model is a strength-based, multidimensional approach to wellness, providing a foundation for evidence-based practice for mental health and counseling practitioners. Similar to the Wheel of Wellness model (Myers, Witmer, & Sweeney, 1996), the IS-WEL model was conceptualized using Adler's (1956) perspective of individual psychology as an organizing principle. Despite using the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle Inventory (WEL; Myers, Witmer, & Sweeney, 1996) to quantitatively assess the Wheel of Wellness model, Hattie, Myers, and Sweeney (2004) argued that the model did not support the "wheel" depiction of wellness. Their findings only supported the reliability and construct validity of the instrument. As a result, empirical study of the WEL instrument led to the structure of the IS-WEL model.

According to Myers and Sweeney (2004), this new model "evolved through research and represents the culmination of efforts to explain the findings of a series of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis using the database from the WEL inventory" (p. 238). Through exploratory factorial analysis, the original 17 factors of the WEL were identified and five second-order factors (e.g., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self* and *Physical*

Self) emerged. In order to identify the relatedness of all factors, higher order wellness was developed, known as the Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) (refer to Figure 1 below).

The IS-WEL model was created with self at the core of wellness and incorporates Adlerian theory, observing that human beings are more than the sum of our parts and cannot be divided (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Myers and Sweeney (2004) recognized that wellness involves the acute and chronic effects of lifestyle behaviors and choices through an individual's lifespan. The IS-WEL model was intended for development of wellness programs to facilitate positive growth and change across the lifespan (Myers et al., 2000). Based on the characteristics of healthy people, this model can be considered a strength-based approach that is choice-oriented and theoretically grounded (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). A more complete understanding of the individual aspects of wellness and their relation to the overall wellness of student-athletes will fill existing gaps in the literature.

Total Wellness is the single higher order factor at the core of the model, followed by five second-order factors that make up the Indivisible Self and each of these factors is comprised of additional sub factors (i.e., 17 third-order sub factors) that contribute both to wellness in the Indivisible Self and to Total Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Five of these components, thinking emotions, control, work and positive humor, comprise the *Creative Self*. What individuals think effects their emotions, how they perceive they can influence their lives expresses their sense of control, their work experiences can influence their capacity to live life fully and positive humor can enrich their mental and physical functioning (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Leisure, stress management, self-worth and realistic beliefs comprise the *Coping Self*. These attributes regulate our responses to life events. The *Social Self* factor includes friendship and love and is central to the human desire for connectedness that can enhance individuals'

quality of life (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Spirituality, gender identity, cultural identity and self-care comprise the *Essential Self*. Myers and Sweeney (2004) described this self as elements that have positive benefits for quality of life, express an individual's sense of meaning and purpose, serve as a lens through which life is experienced and the proactive measures individuals take for a healthy life. Finally, the fifth and final factor, the *Physical Self*, includes the two components of exercise and nutrition, and relates to our body attributes (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Additionally, four contextual variables are presented within the model. The IS-WEL model is both affected by and has an effect on the surrounding world (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), therefore it is essential to recognize the importance of environmental factors in understanding individual wellness. These contextual variables, or environments, in which individuals function include: (a) local contexts which include family, school, community, (b) institutional contexts or policy, laws, or governing bodies, (c) global contexts including culture, global events, politics, and environmental impact and (d) chronometrical contexts which represent the ways in which individuals change across the lifespan (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Each context helps to understand individual behavior in relation to wellness and how the individual interacts with their environment.

The Five-Factor WEL (5F-WEL; Myers & Sweeney, 1999) was developed to quantitatively assess wellness as defined by the IS-WEL model and has proven to be a practically useful measure of holistic wellness across culture and in the college population (Myers, Luecht, & Sweeney, 2004). The 5F-WEL was developed from the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) and measures the higher order wellness factor along with five second-order factors and 17 discrete scales using 74 scored items (Myers & Sweeney, 1999). While the 5F-WEL is a quantitative measurement tool, this qualitative study will focus on in-depth interview

questions about the five second-order factors. In addition to the strength of empirical support of the model, its foundation of direct implications for counseling provides a strong theoretical framework to help counselors address the unique attributes of collegiate student-athletes.

Holistic Wellness and Collegiate Student-Athletes

While student-athletes tend to have the stereotype of being privileged on a college campus (Parsons, 2013), the reality is that questions continue to arise regarding the growth and development of these young adults as more than athletes. With the unique factors due to their participation in sport, it is no surprise that student-athletes exhibit lower levels of overall wellness when compared to the rest of the collegiate population (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Growing literature illustrates the unique stressors and challenges faced by student-athletes, yet literature on addressing holistic wellness within the student-athlete population is limited and inconsistent (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). Additionally, the existing literature pertains to various dimensions of wellness as opposed to total holistic wellness. Several factors related to wellness (e.g., identity, friendship, work and leisure, exercise and nutrition) have been studied within the college student population, few however have focused on overall holistic wellness and even fewer have targeted female collegiate student-athletes and aspects of wellness that affect their overall well-being. Studies relating to student-athletes have been undertaken from specific aspects of wellness including: athletic identity and well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2003); sport commitment and emotional well-being (Hanton, Evans & Neil, 2003); social well-being (Green & Weinberg, 2001) and physical well-being (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). None of these, however, targeted only female student-athletes.

Miller and Kerr (2003) proposed the Athlete-Centered Model to encourage athletic programs, coaches, parents, administrators and support staff to view sport as a vehicle for

contributing to the overall well-being (i.e., physical, psychological and social) of student-athletes. The benefits of this model have not been studied empirically, but its basic principles include a philosophy of treating student-athletes holistically. Beauchemin (2014) studied student-athletes using self-report questionnaires and qualitative interviews to examine the impact of an integrative outreach model that incorporated mental health education, sport psychology concepts and mental skill techniques on awareness and attitudes related to mental health and counseling. Findings indicated that this model may be effective in increasing awareness of mental health supports, reducing stigma and development of performance enhancement and self-care skills.

Related specifically to the IS-WEL model, three studies have assessed and compared the overall wellness between collegiate student-athletes and non-athletes (LaFontaine, 2007; LaFontaine, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007) and one study has used the holistic wellness model to assess overall wellness in former student-athletes (Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017). All three studies however used the holistic wellness model as solely a quantitative assessment tool, rather than an intervention.

LaFontaine (2007) specifically focused on wellness among first year collegiate female athletes, stating that female athlete wellness can be affected by many aspects of college life (e.g., stress, time management, eating and sleeping habits, training, weight control, relationships issues and family situations). Female student-athletes scored higher on 11 of 19 subscales of the 5F-WEL with significant differences found on the nutrition, exercise and total self-direction scales. The female student-athlete group scored slightly higher than the non-athlete group regarding total wellness, but these results were not statistically significant (LaFontaine, 2007). Continuing her research, LaFontaine (2009) conducted an additional study comparing the wellness of female and male student-athletes. She found that female student-athletes scored

lower in 14 of 20 wellness behavior categories, suggesting that female student-athletes may experience sport differently. Female student-athletes scored significantly lower than the male student-athletes in the areas of sense of worth, leisure and stress management. LaFountaine (2009) suggested that addressing the wellness challenges athletes are faced with can lead to a more beneficial student-athlete experience both athletically and as a total person.

Additionally, Watson and Kissinger (2007) used the IS-WEL model to assess the subjective perceptions of student-athletes regarding holistic wellness to compare the wellness of student-athletes and non-athletes. Using the 5F-WEL as their assessment tool, the authors found that non-athletes reported higher levels of wellness than did student-athletes on 22 of the 23 subscales. Non-athletes reported significantly higher scores on two second-order factors (i.e., *Social Self* and *Essential Self*) and one third-order factor (i.e., love). Student-athletes only scored higher on the third-order factor of exercise.

The only other study that has used the holistic wellness model to explore the wellness of student-athletes is a study by Warehime et al. (2017). Warehime et al. (2017) explored the factors that led to higher levels of wellness in former student-athletes. Most previous research has focused on negative outcomes associated with transitioning from sport (Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016). However Warehime et al. (2017) studied the positive outcomes associated with this transition, as data can guide future efforts to improve the transition process for student-athletes. Overall, participants displayed high levels of wellness, significantly in terms of work and exercise. Many former student-athletes also perceived their current wellness as equal, if not better compared to when they were student-athletes (Warehime et al., 2017).

Table 1: Reviewed health outcomes of the student-athlete experience

Positives	Negatives
Increased self-esteem and body satisfaction among female student-athletes (McLester, Hardin, and Hoppe, 2014)	Greater prevalence of depressive symptoms than non-athlete peers (Ingeno, 2016; Wolanin et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2007)
	Less likely to seek psychological support than their non-athlete peers due to stigma, time constraints or negative perceptions of help-seeking behaviors (Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; L6pez & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2005)
Positive effect on student-athlete’s leadership skills, their values and ethics, self-confidence, time management, understanding of diverse cultures, study skills and commitment to volunteerism (NCAA, 2016a).	Sense of emotional loss with separation from significant others post athletic retirement (Murphy, 1995)
	Lower levels of overall wellness when compared to the rest of the collegiate population (Watson & Kissinger, 2007)
Increasing their personal responsibility, honing their teamwork skills and enhancing their work ethic (NCAA, 2016a)	Female student-athletes not thriving in the nutrition, stress management and total self-direction categories of wellness when compared to female non-athlete peers (LaFountain, 2009)
	Prevalence of clinical eating disorders and disorder eating among female student-athletes (Greenleaf et al., 2009)

Conclusion

In reviewing the current and past literature on the student-athlete experience, it is critical to remember that each personal experience can be different when exploring this topic. Each of these differences can result in many different ways of defining and experiencing life as a student-athlete. However, with the challenges and stressors so well documented and supported in the research, it is apparent that there is a need for more wellness support and interventions in working with student-athletes on their holistic wellness, specifically female student-athletes who

may be more susceptible to mental health issues. According to Hermon (2005), this holistic focus is essential for addressing instructional challenges with a college environment. In addition, as evident with the NCAA's recent commitment to addressing student-athlete well-being as their highest priority (Brown et al., 2014), it is essential for collegiate athletic departments to meet the needs of the unique student-athlete population, specifically their health and well-being.

Despite the need for wellness support and interventions within intercollegiate athletics, literature on this topic is extremely limited. The IS-WEL model (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) provides a framework, commonly used in higher education and counseling, for treating student-athletes holistically. The Total Wellness factor of the model will further provide an understanding of the whole individual and the interaction of the different experiences they face with being both a student and an athlete. More specifically, each of the five second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) provides a framework for meeting the needs and addressing the challenges faced by student-athletes. Using a semi-structured, qualitative research approach, this study aims to explore the lived experience of the female student-athlete in relation to holistic wellness and the five second-order factors of the IS-WEL model. By understanding how all of these factors considered impact the holistic wellness of female student-athletes, this current study aims to provide suggestions in assisting athletic administrators, coaches and support staff effectively working with student-athletes in addressing the wellness needs of student-athletes to assist in enhancing them as total people, ultimately encouraging a healthy approach to life.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of the female student-athlete in relation to holistic wellness. The literature review in chapter two highlighted the need to understand the lived experience of the female student-athlete in regards to holistic wellness. This chapter presents the methodology for exploring how the interrelatedness of wellness factors impact the student-athlete as a total person. The study setting and research design are presented first, followed by the participants and sampling procedure, data collection and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

This study implemented a qualitative approach using individual interviews to answer the proposed research questions. A qualitative research method allowed me the opportunity to gain more in-depth responses to the research questions presented (Janesick, 2003). According to Fontana and Frey (2006), interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. Janesick (2003) explains that “the qualitative researcher focuses on description and explanation...and prefers to capture the lived experience of participants in order to understand their meaning perspectives, case by case” (p. 395). Specifically, a qualitative study was best suited for understanding how each participant perceives their lived experience and how the interaction of different experiences as a student-athlete can lead to a state of optimal creative, coping, social, essential and physical well-being.

The conceptual framework for this research study is grounded in elements of the IS-WEL model, a strength-based, choice-oriented, multidimensional approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of various dimensions of an individual’s life (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Interview questions were designed from a thorough review of the literature and included

questions relative to all five second-order factors (e.g., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) and the single higher order factor (i.e., Total Wellness) at the core of the model.

Population and Sample

The proposed study was conducted at a large public university in the Southeast United States competing at the NCAA Division I level. Female upperclassman (i.e., third or fourth year of eligibility) from all women's sports were recruited, excluding women's golf. No members of the women's golf team met the specified recruiting criteria of this study. By narrowing the student-athlete population down to only upperclassman, I anticipated gaining a more accurate understanding of the lived experience of a student-athlete who is familiar with the culture and environment of intercollegiate athletics and this athletic department specifically. Additionally, only American female student-athletes were studied. International student-athletes may face unique challenges when attending an institution in the United States, including adjusting to a new culture, language, education system, weather and distance from their families (Popp, Pierce, & Hums, 2011). Female athletic teams at this institution included basketball, cross country, golf, gymnastics, rifle (coed), soccer, softball, swimming and diving, tennis, track and field, and volleyball.

I utilized purposive and snowball sampling techniques in this proposed study. Purposeful sampling, in which participants were selected based on the criteria set by the researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012), was first used to select student-athletes. Purposeful sampling allowed myself the opportunity to collect data from participants who fit into a wide-ranging group and ensured that the appropriate number of interviewees were drawn from homogeneous subsets of the population

(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The athletic department was contacted by the researcher and permission was granted to conduct a study involving student-athletes.

Twenty female student-athletes, two student-athletes from each women's sport excluding women's golf, were interviewed. Two members of each of these women's varsity sports ensured that all women's varsity sports, excluding women's golf, at the institution would be represented in the study and allowed the researcher the best opportunity to reach data saturation based on the time and resources available. I identified individual student-athletes who were eligible to participate in the study based on the information provided on the institution's athletic website. Once identified, these student-athletes were contacted by the researcher via email with the goal of recruiting participants for the study (see Appendix A). The recruitment email included a brief statement about the purpose of the study and how the gathered data will be used. Additionally, as the study evolved, snowball sampling was used because it allowed the researcher to utilize current participants in an effort to recruit other prospective participants from within the unique population (Vogt, 1999). If necessary, participants were asked to volunteer the names of teammates they feel would have an interest in participating in the study.

Data Collection

First, permission was granted from the athletic department to collect data on student-athletes and athletic administrators. Second, study protocols and data materials were approved by the NCSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in a location that was convenient for the participant, during a time period agreed upon between the participant and the researcher, and then transcribed verbatim. The VoiceRecorder iPhone app was used for audio recording, as well as an Olympus digital voice recorder for backup purposes.

Face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, in order to offer a deeper insight as to how participants perceived student-athlete holistic wellness. According to Creswell (1998), interviews generate qualitative data that can potentially be more open, detailed and sincere, and capture “a complex holistic picture” (p. 5). A semi-structured interview format designed with open ended questions allowed the researcher the flexibility to listen to the participant and ask follow-up questions to seek clarification and pursue deeper meaning when necessary (Kvahe, 2007). The flexibility of a semi-structured interview was well suited for exploring a participant’s attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives related to their individual student-athlete experience. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher the openness to change question forms in order to follow up the answers given by the participant, providing the opportunity to identify new ways of seeing and understanding holistic wellness (Kvahe, 2007). In order to ensure validity, at the completion of each interview, participants were notified that I would provide them with a transcript of their conversation if wanted. Interviewee transcript reviews allows interviewees the opportunity to identify and correct potential transcription errors, and in some cases, to clarify or provide additional information and insights directly linked to interview responses (Kvahe, 2007).

Prior to data collection, the interview questions were piloted for clarity and understanding. A pilot study assessed the feasibility of the study, the administration time for completing the interviews and the procedure for the full study. Turner (2010) suggests piloting interview questions to ensure that any flaws or limitations are addressed before conducting the study. Pilot study participants were recruited by the researcher using a snowball sampling technique. I piloted the interview questions with two former female student-athletes who had a connection to intercollegiate athletics and student-athlete holistic wellness. Both pilot study

participants were associated with a different Division I university than the institution where the participants attended. The pilot study participants provided feedback on the clarity of the questions being asked and the researcher adjusted the wording and flow of various questions.

Instrument

Interview questions for this study were developed using the second order factors of the IS-WEL model (See Appendix A for full interview guide). I asked participants questions about their health and well-being, as well as their perceptions about resources within their athletic department pertaining to student-athlete welfare. Example questions include:

What aspects of the student-athlete experience are most challenging for you?

What factors affect your mental health and well-being? How do you cope with these issues you're facing?

Where is the athletic department lacking/what do you think is lacking in terms of supporting your well-being?

How do you identify yourself outside of sport?

How would you describe your overall well-being since you arrived on campus?

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word, followed by data analysis using a deductive thematic approach. Thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (i.e., themes) across a data set, allows the researcher to see and make sense of shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Using a deductive approach to data coding and analysis allowed the researcher to bring to the data a series of themes conceptualized from the IS-WEL model that was used for coding and interpretation. The five second-order factors of the IS-WEL

model (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*) guided the codes where themes emerged. The Total Wellness factor of the model provided an understanding of the whole individual and the interaction of the different experiences female student-athletes faced.

I read and reread textual data and listened to audio recording in order to familiarize herself with the data, ensure validity, and notice data that might be relevant to the proposed research questions. From this analysis, initial codes were generated. During the coding process, the data was categorized and organized, followed by axial coding which placed these categories into similar topics using the IS-WEL model as a framework (Kvale, 2007). I then searched for themes emerging, reviewed potential themes, defined and named themes and lastly, produced the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Additionally, I utilized my committee members (i.e., experienced qualitative researchers who have prior experience with coding transcripts) to assist in the data analysis process and ensure trustworthiness. If wanted, verbatim transcriptions were sent back to participants to assure accuracy and relevance of what they shared.

Researcher Bias

The main role of the researcher in qualitative research is often to serve as the primary instrument in data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand that it is natural that biases will be present. Several identities of the researcher factored into the data collection and interpretation of the findings of this study. First, I identified as a former student-athlete at this institution, running cross country and track and field throughout my undergraduate years and first year of graduate school. Therefore, research bias did allow me to be accepted within the culture of population I worked with. I may have personally known some of the research participants prior to beginning the study. However, my personal connections can be seen a benefit in this study, as participants were more comfortable in the interviews, ultimately

leading to more honest and open interactions. Additionally, I felt strongly about influencing and impacting student-athletes and experienced many of the student-athlete challenges detailed in the literature review that affected my personal well-being. I reduced potential research bias by adhering to established techniques for data collection and analysis. I allowed participants to review their individual results to determine whether the data interpretations seemed to be representative of their beliefs. Furthermore, by asking my committee members to review my findings and conclusions, potential gaps in my argument that needed to be addressed were identified to affirm that my conclusions were sound and reasonable.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The aims of this study were to a) understand the factors of the female student-athlete experience that impact aspects of her well-being and b) examine the areas of support within the athletic department that significantly impact a student-athlete's well-being. This chapter presents the findings of the analysis from 20 qualitative interviews conducted with collegiate female student-athletes.

Demographics

Twenty collegiate female American upperclassman (i.e., third or fourth year of athletic eligibility) at a NCAA Division I institution in the Southeast United States participated in the study. Demographics were collected from each participant in pen and paper form prior to the start of the audio recorded section of each interview. Excluding women's golf, all women's sports at the institution were represented in the study. No members of the women's golf team met the specified recruiting criteria of this study. Participants consisted of two female American upperclassman student-athletes from each of the remaining women's sports at the institution, including women's basketball, women's cross country, gymnastics, rifle (coed), women's soccer, softball, women's swimming and diving, women's tennis, women's track and field and volleyball. Fourteen of the participants were in their fourth and final year of eligibility and six of the participants were in their third year of eligibility. Twelve participants classified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian, while seven participants classified themselves as Black/African American and one participant considered herself as a European American. For the purpose of this study, each participant was randomly given a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality.

Themes

Using a deductive approach to analyze the data collected, I generated sub-themes based on the IS-WEL model and the five second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*). Many of the sub-themes overlapped and interconnected within multiple second-order factors, however I organized the key findings in the second-order factor of the model that best fit. For example, the sub-theme of performing well fit best within the *Physical Self*. Additionally, I found one sub-theme (i.e., freshman year blues) that did not fit best within the five second-order factors, but rather in the contexts of the evidence-based model of wellness. The sub-themes are essential in helping to better understand the lived experience of the female student-athlete and factors that impacted her holistic wellness at a NCAA Division I Power 5 institution in the Southeast United States. Quotes from participants represent the key findings within each sub-theme. The emerging sub-themes within each second-order factor were: *Creative Self*- Pressure, Coach-Athlete Verbal Communication, and Injuries; *Coping Self*- The Grind, Sports Psychologist; *Social Self*- My Teammates, Athletic Trainer, My Family, and Additional Support for Women's Sports; *Physical Self*- Performing Well; and contexts of the model- Freshman Year Blues.

Creative Self

Participants generally reported challenges negatively affecting their well-being on factors related to the *Creative Self*. Positive expectations can influence one's emotions and behaviors (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), but participants commonly mentioned these challenges as negatively affecting one's thinking and emotions. The sub-themes within the *Creative Self* are pressure, coach-athlete communication and injuries.

Pressure

One of the most substantial sub-themes was this feeling of pressure throughout one's student-athlete experience. The word 'pressure' was mentioned a total of 39 times throughout all participant interviews. Pressure was commonly linked to one's individual and team performance, but also in the general sense of simply being a student-athlete with unique stressors. Most of the participants identified pressure as one of the most challenging aspects of their student-athlete experience or as a factor that negatively affected their well-being. Much of the pressure identified came from the expectations placed on the female student-athlete, either internally from herself or externally from other people. Externally, Hannah felt that people outside of the athletic department had this false perception that student-athletes have it easy, but then explained the pressure they each felt, which negatively personally affected her mental health:

A lot of people think that student-athletes have it easy. It really isn't easy and you have to perform well and you have all these expectations. We have a lot of pressure on us, so I think we need a lot more support than people think. I also think we are harder on ourselves and we have very high expectations on ourselves from other people, so I think an athlete's mental state is very important and becoming a lot bigger in the spotlight for athletes now. I think people are finally realizing how important it is to be a successful athlete.

As evident above, it was obvious throughout participants' interviews that these female student-athletes were aware of the negative effects pressure can have on one's mental health.

The most common type of pressure identified among participants was this pressure to perform in their respective sport. Many felt that the pressure began as soon as they arrived on campus freshman year because they were young and new to their teams. Ashley believed that the

expectations from herself and other people caused excessive pressure her first couple of years, explaining, “The first couple of years were very hard when it came to stress and not getting depressed, not getting overly anxious about things.” Hannah related, “I used to not handle pressure very well and I felt a lot of pressure after my first year here because I had such a good freshman season. I felt a lot of pressure that I had to perform well every time I stepped foot on the field and my coaches expected it from me.” Furthermore, Rachyl felt that the pressure to perform at the best level you know you can “had her in her own head all the time.” From being one of the nation’s top athletes in high school to transitioning to a large university and top ranked team, the pressure led her to make mistakes by constantly overthinking things. Instead of trying to be perfect at all times, all three of these participants acknowledged simplifying the pressure and expectations to perform by simply returning to the basics and remembering their love for the game and just playing how they knew how to play.

Additionally, the expectations from outside sources (i.e., coaches, family, friends) led many participants to translate that external pressure to then internal pressure. A student-athlete is highly competitive, which in many instances, correlated to high expectations for herself. Ashley felt that student-athletes always tend to have expectations for how things are supposed to go, often leading to disappointment, expressing, “We are all highly competitive and to feel disappointed a lot is really difficult to go through. It’s challenging and then you have to accept what’s going on and move on from it.” Demi described how the pressure to perform from external sources correlated to internal pressure in herself because she felt as if she was disappointing others if she did not perform a certain way or her practice did not go well. She then felt that she would have to talk her way out of why it did not go well. Regina described a similar experience, identifying internal pressure as negatively affecting her mental health, “I have a lot

of internal pressure on myself and when I don't meet certain benchmarks that I think I should be meeting by a certain point, I'm definitely a lot harder on myself." Baylie often felt inadequate and although she perceived that she was trying really hard at times, she never felt that she was performing up to her own expectations. Baylie and others perceived much of this external pressure as coming from their coaching staff, further stating, "It was really hard to talk to my coach about all of that because we didn't click very well." As evident in the quotes above, pressure continued to resurface as an aspect of the student-athlete experience that can negatively affect one's well-being, specifically one's mental health.

Coach-Athlete Verbal Communication

Secondly, a coach's verbal communication with a female student-athlete was an additional substantial sub-theme found in the data. A coach-athlete relationship is considered particularly crucial in one's experience because of the effect it can have on a student-athlete. The majority of participants felt that their coach had negatively affected their well-being at some point throughout their collegiate athletic career, specifically in terms of verbal communication issues that created conflict between the coach and athlete. As explained by the participants, coach-athlete communication refers to how coaches speak and verbally interact with their individual student-athletes. Some called it tough love, yet others believed that the way a female student-athlete perceives the communication from her coach depended on what type of person or athlete she was. Beth explained, "It's just the way he talks to you sometimes. I know he means well and wants everyone to do better, but sometimes it's just the way he handles things really makes you feel like shit." Rachyl pointed out the reality of sports:

In sports, you're going to get harped on and fussed at. It just depends on what kind of person you are. I feel like it's important to build a relationship with you, learn what kind

of player you are, and learn what type of player you want to become in order for you to be successful. I can take getting yelled at or cursed at, but someone else might not and it might shut them down and ruin their season. It just depends on what kind of person you are.

While perceptions of a coach's verbal behavior varied by participants, Beth, Hannah, and Sophie all revealed how their coach's comments at times made them question playing their sport.

Hannah mentioned, "It got to a point where I didn't want to be in practice everyday. How can I be a collegiate athlete and not want to go to practice and better myself for the team? I can say that I speak that for everybody. Not one person was at practice and happy to be there." Beth felt that her coach's negative comments created negatively on herself, describing specific situations on which her coach harped on her, "It's just kind of a vicious cycle. I get down on myself. I lose and I'm negative about that and it's just not a good scenario for anyone honestly." Her teammate, Sophie, related, "You start to question if they care about you as a person and overall how you're doing and how your experience is going."

Overall, participants expressed that they felt that their coaches meant well by their comments, but the way the words were delivered negatively affected their mental well-being in specific situations. Many described the coach-athlete relationship as a learning experience that took time to build trust and learn a coach's tendencies. Hannah acknowledged the tough love, stating, "He used to break me down in tears, but I think I've learned that the harder they are on you, it's because they expect so much from you and that was a learning process." Sarah described the time it took to understand her coach, "We're good now, but getting to know her was tough. She's just a very emotional person and for me, how you talk and your tone and everything is key. I would ask a simple question and she would lash out on me." Regina, Kerry

and Hannah all perceived their coaches to be manipulative at times and three other participants used the words “passive aggressive” to describe each of their coaches.

Many of the participants felt that the harsh communication took a toll on them emotionally. Hannah was discouraged early on in her collegiate athletic career, much of which was caused by the way her coach spoke to her, stating, “Just in terms of the way he spoke to me, it was very demeaning. He just made me feel like shit, like I had no idea what I was doing.” Sophie was emotional throughout her interview and even acknowledged the difficulty in talking to the researcher about this challenge, but then began to open up about her head coach being tough verbally. She revealed, “My head coach, his mentality is push push push to get some push back. And in my experience, nobody has ever responded well to that. You don’t want to push someone to their breaking point in hopes that they push back.” Additionally, Baylie thought her former coach held many assumptions against her, which then took a toll on her emotionally and Hannah felt that her coach’s negative comments became very “draining” emotionally on her.

Caelynn and Bella did not agree with the way their coaches talked to them at times, however both felt that it motivated them to perform better. Caelynn discussed how she was able to take the tough comment and how they actually fueled her athletic performance. Bella called it tough love, stating, “You could literally cuss me out and I don’t give a fuck. Throughout my time here, my coaches have been very verbal in their distaste in my play. So I’ve been cussed out on multiple occasions. None of that bothers me.” Katherine felt that a coach’s communication with an athlete could be perceived differently by a female student-athlete depending on the gender of her coach. She stated, “I think it’s more of a male coach to female athlete relationship where a male coach doesn’t know what he’s saying might be affecting a girl the way it is. And I’ve seen the aftermath of a girl pretending it doesn’t bother them, but it does.”

Injuries

Physical injuries throughout a female student-athlete's experience continued to be discussed in participant interviews, including seven participants describing the emotions that accompanied the injury. Erin pointed out, "An injury takes away a part of my life that is a stress reliever for me. I wouldn't say that I was depressed, but definitely down. I didn't want to see people as much and I was less social." Jessica's hamstring injury was the first in her collegiate career, causing her to miss her entire competitive season. She described not knowing what to do with herself and then felt that she had to overcome the fear of reinjuring her hamstring once she was healthy enough to compete again. Alexandra described feeling alone when she tore her ACL her freshman year, further adding, "I really thought I was going to be done. I had never been injured before, so I didn't know how to come back from it. That mental aspect was kind of training because it's like no one understands." Throughout her interview, she continued to mention her injury as a specific experience that negatively impacted her well-being because she was unaware on how to react, who to turn to, or where to find help. Her teammate, Rachyl, felt that her numerous injuries were so tough mentally that they left her questioning even wanting to continue playing her sport, describing, "You play your sport and it makes you happy and does all these things for you, but when you don't have it, you're like why am I here and what am I doing?"

Emily felt that her student-athlete experience was challenging, but doable up until her sophomore year when she tore her ACL. The following year, she re-tore her ACL, calling it a "huge mental burden" stating, "That was definitely the worst of my mental health at that point. I had to make a decision if I wanted to try and get surgery again...I felt like it was the end of the world. But then once I sort of got through that, I feel like I did fairly well through the end of my

junior.” Furthermore, she reflected on her struggle to find purpose outside of her sport, mainly because her injury rehabilitation regimen was still very time consuming, yet she was unable to compete. As her collegiate career evolved, she began getting involved with various opportunities on campus, including two clubs, an honors program, and the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), which she is now president of. She described now seeing herself as more than just an athlete and now has plans to attend medical school upon graduation.

Coping Self

Coping with the demands of the student-athlete lifestyle continued to emerge within participant interviews. Myers and Sweeney (2004) describe the factors of the Coping Self as “elements that regulate our responses to life events and providing a means for transcending their negative effects” (p.4). The sub-themes of Coping Self include the grind and sports psychologist.

The Grind

When facing challenges such as pressure, coach communication issues and injuries, many of the participants used the words “exhaustion”, “stressed” or “drained” to describe these experiences that negatively impacted their personal well-being and their overall student-athlete experience. I connected these words and named the subtheme ‘the grind’ to describe the various adversities and obstacles participants faced. In terms of stress, most of the participants reported difficulty in managing the unique stressors commonly associated with the student-athlete experience. Emily used the word ‘exhaustion’ five times throughout her interview, referencing the term as the most challenging aspect to her well-being throughout her experience. She felt that her exhaustion was created by this mindset that she had to be the best at everything, stating, “I definitely think of the habits or mindsets that are ingrained in athletes that make it very challenging to have holistic well-being.” Kerry acknowledged difficulty in learning how to

handle her sport mentally while also trying to learn how to handle herself mentally. Both, Hannah and Kerry, expressed difficulty in focusing on academics following a long practice. Hannah described stress as “having to deal with a three hour long practice, coach yelling at you and then going home and focusing on school work when you’re very mentally drained” and Kerry stated, “...spending hours mentally training and then finishing practice and being mentally exhausted and then having to try and study is so difficult.”

Although participants struggled at times with balancing the various aspects of the student-athlete experience, they felt as though they were able to draw on these experiences and learn from them. Hannah revealed not learning balance until her senior year, “That’s when I learned what I really needed, what needs to be the priority at that moment.” Sarah described having “mental breakdowns” occasionally because she felt that there wasn’t enough time in the day to do everything, however as she got older, she began to get a grip on what was most important in her life. Rachyl, now a senior, added, “Since I’m older, I know how to take care of myself if I’m slacking in one spot. I know what resources I can use to help build me back up.” Baylie described herself as being “mentally stable and content” in her final month of competition. Katherine reflected on her personal growth, stating, “I feel like I’m at the peak of my wellness. I am a lot more accepting of the student-athlete schedule and embrative of morning practice. I handle situations a lot better specific to my sport.” While the student-athlete grind was exhausting and stressful at times, overall, participants continued to reflect on the ways in which their experience led to personal growth throughout their three to five years thus far as a collegiate student-athlete. The daily grind of being a student-athlete was thought of as a learning process and lead to improving one’s self throughout the experience.

Sports Psychologist

When asked about the areas of support participants utilized within the athletic department, numerous participants mentioned the use of the sports psychologist to cope with challenges faced. Participants described the utilization of the sports psychologist in times of need and also seeing their own improvement over time. Kate described her bi-weekly team meetings with the sports psychologist, crediting her team's success to this resource:

It's helped our whole team connect better and think about each person and not just ourselves. She really just brings up topics to talk about and then we'll do a little team activity. We had a killer season last year and I really think it's because we were all connected by doing that.

Bella praised the support staff, stating that they helped her develop a better state of mind, "The sports psychologist and my athletic trainer have always been really supportive of me doing what I need to do to be better and finding a way to help get me ready to compete or whatever I'm doing with life. I definitely think that has helped me grow within my time here." Others did not utilize the sports psychologist until recently, but have now enjoyed taking advantage of this resource. Regina described the skills she's learned from the sports psychologist, "I've learned how to cope with team situations to apply the problems I'm having within my sport specifically and growing as an athlete." Sarah coped with unique stressors by first talking to her coach, but then described "it got so bad" that she had to meet with the sports psychologist, further adding, "But after that initial meeting, you just kind of realize life's too short to be really depressed about certain things. You're just like I can't do this anymore."

Katherine and Sophie both expressed the feeling that they felt they should probably utilize the sports psychologist, but currently have not. With the athletic department adding two

additional full-time sports psychologist within the last year, Katherine thought that she should also take advantage of them now, but personally felt like she was doing well enough where she just has not followed through with it. Others found it challenging on knowing when to ask for help. Sophie and Jessica had this perception that they needed to act strong because they were leaders on their team. Sophie expressed:

When you're looked at as a leader, it's really hard to show weakness or you don't want to show weakness because you're looked at to be strong. I'd say that I internalized a lot of it for a long time. It had gotten to points where it'd be all built up because I wanted to act so strong or seem so strong and not only do it for myself, but brush things off and do it for my team because I can't show this weakness. I definitely did not deal with it well.

Rachyl was aware of the sports psychologist, but stated that if she wanted to talk with her, she "had no clue where she was located". A few of the participants had utilized the sports psychologist, but felt that they did not personally connect with her. Katherine said, "I went to her a few times and she just personally wasn't for me." Lauryn pointed out her frustration at times with the resource, explaining, "I could be wrong, but I feel like what we talk about in my sports psychologist meetings gets back to my coach." Alexandra met with the sports psychologist once and stated, "It was awful. Sorry. I just felt like I was talking and she was just sitting there because she can't really teach you what to do." Overall, the majority of participants had either utilized the sports psychologists within the athletic department or were at least aware of the option, however participants had different perceptions on this resource.

Social Self

Overall, participants continually referenced a sense of support in largely impacting their student-athlete experience, particularly the support of their teammates and athletic trainer. Sense

of support refers to the relationships that participants described being most important in their student-athlete experience. Most participants also mentioned wanting to see more support for women's sports at the institution as being a needed change regarding the female student-athlete experience. Support meant different things to each individual participant, however it was mentioned multiple times throughout each interview.

My Teammates

Every participant mentioned their teammates in some way or another, particularly in reference to the relationships and bonds formed with each other. These student-athletes were spending more time with teammates than anyone else throughout their student-athlete experience. Jessica, Hannah and Demi all mentioned surrounding themselves with positive teammates whose positive energy was contagious. Taylor explained, "Once you find those really good people, you can start to tell a difference in yourself. When you're around the right people, it can really bring you up and bring out the best in you." Who you surround yourself with continued to recur as an important factor in affecting one's mental health and well-being.

The relationships formed throughout one's sport was by far the overwhelming response when each of the participants was asked what aspects of the student-athlete experience were most rewarding to them. Participants saw teammates as best friends, life-long friends, and as people that they could turn to for support. Kerry expressed that the friends she has found through her sport are people that she will be friends with the rest of her life. Beth mentioned, "You always know these girls are going to be your bridesmaids one day and you're still creating the relationships with them...They're my best friends. You kind of go through it all together, so you create this unbreakable bond in a way, which is really cool." Baylie referred to her team as a family, stating, "Hands down, it's a group of people that I will keep in touch with forever and it's

people that have made me who I am today and have helped support me throughout everything. That's one of the biggest positives that I have gotten out of my swim career.”

Although all the participants discussed the importance of their closeness with teammates, many also referred to times of conflict and drama within their team. Many times it was a reference to drama as a result of being a part of a team with all women. Alexandra felt that competing with a bunch of girls was one of the most challenging aspects of her experience, particularly because she spent so much time with them:

...Because our season is so long. You're playing with these girls and you're with them all the time. So I think a lot of girls at one time is a lot of drama and I feel like that's kind of impacted me as a student-athlete. I've been like do I even want to be here or be around them anymore.

Regina ranked unnecessary drama on her team as the number one factor that has affected her mental health since arriving on campus. She mentioned learning how to get good grades as challenging at times, but later said, “That was nothing in comparison to the challenges I've had with teammates. I feel like I put more mental energy into dealing with relationships on our team than I do to actually staying up with what I should be doing in my sport.” It should be noted however that Regina is one of two participants that was on a co-ed team. Many participants also noted that their teammates affected the culture of the team. Caelynn reflected on her team dynamic her freshman and sophomore years, “...the culture was just terrible on our team and having to go out there and practice everyday just kind of sucked and it wasn't exciting because I didn't want to go do it. It was just hard going out there everyday and giving 100%.” Ashley described that “being around a group of girls that I had never met before and all being from

different places from all over the country that have been raised differently and exposed to different things” significantly affected her mental health.

Athletic Trainer

Participants continued to emphasize the training room and their sport specific athletic trainer as a resource they utilize in the athletic department pertaining to their well-being. An athletic trainer was seen as a mentor, someone who was willing to listen, and someone who female student-athletes trusted because in many instances, they were in everyday contact with the student-athlete. For example, Bella trusted her athletic trainer, saying:

She’s just always around, so I end up venting to her about a lot of stuff. Even though she doesn’t have a psychologist title to her name, I feel like since I spend so much time with her, she pretty much is one of those to me. Just having someone who is open and willing to listen on campus was very helpful.

Avery felt that she coped with issues by talking to the athletic trainers, acknowledging, “They understand. It’s different for adults to get what you’re going through, but they really see it in 15 other athletes. They truly get it. I would go talk to them a lot.” Participants emphasized that their athletic trainers were always willing to help if they needed anything, even outside of injuries and sport related issues. Lauren gave a “shout out” to her athletic trainer, pointing out that she should have mentioned her much earlier in the interview than when she did. Regina felt that her athletic trainer was one of the greatest mentors she had ever had and someone who she trusted with everything. Kerry expressed that her athletic trainer always gave her objective advice, stating, “If I’m in the wrong, she’ll tell me but she’ll never be belittling about it. One of the things I realized this past semester was that she never made me feel like I wasn’t good enough.” Athletic trainers

were seen as non-bias resources, ultimately wanting what was best for the female student-athlete, regardless of athletic performance.

Additional Support for Women's Sports

When asked what change a participant wanted to see regarding the female student-athlete experience, the overwhelming response was more support for women's sports. Support meant different things to different participants. Many participants felt their sport did not get much recognition compared to male sports. Four participants noted the support that the athletic department gives to the men's basketball and football teams, particularly with the hype that the athletic department's social media accounts give to these specific male revenue sports. Alexa expressed that her team deserved more recognition, especially on social media platforms, stating, "That's a big one, the social media aspect. The athletic department's social media accounts, that's how we bring in people to basketball or football games. They hype it up so much, but with other sports, you don't see it as much." Hannah also pointed out that there was much more excitement around male sports and she wanted to see the athletic department giving the women's sports more credit. Throughout her interview, we went on to say, "You always get those emails about men's basketball or football, but you never see anything about my sport or any other women's sport unless they're in the tournament or something."

Rachyl felt that women's sports deserved more student support, but was not sure how to get that information through to anyone in the athletic department, stating, "As students here, you know how well the men's teams are doing, but not the women's teams." Jessica felt that more support in general was needed. She suggested, "Like physically going to the basketball games. Going to the volleyball games. Just supporting each other. There's so much more attendance for men's basketball and football and it could be boosted up for the girls." Caelynn felt that female

athletes need to be taken more serious in all aspects of the student-athlete experience and Aria thought that women's sports were "really slept on", mentioning that the athletic department gives a lot of time to the male sports.

Physical Self

Relevant to exercise (i.e., third-order factor) within the *Physical Self*, 17 participants described performing well individually or team wise as the most rewarding aspect of their student-athlete experience. Performing well refers to the individual or team success that a participant has experienced during her collegiate athletic career.

Performing Well

Many participants described their individual success within their sport as particular moments when they felt like they were truly thriving in their overall well-being. Kate described her peak performance as a moment that left her feeling confident about herself in all aspects of her life. Additionally, Baylie qualified for the Olympic Trials the summer after her freshman year, a highlight of her student-athlete experience. She described it as a life goal of hers, stating, "When I finally made it, it gave me a lot of confidence." While Regina had a rocky start her freshman year in regards to team drama, she felt that was truly thriving because she was "making really big gains really early on in a short period of time." Sarah also described her individual success as the most rewarding aspect of her student-athlete experience, specifically when she earned a medal at the ACC Championship. She believed that most people did not understand her sport, but a medal was something she could physically take home to visually show others. Jessica did not record a personal best in her individual sport until her junior year, but discussed the positive emotions that followed the performance, "It was the best feeling I'd had in awhile. It brought me up because I was in a whole entire slump in what felt like was two years. I finally got

hope that I could do it now.” Beth described her individual performance as the single most factor that influenced her overall well-being as a student-athlete, “Some months, I feel really positive, really good. And it does have a lot to do with how I’m performing. Obviously winning, you’re in a better spot with your coaches. When you start losing, you start doubting yourself.”

Participants felt proud to be a part of something bigger than themselves and see their hard work pay off. I could sense Sophie’s genuine excitement when she described success in her sport, stating, “You’re truly thriving when you’re winning and you’re doing well. Also when your team’s succeeding and you’re part of something so much bigger than yourself. Those are the thriving times, when you’re breaking records and doing all that kind of stuff.” Hannah, Rachyl, Sarah, and Erin all mentioned their team’s appearance in the NCAA tournament as the most rewarding aspect of their student-athlete experience. Erin described national appearances and conference championships as something incredibly special that she was able to share with her teammates. Sarah felt that she was a part of changing the culture of her sport’s program when her team made the NCAA tournament for the first time in five year, instilling a sense of confidence in her. Hannah described her team’s transformation from winning only 26% of their games to advancing deep in the NCAA tournament in one year, reflecting, “I’ve never been more proud of anything I’ve ever done than that.” Katherine related, “Most rewardingly selfishly might be my personal accomplishments, but I will say one of the biggest things was our women’s team winning ACC’s two years ago. That was huge because I didn’t know what I was stepping into and what that goal entailed until we were there and actually did it.” As exemplified in these quotes, performing well individually as well as collectively is an essential part in positively influencing one’s optimal well-being and overall experience.

Contextual Variables

The IS-WEL model recognizes that an individual's wellness is both affected by and has an effect on the surrounding world. Local, institutional, global, and chronometrical factors are considerations within the model (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Within the context of the student-athlete environment, the participants revealed this transitional period of freshman year as being extremely difficult in all aspects of their well-being. Understanding the transitional factors that a student-athlete's freshman year can have on an individual's sense of wellness is essential. This sub-theme of freshman year blues involved various aspects of well-being, but I felt that it fit best within the contextual variables of the model.

Freshman Year Blues

One of the most substantial sub-themes emerging from the data was participants discussion of their freshman year. Freshman year blues represents the defining aspects of the transitional period of freshman year had on the experiences of the participants. 16/20 of participants referenced their freshman year in some aspect when describing their student-athlete experience. Many of the experiences describing freshman year encompassed the struggle adapting to a new environment and learning the variables associated with the student-athlete lifestyle. Hannah referenced her freshman year as a critical time in college in which she felt her overall well-being decreased in terms of confidence, largely due to the fact that she had moved away from home and was surrounded by so many great athletes. Ashley described the new environment as very difficult to adapt to, stating, "My freshman and sophomore years were very hard on me. Being away from family and everyone I know and coming to a new place where I know nobody and kind of having to trust everyone was rough." Sarah also reflected on her sadness from being away from home and began questioning why she was at the institution and if

she really wanted to be there. However, she pointed out that once she reframed her mindset, she felt that her student-athlete experience improved. Rachyl, a then 18-year old freshman, believed that it was up to the young athletes themselves to find the resources needed, even if they were not presented, which she described as difficult for her at times.

Four of the participants referenced some type of struggle in terms of connecting with their team and learning the team dynamic their freshman year. Caelynn detailed her freshman year as definitely negatively affecting her well-being, stating:

Freshman year was a struggle for sure with the culture and the team. It was not good. It was miserable. I was miserable every day just having to go to practice. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to travel. The girls just weren't nice. I don't know how I got through it. I really don't. I literally don't know how I'm still playing. It just was not good.

Her teammate, Ashley, struggled to find people she considered friends her freshman year because her teammates were a group of girls from all different states and backgrounds. She described having to hold her feelings in and further added, "I just remember always being in my room alone and it was awful. It's so depressing when you think about it because I knew all my teammates would be out doing stuff and I would be in my room doing nothing." Regina described a similar rough freshman transition because she did not connect with anyone on her team, commenting, "Even though I had upperclassman who were mentoring me, I felt very distant and hated my first year. Absolutely hated it. I cried almost every single night. I called my mom the very first night and told her that I made the wrong decision and that I wanted to go home."

Participants described freshman year as a learning experience that took time to fully understand. Katherine called it a "big, big transition" from freshman to sophomore year,

specifically with learning a coach and program. Rachyl believed that many freshmen, including herself, chase perfectionism, which creates hesitation and overthinking within their sport. Especially her freshman year, Caelynn searched for perfection, “I think all athletes search for perfection. You just can’t get it. I think that eagerness to be perfect makes you feel like you failed.”

Many of the participants referenced freshman year as difficult if they were not physically performing well or up to expectations. When Baylie did not perform as well at the conference championship as everyone was expecting her to, she felt that things started to become much harder mentally her freshman year, explaining, “Not performing to those standards, it really crushed me and then I was kind of brushed aside from the coaches at that point. That was a hard struggle and I really had to fight back to where I wanted to be.” Additionally, Ashley got injured her freshman year, causing her performance to be sub-par for where she wanted it to be. Not being able to perform then created negative thoughts about her self-image, in which she described as being the hardest part of the start of her student-athlete experience, but later commented that it has significantly improved over the years.

Six participants referenced having a negative body image perception their freshman year. Jessica and Beth mentioned that they had gained 15 and 20 pounds each that year, respectively. Sophie reflected that she ate “horribly” her freshman year and Demi stated, “I gained a lot of weight after my first semester because I wasn’t with it and I wasn’t taking care of myself. I definitely was just eating whatever whenever.” After Hannah gained weight in the spring of her freshman year, she began feeling “super self conscious” and struggled with body image issues within her sport. Hannah and Beth both referenced lifting heavy weights for the first time as one of the reasons for the weight gain.

Overall, as described in these quotes, freshman year was a time in which many participants reflected on the transitional period as an experience that encompassed struggle for the female student-athlete.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the collegiate female student-athlete experience in relation to holistic wellness. Thus, semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with 20 American female collegiate upperclassmen student-athletes. Two overarching research questions guided this study. First, what factors of the student-athlete experience impact various aspects of a female student-athlete's well-being? Second, what areas of support within the athletic department impact a student-athlete's well-being? The IS-WEL model was used as a framework to explore the wellness of the student-athlete, as it describes optimal health and well-being among second- and third-order factors of the model that align with multiple aspects of the student-athlete lifestyle. Using a deductive analysis approach, I developed sub-themes based on the second-order factors (i.e., *Creative Self*, *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential*, *Physical Self*) and contextual variables of the model. This included: *Creative Self- Pressure, Coach-Athlete Verbal Communication, and Injuries*; *Coping Self- The Grind and Sports Psychologist*; *Social Self- My Teammates, Athletic Trainer, and Additional Support for Women's Sports*; *Physical Self- Performing Well*; and Contextual Variables- *Freshman Year Blues*. Based on what participants were saying, pressure, coach-athlete verbal communication, and freshman year were the three most prominent factors impacting one's student-athlete experience, but all 10 sub-themes discussed were mentioned substantially in participant interviews. It is also important to note that no significant findings from this study came out within the *Essential Self*, as you will see in the discussion below.

Participants continued to discuss their mental health as critical to their well-being. Interestingly, mental health was mentioned in every participant interview, however mental well-being is not a second-order factor of the IS-WEL model. While this model recognizes the

interactions of multiple components of wellness to make up the total person, the findings of this study suggest that multiple components of wellness dictate one's mental health. This model has been used as a framework in many higher education studies (e.g., Osborn, 2005; Perepiczka, & Balkin, 2010), yet some of the findings in this study did not fit within the model. Based on the definition of each second-order factor of the model, I placed the sub-themes within the second-order factor that she felt best fit.

These findings can be used to strengthen the limited literature on student-athlete wellness and the experiences of collegiate female student-athletes, as well as be applied to coaches, administrators, and all support staff within collegiate athletic departments to enhance the female student-athlete experience. This chapter includes a summary of the findings according to the IS-WEL model and related to previous and current literature on student-athlete wellness, followed by implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Creative Self

Participants discussed challenges related to the *Creative Self* (i.e., Thinking, Emotions, Control, Work, Positive Humor; Myers & Sweeney, 2004). In terms of the first research question of this study, participants continually referenced pressure, verbal communication issues with their coaches, and injuries as factors negatively affecting their well-being, specifically their mental health. An overarching sub-theme was this feeling of pressure throughout a female student-athlete's experience. Many participants identified pressure as one of the most challenging aspects of their student-athlete experience or as a factor, thus supporting existing literature that identifies pressure to perform as a frequent source of stress for student-athletes (e.g., Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Brown et al., 2014; Brunet, 2010). It is important to note that participants discussed pressure in various forms. For example, half of the participants felt

pressure to look a certain way in their sport, furthering literature that the sport environment heightens body and weight-related concerns (Greenleaf, 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2009).

Additionally, these findings support the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as the external pressures participants described may threaten to undermine their intrinsic motivation, performance, and satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The SDT represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality, proposing that all human beings have a need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon & Watson, 2011). In the student-athlete experience, coaches can be seen as the dominant individuals and student-athletes as the subordinate individuals. According to the SDT, receiving autonomy support for authorities/dominant figures should be important for any subordinate, as all humans are presumed to have an innate need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which may explain a coach's approval, pressure, and/or expectations can threaten a student-athlete's motivation and performance. Ultimately, coaches decide playing time and can make decisions that a student-athlete's scholarship and future life. In addition to the pressure created by the coaches, the demands (i.e., practice, travel, academic, competition) of being a student-athlete often create a substantial amount of pressure on the athlete, therefore highlighting a greater risk for these athletes to experience mental health problems than their non-athlete peers (Brown et al., 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009). Coaches, administrators, and support staff must be aware of the various risk factors in the sport environment, including pressure to perform, in order to create a culture of athletics that acknowledges the needs of their student-athletes.

Additionally, one of the overarching themes found as a primary factor affecting a female student-athlete's well-being was verbal communication issues with their respective coach. It is no secret that coaches play a major role in their current student-athletes' lives and are often the

front lines to their athlete's mental health (Vickers, 2014). Interestingly, 12 participants had a male head coach, while eight participants had a female as their head coach. Yet, participants with coaches of either gender expressed communication issues between the two individuals. It was evident that participants felt strongly about their relationships with their coaches, but had experienced verbal communication issues at some point in their collegiate athletic career that created conflict between the coach and athlete. Three participants even mentioned that they questioned continuing to play their sport after the way their coach talked to them.

Emotional abuse has been studied as a key issue within the youth sport context (Gervis, Rhind, & Luzar, 2016), however little is known about emotional abuse within collegiate athletics. Stirling and Kerr (2009) found that acts of emotional abuse may be harmful to an individual's affective, behavior, cognitive, or physical well-being. Participants never used the word "abuse" to describe these specific situations with their coaches, but many described it as mistreatment. Overall, the findings indicate that negative psychological effects may result from female student-athletes' experiences of communication issues in the coach-athlete relationship, potentially verbal or emotional abuse. These findings support a recent NCAA study that found that women and Division I student-athletes are more likely to be critical of their coaches in regards to ethical leadership (NCAA, 2016a). However, it is important to note that like coaches, all female student-athletes are different. Participants mentioned how some female student-athletes are more thick-skinned and can tolerate harsher coaching behavior while others are more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable than others. At this specific institution studied, collegiate coaches are reminded to utilize a leadership approach that criticizes the performance, not the person. Coaches must be particularly aware of the influence they have on the experiences of their student-athletes.

The final theme within this second-order factor is injuries. Participants described physical injuries they dealt with throughout their experience and the emotional toll it had on their mental health. Injuries are often an unavoidable part of sport participation and can these findings support existing literature (e.g., Brown et al., 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009) on the severity that injuries can have on a student-athlete's mental health.

Coping Self

Along with the *Creative Self*, participants also acknowledged the importance of prioritizing their mental health within the *Coping Self* (i.e., leisure, stress-management, self-worth, realistic beliefs) to handle the demands of being a student-athlete. Participants discussed high levels of mental well-being as being critical to their holistic wellness, but found it challenging to actually prioritize their mental health. Participants continuously reflected on the daily grind of the student-athlete lifestyle to be stressful, exhausting, or overwhelming at times. This further supports the NCAA's recent findings that 30% of student-athletes self-reported that they have been intractably overwhelmed during the past month and nearly one-fourth reported being exhausted from the mental demands of the sport (Brown et al., 2014).

However, while most of the participants reported difficulty in managing the unique stressors commonly associated with the student-athlete experience, they also described the utilization of the sports psychologist to cope with the unique stressors in times of need. These findings contradict the majority of previous research suggesting that the culture of athletics may inhibit student-athletes from seeking help (e.g., Brown et al., 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; Lopez & Levy, 2013; Watson, 2005). Interestingly though, more recent research has shown that athletes are becoming more open to the idea of seeking help for their mental health (Barnard, 2016). Participants may have felt comfortable seeking help within the athletic department

because many of their teams were already utilizing the sports psychologist, but with a team approach. From the team setting, female student-athletes may have already built trust with the sports psychologist and then felt more comfortable reaching out to her individually. Furthermore, with the high demand of student-athletes utilizing the sports psychologist at this specific institution, it could be possible that female student-athletes utilized the sports psychologist because the resource is available within the athletic department. A recent study by Gavrilova, Donohue, and Galante (2017) found that student-athletes are more likely to seek help when the program is targeted toward a sports culture. Regardless, previous literature (e.g., Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009; Wolanin et al., 2016) suggests that female student-athletes are more susceptible to mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorders) and these findings support the importance of prioritizing a student-athlete's mental health and educating female student-athletes on the benefits of utilizing a sports psychologist in house.

Social Self

Participants generally expressed this sense of support within the *Social Self*, specifically the support of their teammates and athletic trainers. Support meant different things to each participant, however it was always referenced as enhancing one's overall well-being, further supporting existing literature. Contradicting Watson and Kissinger's (2007) findings that student-athletes have been shown to have lower levels of wellness in this area of *Social Self* than other second-order factors, participants described feeling connected to teammates, family, and athletic trainer. A strong sense of support is associated with lower levels of mental illness and higher quality of life (Watson & Kissinger, 2007) and a strong predictor of holistic wellness (Williams, 2007). DeFreese and Smith (2014) found that it is nearly impossible to remove all negative experiences from sport, however when negative experiences do occur, it is important to

offer the necessary support and resources to cope with these experiences. The strong social relationships that females have are important in the way they cope with stress (Hagiwara, Iwatsuki, Isogai, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2017). Social support is a factor in the well-being of the student-athlete population and these findings suggest it is imperative for student-athletes to have a strong sense of social support throughout their student-athlete experience.

Additionally, female student-athletes mentioned the importance of their athletic trainer for support throughout their experience. This may be the most interesting finding of the entire study as participants genuinely seemed very excited to praise their athletic trainers for their guidance beyond just injury prevention or rehabilitation. Interesting enough, all athletic trainers mentioned were women. Perhaps this is because female student-athletes saw these women as motherly figures. Participants felt that their athletic trainers supported them in all aspects of life and were always there if they needed them for anything. Brown et al. (2014) found that athletic trainers are often the first point of contact in managing mental health concerns. Athletic trainers assume several roles and responsibilities, but these findings support previous literature suggesting that perhaps the most important role is that of a counselor (e.g., Misasi et al., 1996; Washington-Lofgren, Westerman, Sullivan, & Nashman, 2004).

Lastly, when asked what changes participants would like to see regarding the female student-athlete experience, the overarching answer was more support for women's sports. These female student-athletes wished to see more support for their sports in terms of social media presence on their athletic department's social media accounts and fan attendance. Studies have found that media coverage of women's sports is inadequate when compared with coverage of men's sports (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Bishop, 2003; Kian, Vincent & Mondello, 2009). While these studies did not specifically target only athletic department's social media platforms (e.g.,

Instagram, Twitter), they do suggest that there is an unequal type of coverage in regards to media exposure of women's sports. Schleader and Wagstaff (2018) state, "Such misrepresentations of women's sports has been argued to be responsible for the lack of interest in women's sports from sports fans and reinforces the public's general negative attitudes towards women" (p.1).

Participants mentioned the lack of attendance at women's sports versus men's sports, such as football and men's basketball, at their institution. While fan attendance is not entirely in the athletic department's control, athletic departments can prioritize awareness and media exposure to coverage of women's sports. It is possible that much of the media exposure of an institution's teams has to do with the athletic teams that are performing the best. For example, regardless of gender, a team that is winning conference championships or having a record-breaking year, will generate more media attention than another team at that institution that may be struggling that year. Regardless, this topic could be explored in greater depth to better understand the interests and attitudes towards collegiate women's sports.

Essential Self

No major themes relevant to the *Essential Self* were found during data analysis.

Participants were asked how they would identify themselves outside of their sport, but no themes emerged. Watson & Kissinger (2007) found that student-athletes have lower levels of wellness within the *Essential Self* than other traditional students not participating in collegiate athletics. While previous literature (e.g., Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Ferrante & Etzel; 2009; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) suggests that much of a student-athlete's sense of purpose is connected to their identification with their athletic role, female student-athletes in this study were able to identify outside of their sport. At first, many expressed a bit of difficulty in answering how they identify outside of their sport, but then described their academic major or personality traits to identify

themselves. Participants were all upperclassmen, including 14 seniors, and could perhaps matured over the course of their experience to expand their perspective and see beyond their identification as an athlete. Future research could better understand how student-athletes view themselves through different lenses, including all third-order factors (i.e., spirituality, gender identity, cultural identity, self-care) of the *Essential Self*.

Physical Self

Within the *Physical Self*, performing well continued to be described throughout interviews. Participants felt that they were truly thriving in terms of well-being when they were performing well individually or as a team. Interestingly, many participants described their physical performance in their sport as the single most important factor that influences their overall well-being. This is no surprise as student-athletes dedicate an overwhelming amount of their time attempting to perfect their craft in various ways (e.g., practice, competition, injury prevention and rehabilitation, sleep, nutrition) and when they feel as if they failed, this is likely to impact their well-being. Previous and recent literature continue to reiterate the impact performance has on mental health (e.g., Brown et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2016; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018). While peak performance can positively influence one's well-being, repeated poor performances can lead to symptoms of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or substance abuse (Gulliver et al., 2012). It is critical that these student-athletes are aware and educated on the importance of training their mind, known as sports psychology, in addition to just their body in order to achieve peak performance. Sports psychology is defined as "the study of how thoughts and behavior influence athletic performance, and vice versa" (Monica, 2019, p.1). Today, sport psychology is continuing to gain awareness as not only a resource that enhances peak sport performance, but also helps athletes

achieve optimal human performance. The mental skills student-athletes develop through their sport can be applied to all areas of their daily life. But first, these student-athletes must be aware of their sport at the psychological level. A sport is about so much more than having the perfect game or throwing the perfect pitch.

Contextual Variables

As part of the first research question, participants repeatedly referenced their freshman year as a factor of the student-athlete experience in which they felt negatively affected their overall well-being. Transitioning into college and being in a new environment, along with the additional demands of collegiate athletics, led many of the participants to feeling stressed and wanting to go home upon arriving at the institution. Although transitioning from high school to college can be difficult for any student, evidence suggests that student-athletes may experience greater levels of stress due to the dual demands of athletics and academics placed on them during their freshman year (Naphy, 2016). Participants identified unique stressors of their freshman year, including moving away from home, adjusting to new teammates, loss of star status, heightened expectations, and body image struggles. These findings are consistent with previous research that has specifically identified unique sources of stress experienced during the first semester of freshman year for the student-athlete including: extensive time demands, loss of star status, injuries, possibility of being benched/red-shirted their freshman year, increased academic needs, and conflicts with their coaches as challenges facing freshman student-athletes (Pritchard, 2005).

Naphy (2016) conducted a similar qualitative study, interviewing student-athletes to better understand the first-year experience. Findings indicated that first-year student-athletes struggle with time management, lack awareness of university resources, are socially

disconnected from the campus community, and relate athletic success to retention. However, this study population targeted only Division III student-athletes. Division III student-athletes do not receive athletic scholarships, thus their experiences cannot be generalized and may not be representative of student-athletes across different divisions. This present study, along with the evidence presented above, suggests that the combination of stressors a student-athlete may experience in their freshman year has a negative effect on their well-being and pleads the need for athletic departments to be proactive in supporting student-athletes as they transition to their new environment. Successfully managing the challenges of freshman year will not only enhance a student-athlete's well-being, but also enhance the overall college experience.

Practical Implications

This study has multiple implications within higher education and collegiate athletics. First, it is important to address the issue of wellness early on in the student-athlete experience. Based on the findings of this study, female student-athletes experienced challenges specifically related to their freshman year of college. This institution currently requires all student-athletes to complete two, one credit orientation courses their freshman year, designed to support student-athletes transitioning from high school to college. Topics covered in these courses include: goal setting, time management, degree audits, academic integrity, academic majors, continuing eligibility, transferable skills, and personal mission and values. Due to this course being created by the academic services department within the athletic department, the curriculum is mostly specific to academics, yet many issues facing student-athletes today are outside of the classroom. By rethinking and redeveloping the curriculum for these orientation courses from perhaps a more life skills perspective, these courses have the potential to better help student-athletes transition to college and better address all of the pressures associated with collegiate athletics. For example,

Hayes and Fudzie (2001) created an “essential guide”, which included a 20-week course curriculum. The course topics ranged from success in the classroom to strategies for being successful on the playing field. These authors heightened awareness in areas beyond just academics, such as interpersonal relations, financial literacy, media relations, and the social transition from high school to college. By rethinking the curriculum for this orientation course at this institution that tackles a more holistic view of the student-athlete experience, freshman student-athletes may be more aware and equipped to tackle the relevant issues facing them today.

Second, the importance of athletic trainers in a student-athlete’s life is apparent throughout this study, as their role goes well beyond the care and prevention of athletic injuries. Student-athletes seek their athletic trainers for support, yet these athletic trainers may not be prepared to counsel student-athletes. The National Trainers’ Athletic Association (NATA)’s website states, “athletic trainers have the ability to identify ‘red flags’ as well as provide the opportunity to be an advocate for the welfare for the individual” (National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA); 2019, p. 1). However, after speaking with an athletic trainer at this institution, it was apparent that athletic trainers receive specific training in physical injury issues (e.g., concussions, orthopedic injuries), yet receive no specific training on mental health and counseling. Athletic trainers more so acknowledge the mental health scenario, but are taught to refer the student-athlete to appropriate professionals, such as the athletic department’s sports psychologist. Based on my findings, perhaps the NATA needs to go a step further beyond just providing resources on their website, and provide adequate training for athletic trainers. The NATA must include curriculum, as well as continuing education, that equip and prepare athletic trainers with current information and the necessary skills for counseling student-athletes. Athletic

trainers should be aware of their current training room procedures for providing mental health services to their student-athletes.

Within this specific athletic department studied, the sports psychology department has initiated individual meetings with various other departments (e.g., strength and conditioning, academic services), however no individual meetings have been scheduled with the athletic training department. These meetings are meant to be intentional cross training between departments in order to better educate all involved, within a student-athlete's day-to-day life, on the symptoms of mental health issues and how to recognize these symptoms in the athletes they work with. This collaborative approach hopes to ensure that no one department pertaining to student-athlete welfare is siloed and all are intentionally working together to ensure the health and well-being of student-athletes. Based on my findings, it is imperative that this cross training with athletic trainers and sports psychologists takes place sooner rather than later.

Additionally, athletic departments can educate student-athletes on the importance of prioritizing their mental health. Student-athletes may believe that a sports psychologist can be utilized to enhance athletic performance, but sports psychology practice can enrich the functioning in multiple aspects of one's life, such as school, relationships, family, and health. Perhaps rewording the name of the sports psychology department to a more holistic title could enhance the utilization of these trained counselors. Sports psychologists could be viewed as "life skills coaches" or "performance coaches" to reduce the stigma around student-athletes and mental health.

40% of student-athletes at this institution have met with the athletic department's sports psychologist within the past year (Tim, personal communication, November 30, 2018), but a student-athlete's mental health and well-being can also be enhanced without having to see a

sports psychologist. For the 60% of athletes that have not utilized the sports psychologist, an athletic department can support and serve student-athletes with other resources, such as educating student-athlete on everyday mental health skills that can enhance their lives and well-being beyond just their athletic performance. Some challenges and risk factors within the collegiate athletics environment may be unavoidable, such as high training loads and athletic pressures (Brown et al., 2014), but athletic departments can incorporate additional mental health resources, beyond sports psychologists, that combine education, prevention, and self-care to equip student-athletes with the skills and knowledge when such challenges do arise. Mental health is a major resource for athletes in relation to their performance, development, and holistic wellness. By increasing awareness of wellness-related topics (i.e., mindfulness, coping strategies, meditation), student-athletes may be more self-aware and reflective of their own actions, thoughts, and emotions in their everyday life.

Lastly, collegiate athletic personnel should continue to educate all student-athletes on the resources available within the athletic department. Based on the findings of this study, student-athletes want to feel supported, yet some were unaware of what's available or the importance of taking advantage of the resources available to them within the athletic department and sports culture. Addressing wellness is critical to the development of a healthy lifestyle and will also ultimately influence a student-athlete's sport performance (Watson, 2015). Athletic departments must be intentional about their collaborative approach to student-athlete wellness in order to ensure that individual departments within the entire athletic department are not being siloed.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study holds important implications for future research on the holistic wellness of collegiate student-athletes. The findings of this study demonstrate the interconnectedness of a

student-athlete's well-being, along with the complexity of the student-athlete experience. First, future studies should use the IS-WEL model to focus on the strengths of an individual's student-athlete experience. Findings from this study leaned more heavily on factors negatively affecting a female student-athlete's well-being, yet this model uses a strength-based approach. By creating an interview guide focusing on the strengths as opposed to weaknesses, collegiate athletic personnel can help student-athletes understand the components of wellness and the interactions of those components that enhance the student-athlete experience and ultimately lead to a healthier way of living. Secondly, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. To participate in this study, participants must have been American female student-athletes in their third or fourth year of eligibility at this specific Power Five NCAA Division I institution. Future studies should focus on the lived experience of the male student-athletes, determining if factors impacting a female student-athlete's well-being are gender specific. Additionally, studying student-athlete wellness among other dimensions, such as specific racial demographics, international studies, or younger student-athletes, warrants future research.

Future research should focus more on specific aspects of wellness within the student-athlete experience. This study covered an overview of student-athlete wellness, however other studies should narrow their focus and examine sub-themes of this study in greater depth. For example, verbal communication between a coach and athlete can be explored more richly. The participants described specific situations when they did not agree with the way their coaches spoke to them, leading to negative thoughts and emotions. Future research can examine the impact the gender of the coach has on how the female student-athlete perceives the verbal communication between the two. For example, what characteristics do female student-athletes look for in a healthy, two-way relationship with their coaches?

Furthermore, support from the team's athletic trainer seemed to be an important part of the female student-athlete experience that warrants further research. Beyond injury prevention and rehabilitation, to what extent do student-athletes approach athletic trainers with personal problems, such as mental health issues or emotional conflicts? Are these specific problems related to athletic competition or outside of sport? This is a largely untapped topic of research within collegiate athletics. Lastly, a longitudinal study may be beneficial in examining wellness changes through one's student-athlete experience. Collecting data from student-athletes from the time they first step foot on campus to the completion of their collegiate athletic career can assess the impact that collegiate athletics has had on their personal well-being.

Limitations

There are limitations within this study that need to be acknowledged. First, all participants were from the same institution and same NCAA division. Thus, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to every collegiate female student-athlete. Additionally, it is important to note that no two college experiences are identical. I attempted to gain a wide range of experiences by initially randomly selecting student-athletes, but as the study evolved, snowball sampling was particularly useful. In an effort to recruit other prospective participants, current participants were asked to volunteer the name of teammates they felt would have an interest in participating in the study. It is possible that the athletes who chose to participate in the study are the ones who had more positive experiences and feelings towards their student-athlete experience. For example, Ashley recommended her teammate to participate in the study, but the teammate later decided against it because she had experienced challenges within her time as a student-athlete at the institution that she did not want to discuss.

Additionally, potential researcher bias is a limitation of this study. I was a former student-athlete at this institution and currently work in the athletic department from which the sample was generated and knew several participants on a personal level. While the researcher bias may have been a potential limitation, it did allow me to be accepted within the population I was studying. Many participants agreed to participate in the study because they were familiar with me and may have felt more comfortable honestly discussing their experiences in the interview. I adhered to established techniques for data collection and analysis, however it is important to recognize that each researcher may have a slightly different interpretation of the same text.

The final limitation of this study is related to the IS-WEL model selected as a framework to explore the collegiate female student-athlete experience. I chose this model because of its validation from other higher education studies (e.g., Spurgeon & Myers, 2010; Watson & Kissinger, 2007; Williams, 2007). It seemed to fit well, but theoretically it is a strength-based model that accounts for an individual's strengths and recognizes that strengths in one area can help overcome weaknesses in other areas (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). However, the findings in this study shifted much more significantly to the negative factors associated with the student-athlete experience rather than the positive aspects or strengths of the experience. Future research could examine if there are other ways to holistic wellness in regards to student-athlete well-being.

Conclusion

This study aimed to better understand the lived experience of the female student-athlete and factors that impact aspects of her well-being. The findings of this study shed a new light on the complexity of a female student-athlete's wellness, in addition to the importance of prioritizing student-athlete mental health. Findings clearly indicate that female student-athletes

encounter challenges in achieving optimal well-being, such as pressure to perform, verbal communication issues with their coaches, and freshman year blues. Participants emphasized the importance of sense of support throughout their experience, including the support of their teammates and athletic trainer, as well as revealed the importance of the sports psychologists in coping with the demands of being a collegiate student-athlete. This study adds more richness to the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness model that is commonly used in higher education and counseling, but also highlights the need for future research on the female student-athlete experience and student-athlete wellness. Finally, this study has cultivated a greater depth of understanding and awareness of the female student-athlete experience and their identified wellness needs for those working in collegiate athletics.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RECRUITING MATERIALS

Hello (Potential Participant's Name),

My name is Bethany Neeley and I'm currently a master's student studying Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management. As a component of my academic curriculum, I'm conducting a research study regarding the lived experience of the female student-athlete in relation to holistic wellness. I am hoping to conduct in-depth interviews with female student-athletes in their third or fourth year of eligibility. This would be one interview lasting 30-45 minutes and is strictly confidential. This interview is voluntary and your participation or lack therefore, will have no impact on your standing at your institution or within your athletic team.

If you would be interested in participating in my study, please let me know and we can set up a time to get together. I am hoping to set up interviews for December and January. Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated! Feel free to contact me at bcneeley@ncsu.edu with any questions you may have.

Best,

Bethany Neeley

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello, my name is Bethany Neeley and I am a graduate student at this institution working on my own research study regarding the experience of the female student-athlete and holistic wellness.

I am interested in learning more about your personal student-athlete experience in collegiate athletics. You have been asked to talk with me based on your involvement as an upperclassman female student-athlete at a Division I Power 5 university. I plan to use your input as part of my study to better understand challenges and opportunities relating to a female student-athlete's well-being and overall perceptions of the student-athlete experience. Before we begin, I'd like to share with you a consent form for you to review.

[Participant reads consent form and provides written consent]

Do you have any questions before we get started?

I would like to record our discussion today to make sure I don't miss any of your comments. I can take notes, but often they are not as complete as when I take the discussion. I will first ask you some introduction questions. After those questions, may I turn on the audio recorder?

Introduction

First, can you please tell me what sport you participate in?

What year of athletic eligibility are you currently in?

What are you majoring in?

Can you describe your background/participation in sport, including any participation outside of high school sport?

What brought you to this university?

In general, what are your thoughts on your student-athlete experience thus far?

Are you on scholarship?. If so, what percentage and how do you feel about it?

Next, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your well-being. Well-being is the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. I will be asking you about a combination of factors that influence your health and well-being, including emotional, physical, social, and intellectual factors.

Overview / Total Person

What comes to mind when you think of a student-athlete's wellness/well-being?

How would you describe your overall well-being since you arrived on campus?

How do you identify yourself outside of sport? Explain who you are outside of your sport.

IS-WEL Model

Describe in what ways you prioritize your own health and wellness? How do you take care of yourself in order to be the healthiest and happiest you? [*Essential Self*]

What factors affect your mental health and well-being? Can you describe these factors? How do you cope with these issues you're facing? [*Coping Self*]

Have you ever struggled with body image issues within your sport? If so, when did it start? Can you elaborate on this please? Do you feel pressure to look a certain way in your sport? How would you describe your nutrition? [*Creative/Coping/Physical Self*]

Do you ever feel like you've been mistreated by anyone in the athletic department? If so, can you describe your experience? Have you experienced any type of verbal or emotional abuse in your sport? If so, can you give some examples? How does this affect your thinking and emotions? [*Creative/Coping Self*]

Can you describe the relationships that have been most important to you during your college experience? In general, do you feel like you have someone to turn to for support? If so, who? Can you describe the forms of mentorship you currently have in your life? Who are they? How did you meet them? How do they support you? [*Social Self*]

Do you feel that social media has affected your well-being in any way, either positively or negatively? Can you describe the ways in which it does, if any? [*Coping Self*]

Challenges of Student-Athlete Experience

What aspects of the student-athlete experience are most challenging for you? Do you think your challenges would be similar if you were a male student-athlete? Why or why not?

Describe specific experiences in college that you felt negatively affected your well-being.

Opportunities of Student-Athlete Experience

What aspects of the student-athlete experience are most rewarding for you? Describe specific experiences in college where you felt like you were thriving.

In what areas of your life do you think you could improve your personal well-being?

Areas of Support

What resources do you utilize within the athletic department pertaining to your well-being? Are there any forms of support outside of the athletic department that you utilize on campus? Can you describe any forms of support outside of the university setting that enhance your well-being?

Where is the athletic department lacking/what do you think is lacking in terms of supporting your well-being?

What else do you think athletic departments can do to enhance student-athlete well-being?

What changes do you want to see regarding the female student-athlete experience, if any?