



# An Exploration of a Collegiate Women's Basketball Program, Health, and Student Development: A Case Study

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## Abstract

This naturalistic case study used Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Student Identity Development to explore the impact of participation in collegiate women's basketball on female student-athletes' health, well-being, and academic development. This study followed one National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I women's basketball program throughout an entire season. Data was collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to understand the lived experiences of student-athletes and coaches. Findings discovered five themes: effective communication, emotional challenges, demands of student-athletes, support systems, and motivation mindset. Results showed that participation in collegiate athletics supports student development, including competence, autonomy, and purpose, while also facing challenges with limited time, mental health, and identity development outside of their sport. Strong support systems and open communication with coaches were crucial in helping these student-athletes face these challenges to maintain academic and personal growth. Overall, this study shows the importance of a holistic approach within collegiate athletic programs to improve student-athlete development, well-being, and overall success.

**Keywords:** Student-athlete Development, Health, Well-being, Collegiate Athletes, Female Student-athletes, Women's Basketball, NCAA Division I athletes.

## Introduction

Participation in collegiate athletics plays an important role in shaping students' academic and personal development [1, 2]. For National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I female student athletes, participation often impacts their academic performance, health, and personal development in multiple ways. While participation and support of women's collegiate sports has grown, limited research has been conducted on how female athletes experience identity development and well-being within a traditional season.

Women's collegiate basketball has recently spiked with increasing participation and record-breaking viewership in recent years [3, 4]. While this progress shows improvement with gender equity, female student athletes continue to deal with their struggles in resources, research, and recognition faced. Understanding how these female student athletes experience across their season is crucial to improving practices for higher education and collegiate athletics.

This study is grounded in Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development, which visualizes student growth within the seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. While previous research has used this framework with collegiate athletes, existing studies have used mixed gender samples or focused on multiple sports rather than on a single women's team or sport. Also, limited research has viewed how student athletes participation within a season may improve or hinder identity development and overall well-being.

Recent research shows that collegiate athletics can both improve and constrain student development. Studies using Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development have shown student athletes' abilities to develop in early vectors however struggle to advance towards purpose and identity outside of their sport [6, 7]. However, research focusing on female Division I student athletes on health and development during a season is minimal.

This naturalistic case study follows one Division I women's basketball team during a season to understand how participation impacts athletes' health, well-being, and academic development. Using Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development for this study allows researchers on how the participation in women's collegiate basketball may support or hurt student development through multiple dimensions. By focusing on the lived experiences of the female student athletes, this study helps

the understanding of identity development within women's college basketball and may offer valuable insight for coaches, faculty, and administration to better support female student athletes.

## Literature Review

Student development is defined by Rodgers [8] as "the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education." Several student development theories help to understand the growth and development of collegiate students. Common theories include Erik Erickson's [9] student development theory, Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development, and William Perry's [10] cognitive theory model. Chickering and Reisser's [5] student development theory outlines the seven vectors of student development. Each model describes the stages or processes students experience throughout their collegiate career. Focusing on a holistic view of student development can help each student better understand their development and foster personal growth.

Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development has been used to study the experiences of college students and college student athletes. Although this theory is not specifically designed for athletes, the theory has a holistic framework for understanding the participation of athletics and the impacts with student development. Previous research reported that while student athletes have similar developmental experiences as traditional students, the demands of student athletes have unique challenges and opportunities [7].

Building on Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development, previous research focusing on specific vectors touch on both developmental benefits and limitations experienced by student-athletes. Research suggests that student athletes often show stronger development for their physical competency and interpersonal skills [11, 12]. Development within later vectors such as establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity may take more time for student athletes due to time constraints for opportunities outside their sport [6, 13].

Studies using Chickering and Reisser's theory with student athletes shows that athletics can help support their growth with teamwork, goal setting, and resources. Athletics may also cause limitations beyond their sport. Lockwood [6] and Scanlon [7] found that student athletes quickly progressed through earlier vectors but experienced trouble in later stages with identity and purpose outside of their sport. These results show the importance of understanding how student athletes' participation in sport shapes their development.

Health has been long understood as a holistic, multi-dimensional concept that has numerous aspects for an individual's well-being. This includes physical, mental, spiritual, environmental, emotional, and intellectual dimensions to create a balanced and healthy individual [14-19]. Female student athletes, specifically those in the Division I level, experience unique health related challenges due to the demands of their sport, academics, and expectations.

In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments was signed into law by President Richard Nixon. This amendment created a significant step towards achieving equality for genders in athletics and education. The Education Amendments Act of 1972, Title IX, states "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" [20] ("What is Title IX" section). This amendment explains the inclusion of Title IX to include various roles including education, academics, athletics, and additional support of students.

The Title IX law requires universities including athletics, intramural sports, and clubs to provide an equal opportunity for genders to ensure no student or athlete is discriminated against based on their

sex [21]. These regulations are to be upheld by nearly all private and public universities that receive any federal funding. For participation, universities are required to give equal opportunities to both men and women. While Title IX is not required to provide the exact sport for genders, they are required to provide the equal opportunity to participate. With scholarships, Title IX states men and women sports must receive equal scholarships that are similar to their participation. As for other benefits, Title IX states universities must provide equal treatment for men and women student-athletes including resources, treatment, services, and opportunities [20].

Since the creation of Title IX, the Department of Education continues to oversee to ensure the laws and regulations are met for both male and female students across the United States [21]. Challenges continue to emerge as universities continue to maintain a balance with participation, scholarships, treatment, and opportunities [20]. As the equality with Title IX continues, this continues to remain a guide of regulations to ensure policies and practices are enforced for the benefit of all students.

The unique challenges female student-athletes face throughout their collegiate career are unique and different for each individual student. These challenges can have a large impact on their overall health and well-being. Gray et. al [22] focused their research on the grit, burnout, and overall well-being of female collegiate student-athletes. Grit is often described as the courage or strength used during challenging times [23]. Gray et. al [22] discovered the type of grit a female student-athlete had a significant impact on their burnout and overall well-being. This study showed that working on improving their grit with goal-oriented strategies would potentially help the female student-athlete with their burnout and overall well-being. Female student-athletes within this study who reported higher levels of grit showed lower levels of athlete burnout and a better overall well-being. The researchers expressed the need for coaches, athletic trainers, and additional staff to understand the need to help female collegiate student-athletes develop goals and help lessen the pressure. This could potentially help lead to better overall grit for the student-athletes and less changes of experiencing student-athlete burnout [22].

Additional studies explored techniques such as resilience training and coping strategies to support student athletes' overall well-being, mental, and emotional health [24, 25]. These previous studies show the need for holistic practices for student athletes that address mental and emotional health along with their current expectations. Although there is continuous support for student athlete well-being and development, existing research examines multiple sports or genders. This limits the insight to a specific sport and gender experiences.

While there is increasing support of women's college basketball, there is still a need for research that focuses on their lived experiences. Following their development throughout a season provides insight into how their participation supports or hinders their student development and well-being. This naturalistic case study addresses these gaps by exploring the experiences of one Division I women's basketball program using Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development to better understand the student-athlete's overall development and well-being.

## Methods

This naturalistic case study describes the impact of participating collegiate sports (specifically women's basketball) on the health, well being, and academic development of female college students. A naturalistic case study is suggested when the research aims to explore a specific case within its natural environment without researcher coercion or manipulation [26, 27]. This study allowed for an in-depth understanding of student athletes' lived experiences throughout an entire season.

The primary research question for this study was:

What is the impact of participating in collegiate sports (specifically women's basketball) on the health, well being, and academic development of college students?

Sub-questions included:

1. How does participation in collegiate athletics support or hinder positive student development as described by the Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Study Identity Development?
2. How can the results of this study be used to improve the health, well being, and academic development of women collegiate basketball players?

A regional southern university was used for the focus of this research. This university is a public university established in 1925 and has grown into a larger university within the southern region with a student enrollment of about 14,000 students, 1,8000 faculty and staff, and over 150 programs of study. Purposeful sampling was used when selecting participants who were involved with the women's basketball program [27]. There were 16 female student athletes and 5 coaches who participated in this study.

For this naturalistic case study, a multi-method data collection approach was used. Throughout the study, interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to develop the best understanding of this case [26, 28]. Prior to data collection, approval from the university's Institutional Review Board and the head coach for the women's basketball team was given. All participants in the study completed an informed consent form and were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Throughout the season, observations included practices, conditioning, team activities, and games. The researcher engaged in observation while recording detailed field notes to understand the context, behaviors, and dynamics.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the student athletes and coaches to understand experiences related to their sport, health, well being, and academic development. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Document analysis helped with observations and interviews with review of materials identified during the data collection.

Throughout the study, data analysis was a continuous process from the beginning of the first data collection [27]. As the data was processed and reviewed, the record for the case study was developed. The case study record consisted of transcribed interviews, observation notes, and review of documents. The interviews for this study were audio recorded and were transcribed verbatim utilizing OTTER. A constant comparative approach was utilized for this study. Each interview was coded by the researcher as it was completed. Indigenous coding was utilized to create themes that were consistent with the voices of the participants. Each interview was then compared to the previous interview until all interviews were coded and themes were created. Like codes were collapsed to create mutually exclusive themes. These themes were utilized to answer the research questions.

Once all interviews were transcribed, observation notes, and documents were reviewed appropriately, the case study report was able to be completed answering the main research question. Afterwards, the content was used in comparison to Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Student Identity Development [5]. To answer the sub-questions, each one was compared to the seven vectors by Chickering and Reisser [5].

The goal of this naturalistic case study was to increase the understanding of this specific phenomenon. The reader of this naturalistic case study must trust the research conducted was completed in a rigorous manner and is representative of the phenomenon of the case study. The research must be trustworthy. Confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability were

the four criteria Lincoln and Guba [27] described for establishing trustworthiness.

Confidentiality throughout the process has been insured as each participant was given a pseudonym as well as the university the data was collected from. The participants were also aware at any time, they could remove themselves from the study as it was on a voluntary basis.

## Results

Five main themes were identified throughout the use of indigenous and sensitizing coding. These themes were: Effective Communication, Emotional Challenges, Demands of Student-Athletes, Support Systems, and Motivation Mindset.

### Theme 1: Effective Communication

Throughout the season, the team's key to success was strong communication with each other. Observations and interviews showed that communication extended beyond discussion about basketball and helped serve a purpose for emotional support, leadership, and bonding.

Coaches emphasized the importance of building relationships with the student athletes. Coach 1 described the importance of maintaining an open-door policy throughout the season with the players, saying,

“Letting them know your door is always open...you can come talk to me about anything. We are not just coaches, help them with any type of situation including health. Making sure you get to know your players so when they come in at practice and they are off. We know something is wrong and we'll talk to them.”

Similarly, Coach 3 highlighted the importance of creating strong relationships with their players early during the summer. Both Coach 1 and 3 emphasized the importance of an open-door policy by saying,

“We develop that relationship early on in the summer...we check in on them daily. We watch their non-verbals...we have to make sure and develop that relationship early so they feel comfortable to tell anyone, not just the coaches, just somebody.”

These coaches show the importance of their strategies in making connections with their student athletes. They regularly monitor their athletes' emotional well-being and pick up on non-verbal cues that may be shown. This proactive approach towards their communication allows the players to feel seen and heard. Continued efforts by the coaches to allow the players to feel supported was crucial for these student-athletes to be successful both on and off the court. The ability to effectively communicate also works along with the student-athletes motivation as well as player development, as seen discussed with Player 7. In her interview, she opens about how basketball has taught her the importance of relationships to allow her and teammates to discuss even difficult topics mentioning “[Being a student-athlete] has definitely taught me how to talk to people” even when there are hard conversations that need to be discussed with her coaches or teammates. This shows the importance of communication not only helping resolve adversity but also in helping strengthen the team. Player 7 continued to explain the importance of developing close relationships with her teammates, stating,

“Just knowing your teammates, building relationships with them so you can help hold them accountable. Building that relationships, the chemistry, knowing that you show love towards them, that's how you help motivate each other.”

Several student athletes stated that effective communication by understanding how different teammates or coaches comprehend helps with creating this team environment where all feel comfortable.

Lastly, Player 1 discussed the influence basketball has had with building her confidence and leadership skills by stating “Basketball has made me more outspoken with my leadership...Basketball gives me confidence.” Player 1's ability to communicate and be a leader on the floor shows the importance of effective leadership for the team's overall success. She spoke on the importance of communication with her teammates, especially when it comes to constructive criticism.

The communication skills developed over time with this women's basketball program are a key component to their overall success. From coaches building relationships early on with their open-door policy and regular check-ins to players willingly holding each other accountable through adversity. The players are able to develop both professionally and also personally for later experiences in life. Communication was essential for this team's continued success.

### Theme 2: Emotional Challenges

Emotional challenges were shown as a consistent experience throughout the season for student athletes that can significantly impact both their academic and athletic performance as well as their overall health and well-being. Both coaches and players found mental health as one of the most significant challenges. Coach 4 emphasized the important role mental health has with the student-athlete's overall well-being by stating,

“Mental health is the most critical aspect [of health] as it impacts physical and emotional health.”

This statement signifies the importance of mental health, suggesting that it has a strong influence on the student-athlete's performance both academically and athletically. When mental health is not prioritized and addressed, it can hinder progress not just for the individual but also for the whole program. Player 5 shared their own struggles throughout the season by stating,

“It's a roller coaster. I think it's a big thing of ups and downs because I've had some pretty low lows, and had some very good moments. It's helped mold me into a great person but at the same time exposing certain things about yourself you have to face.”

Player 5 shows the emotional influx that comes with being a Division I student-athlete, acknowledging the personal growth that can be developed from the challenges over time but showing the toll these emotions can take on an individual. Addressing any mental health issue may be a challenge but these student-athletes have shown through adversity they are still able to navigate the ups and downs while still being successful.

Balancing the demands of a student-athlete further challenges their emotional pressure. Player 10 described her challenges as “a mental game” when explaining the struggle to balance the academic pressures with her mental well-being. The pressure to perform at such a high level for both academics and athletics can be overwhelming.

Confidence emerged as an important factor when navigating mental health challenges. Coach 5 spoke on the importance of confidence, particularly how it impacts their performance and mindset by saying,

“The most challenging is just getting them to the point where they're just confident with everything. Each year there's challenges, whether you're a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior, but the biggest thing is just them being confident in who they are, their game, and the work they put in.”

Confidence was necessary for being able to overcome the obstacles and adversity seen throughout a season and their academic career. Player 2 explained having routines, such as pre-game Bible study and prayer offers her a sense of calm and peace which helps her refocus and have the confidence going into an important game. By reinforcing the idea to athletes all will be well can help provide simple and meaningful moments to reconnect to themselves with prayer.

Coaches and support staff are essential in ensuring these student-athletes have the mental and emotional support needed to maintain motivation and overall well-being throughout such a long season of basketball. By offering regular check-ins, developing confidence, and providing outlets such as team Bible Study, they are able to create an environment for these student-athletes to thrive both on and off the court.

### Theme 3: Demands of Student Athletes

The demands of being a student-athlete are substantial. These participants highlighted how long the season was while combining the requirement to balance both academics and athletic responsibilities, which requires creating routines, time management, and discipline. Player 6 provided an understanding of her regular routine throughout the season, reflecting on the time constraints and requirements each day,

“I wake up about 6 or 7am because people have class so we have to practice earlier. We normally have practice for about two hours. Then you have to go shower, go to class. Depending on how many classes you have, I usually have two classes [in-person] a day. I probably end [class] about 3pm. Then I might have study hall hours, which you have to get three hours a week...you might not get home until like 5 or 6pm...I try to go to bed early...I try to go to bed at least by 11pm.”

The quote provided by Player 6 notes the time constraints student-athletes face throughout the season, where their schedule begins early in the morning but also can extend into the evening most days. She continued to emphasize the importance of staying disciplined with her routine as it was necessary for her mental and physical well-being.

While the demands of balancing academics and athletics can often feel overwhelming, Player 5 reflects on the limited time throughout her day by stating,

“It feels like there's not enough time in the day...As a student-athlete, trying to balance everything, enjoy college but still being that great athlete and get good grades.”

Player 5 openly shared her struggle student-athletes often face trying to manage their responsibilities while still finding enjoyment throughout a long season. The pressure to perform at such a high level both for academics and athletics can be exhausting which can potentially lead to burnout if not properly managed.

Player 10 followed similarly previous players' discussion but also shared how developing a consistent routine has benefited her throughout the season with their busy schedule. She explained,

“I shoot after practice, go to treatment if needed. I normally have two classes in-person and try to get lunch in between. I try to go to bed early. You know, help keep my body going.”

For player 10, creating a set routine regularly allows for the dedicated practice time but also additional opportunities to get more shots up in the gym, recovering if treatment was needed with their athletic trainer, and ensuring to properly take care of herself throughout the day. Player 10 was able to stay focused and organized with her commitments. The focus for getting adequate rest can also play a significant role in regards to a student-athlete's overall health and performance.

Overall, the routines created by these student-athletes emphasized the importance of having discipline to be successful in both the classroom and on the court. Also, it highlights the need for additional support to be provided to help manage stress and avoid too much pressure. As these student-athletes continue to play their roles, being able to create routines will allow them to manage their time and work towards their overall goal.

### Theme 4: Support Systems

The support systems available to student-athletes at a Division I university play a critical role in their need to balance their academics and athletics. Player 4 discussed the importance that the university's community, their team mentors, and staff play in supporting the student-athletes much further beyond the sport of basketball by saying,

- “Our community, our team mentors, and even our staff. They are so willing to help us in different aspects, not even just the basketball part or the student part, but getting ahead in life as well.”

This statement highlights the additional support that student-athletes receive, which extends beyond their sport or major. Such a vital system of support allows these student-athletes to develop both personally and professionally. This helps continue to prepare them for the challenges faced during college and well beyond. This shows the university’s commitment to further developing their student-athletes into well rounded human beings.

In addition to the community support and mentors, Player 4 also touched on the added benefits of having an athletic advisor and team mentor which has been important towards her success in college.

“Just having access to our athletic advisor or having our mentor as well. Just helping us in different aspects, like getting ready to leave college and things we should be looking at going forward.”

The role of their academic advisors and team mentors provide crucial guidance throughout their college career and while they transition into the real-world. For student-athletes, the opportunity to have mentors who can help with personal development was key to ensuring they are prepared for life after college.

Similarly, Player 6 discussed the importance of regular meetings with her athletic academic advisor and the ability to create a set structured schedule by saying,

“We meet with [our academic advisor] every week, she sends us a weekly schedule, and everything we’re supposed to do... Study hall hours too, you can go in there [athletic center] and focus on your work. Counseling is also a good resource for us too.”

This organization and discipline developed by the student-athlete’s to regularly meet with their academic advisor allows for additional support while balancing academics and athletics. This allows the student-athlete to stay on track with their responsibilities during the season. While not many student-athletes spoke about using the University Counseling Center, their services are still available as there was a specific counselor available to student-athletes to help with navigating their mental health and overall well-being.

Coach 3 also touched on the importance of regularly maintaining communication with the student-athletes’ families or parents. Coach 3 stated,

“We [parents and coaches] talk about the health and well-being of their child.”

This simple explanation shows the importance of the coaches’ responsibilities to keeping the parents up to date on their child even while in college. By engaging with the student-athlete’s parents, the coaches can ensure they are working on meeting each student-athletes needs and providing additional support. Coach 3 further explained the need for constant communication between all coaches and their various support systems,

“We’re in constant contact with all those other people. We’re in constant contact with the athletic counselor. If I see a really big situation going on or lingering, I will contact the counselor myself and just push our players towards that way. We are constantly in contact with our mentors, other coaches, and their family members.”

This consistent communication with the coaches and support staff ensures each individual involved with the student-athletes’ lives are on the same page whether they need help with their academics, mental health, or personal growth. These coaches have a proactive approach in regards to their players’ health. The coaches discussed they will contact the counselor or other support systems if it was clear

a problem needs to be addressed making sure they keep the student-athletes’ health a priority throughout the season.

### Theme 5: Motivation Mindset

Motivation was a significant topic for each coach during their interview process. The coaches approach motivation with each student-athlete in a unique way, understanding that each player has individualized needs. Coach 4 spoke specifically about some players having that self-motivation, while other student-athletes need more support.

“I feel like some of their motivation comes from getting in the gym with them...Other ones, they’ll do it by themselves, even with film having you [coaches] help them schedule, we have to check in more with others.”

Coach 4 shows the adverse levels of motivation for each student-athlete and the importance for the coaches to understand it was not a “one-size-fits-all” approach when it comes to the players’ development. Throughout the season before or after practice, off days, coaches will work individually or with a small group of student-athletes on the court working on better developing their skills and getting certain repetition of shot selections to improve their game performance. Coach 4 spoke how some players willingly do this on their own while others, the coaches have to specifically ask or tell them a certain time to come into the gym to work on their skills.

Coach 1 continued the explanation on how each student-athlete has unique needs that often require various levels of motivation throughout the season.

“When it comes to motivation, you treat them a little different, because some players need more than others. Some players are self motivators, and some players need a little boost of confidence...You don’t want anyone to feel like they’re unwanted or someone is wanted or loved more than them.”

Coach 1 continued to speak on while each player was treated different, they are still from their viewpoint treated equally. This ties back to having effective communication between student-athletes and coaches. They each understand some individuals will need more motivation, guidance, and push from their coaches than others.

As this season continued, keeping the same motivation was seen as a challenge, especially with these student-athletes working regularly with their practices and additional training. This season seemed to be different according to Coach 5 as they know in the past they have always wanted to make history, however, this team was willing to work to make history happen.

“This year the biggest thing is making history. We had success in the past with teams, but this year, this is the first team I think that all clicked where they wanted to be the team that was undefeated at home, or wants to run the conference undefeated. We always say it, but they [the players] have owned it, I believe they wanted to actually do it...They’re buying into everything.”

Throughout the pre-season and regular season, you would hear coaches and several leaders on the team talking about “trusting the process” or “buy into it” meaning they wanted everyone on the team from players, coaches, and staff, to believe in everything they were working on each day that could potentially lead to big results for their program.

While “buying into the process” during the season was important, Coach 2 touched on how basketball was a long season and motivation may be lost along the way. They continued to explain it was important to find a balance between the seriousness of the sport by making connections with humor,

“It’s such a long season... You have to have a different personality, they know I’m serious. They know when we’re inside the lines [of the court] everything is serious but we do joke with them. That’s one thing as coaches we have learned you cannot be serious all the time.”

This shows the importance of creating a balance between their overall goal and allowing for a unique approach when the time was right. The ability to connect with players on a different level helps with the demands of such a long season allowing to maintain the team morale and bond.

Coach 2 continued to explain the importance of building those relationships early on for the student-athletes during the pre-season to understand what motivates each player and how to correctly support them.

“We get to know them over the summer so I kind of try to learn what they like or what motivates them to use it to our advantage.”

This approach allows the coaches to adjust their motivational tactics for each player individually, providing the proper strategies to continue the drive with each player’s motivation throughout the season.

Lastly, Coach 3 discussed that the challenge of motivation was difficult with such a long season looking at the big goals, they have to focus on the small, weekly goals to achieve overall success.

“We take daily tasks. We’re getting through this practice. We’re getting better this week. I find with a big common goal, like a main season goal, it gets lost all the time. So, yes, it’s winning the conference championship but we talk each week how we want to go 2-0 [winning] this week. Take care of home. So really breaking it down throughout the season and just small goals that will help get to our big goal at the end.”

This strategy to focus on short-term goals was crucial for maintaining motivation during the season. Coach 3 as well as other coaches discussed their goal each season was to win the conference championship. By having smaller goals throughout, it allows the players to achieve something new each week and not become overwhelmed with their overall goal. While they obviously have a much larger goal to one day win a NCAA National Championship, they must start somewhere. While a conference championship was still a difficult goal to accomplish each season, it has been achievable in previous years and something they still continue to work towards.

## Discussion and Recommendations

This naturalistic case study aims to explore the impacts of participating in collegiate women’s basketball on the female student-athlete’s health, well-being, and academic development. This chapter explores findings that review how participation in collegiate women’s basketball impacts student-athletes’ health, well-being, and academic development. The findings can be used to help improve the experiences of female collegiate basketball players. The pre-season, which begins in late May, serves as a crucial time for student-athletes to develop their skills, review their program expectations, and begin or continue their academic work by taking summer courses. During this time, new student-athletes and transfer students adjust to the demands of both academics and athletics, working towards an easier transition into their program.

Five themes became significant throughout the observations and interviews with each participant. These themes were: effective communication, emotional challenges, demands of student-athletes, support systems, and motivational mindset.

The two sub-questions for this case study were addressed through observations, interviews and themes relating to Chickering and Reisser’s Theory of Student Identity Development [5]. The first sub-question examined how participation in collegiate athletics supports or hinders positive student development as described within this framework. Findings from this study show that participation in collegiate athletics largely supports student development, specifically in areas such as competence, autonomy, and purpose.

The collegiate student-athletes in this study described their growth in competence, autonomy, and purpose throughout their experiences. Through training, academic load, scheduling, and meeting the physical demands, the student-athletes are able to excel in their responsibilities. The demands of being a student-athlete support the development of autonomy. As participants developed time management skills, decision making, and self-discipline they were more fully able to direct their lives and participate in their sport and student lives.

The student-athlete’s ability to develop competence throughout their collegiate career is crucial. Competence extends beyond the student-athlete’s athletic abilities. The importance of competence within their academic requirements to maintain eligibility to participate in their sport. The individual must learn to balance their requirements with their demanding schedule.

At the same time, purpose is a motivating factor that will control the student-athlete’s ability to be successful. Developing purpose throughout their college career will help work through any challenges or setbacks such as injuries. The participants discussed the importance of small goals throughout the season. One large goal of winning their conference tournament or the NCAA Tournament could get lost along the way. Having a team and an individual purpose can help the student-athletes achieve success within their sport, their academics, and building their foundation towards future careers.

However, challenges such as injuries, coaching changes, or transfers can hinder positive development. The program’s structure, open door policy, and support systems help limit these stressors they may experience, allowing athletes to navigate through their collegiate years with a positive approach.

The second sub-question examined how the results of this study can be used to improve the health, well being, and academic development of women collegiate basketball players. Findings from this study focus on the importance of support systems, an open-door policy with their coaches and effective communication, and overall development for the women’s basketball program. The open-door policy helps encourage trust and stability between the student-athletes and coaches, which is crucial for mental health throughout the season. Similarly, McCurry [29] reported coaches having intentional interactions with student-athletes reported having a higher positive perception along with positive morale.

Mental health counseling, academic advisors, and team mentors can help address emotional challenges and stressors experienced throughout their collegiate career. Sturm [13] discussed within their study the importance of student-athletes understanding the available resources and support services on campus. These essential resources help the student-athletes manage their emotional and academic stressors year round. The advisors and mentors can help enhance their academic and personal support which can help ensure the student-athletes maintain their GPA despite their demanding schedule.

In addition, their physical health is a continuous influx throughout the season from injuries, strength and conditioning, and recovery. This study shows the need for a positive team environment and team leadership. This can help be improved through mentors, confidence, adversity, and effective communication throughout their athletic careers.

This study has four major findings. First, effective communication improves team, student-athlete development, and sports enhance student development. Second, the demands of student-athletes require strong support systems. Third, the program’s success is influenced by leadership and strong bonds. The fourth and final major finding shows that participation in collegiate women’s basketball can enhance the development of student-athletes, particularly with leadership, communication, and personal growth.

This study found that strong communication between student-athletes, players, and support staff is a key factor in the team's success. Player 4 included within their interview the importance of the community, mentors, and staff that are willing to help the student-athletes during the regular season but also in life. The student-athletes being able to understand the importance of communication leads toward their success. Player 7 focused on how being a student-athlete has taught her how to talk to people. She emphasized the importance of getting to know your teammates as this helps build that relationship to later hold each other accountable within the season. Coach 1 also touched on the importance of while you want to treat each student-athlete equally, you do have to treat each different. Howard-Hamilton and Sina [11] expressed the student-athletes having limited time outside of their sport as there are numerous demands. This creates difficulty in being able to listen and communicate effectively for the student-athlete with those outside of their sports program. Similarly, within this study, Player 6 focused on their ability to create bonds with her teammates. While the teammates provide ample support throughout the season, the participants' social life outside of their program was not mentioned. This essential communication built on accountability, trust, and open-door policies contribute to both the individual and team success.

The second major finding, the demands of student-athletes require strong support systems that help manage the tough schedule of academics, athletics, and personal responsibilities these student-athletes experience. Sturm [13] touched on the understanding of student-athletes balancing emotions along with exhaustion and need access to resources and additional support, it is important for coaches to emphasize the importance for emotional and social support. Harris [12] expressed the importance of emotions student-athletes experience throughout their college journey. Harris continued to explain athletic trainers could potentially help manage these emotions the student-athletes are experiencing; however, it is important to see a professional counselor if the emotions continue or progress. Player 4 touched on the significance of having the support system within college. She enjoys access to their athletic advisor and team mentor. Player 4 continued to express the support staff helps them throughout current challenges but also for later after college as well. Coach 3 also emphasized the importance of knowing their student-athletes. While the coaches have an open-door policy with the student-athletes, it is important for them to pay attention to the student-athlete's body language, their mood, and emotions. As coaches, they are constantly reminding the student-athletes they have their mentors, academic advisor, and athletic counselor available. The coach reports there have been instances where they would contact the athletic counselor for the student-athlete out of concern. Along with the on-campus support, the coaches stay in touch with the student-athlete's family members as well.

The third major finding is that the program's success was influenced by leadership and strong bonds. Without these strong bonds and relationships established early on with teammates and coaches, the success would be difficult. The program's historic season and impressive achievements could be overshadowed by the announcement of the head coach leaving and important key student-athletes entering into the transfer portal. Player 4 focused on their leadership skills they developed throughout her athletic career. Her ability to communicate with different individuals allows for her to be a strong leader, being vocal and having that trust with her teammates. Similar to Player 4, Player 1 also touched on basketball having a large influence with her ability to be a leader with the confidence she has built over the years. These bonds and effective communication this women's basketball program experienced within this season was a key component to their overall success. Gray et. al [22] expressed the importance of additional support from coaches and various support

staff can help develop better grit for student-athletes and help prevent burnout from occurring.

The fourth and final major finding shows that participation in collegiate women's basketball can enhance the development of student-athletes, particularly with leadership, communication, and personal growth. The demands of collegiate sports allow for opportunities for the student-athletes to excel outside of their athletic abilities into successful adults after graduation.

The student-athlete's roles within the team helped develop important life skills such as accountability, time management, and effective communication. For example, Player 7 discussed her experience as a student-athlete helping with her communication skills and building lasting relationships with her teammates. This allows for accountability and trust to be established with each of the student-athletes. Player 4 focused on being a leader for the program helped with her confidence and ability to work with different individuals. Skills that will help in future careers outside of sports.

The participants' responses match with Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Student Identity Development [5], specifically the vectors on developing competence, managing emotions, and establishing identity. Being a student-athlete supports growth within these vectors by the unique challenges the student-athletes face forcing them to grow, adjust, and excel as an individual and student-athlete. Scanlon [7] reported that while Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Student Identity Development [5] is not specifically geared towards college students, the lived experiences student-athletes have can relate to the seven vectors. By using Chickering and Reisser's Theory [5], this allowed for a better understanding of student-athlete development.

With Chickering and Reisser's Theory [5] fourth vector, "Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships", this focuses on the student's ability to develop and evolve their relationships. During the fourth vector, the student-athletes are able to build deeper relationships with teammates, coaches, and various support staff. Harris [12] reported many college students face challenges throughout the exploration of the fourth vector. Scanlon [7] discussed the student-athletes within their research able to respond to individuals on a personal level rather than the typical stereotype.

While the demands of being a student-athlete can be tough and time consuming, when surrounded by a positive environment, this can enhance student development rather than hinder it. The mentorships, support systems, and coaching staff ensure that the student-athletes are supported every step of the way.

This naturalistic case study has significant implications for collegiate student-athletes, particularly the development and well being of women's basketball players. The findings support Chickering and Reisser's [5] Theory of Student Identity Development, showing how student-athletes develop competence, manage emotions, and establish identity through their season and various support staff. This study also highlights the importance of effective communication, support systems, and strong leadership. The effects of the coaching change was not heavily followed after the end of the season and could play a significant role into the next season. This study suggests that athletic programs should look to improve their communication, support systems, and team leadership for both student-athletes and coaches. Implementing student development theories into athletics can help have a better understanding of the unique experiences student-athletes face as well as help create a holistic approach to the student-athlete.

Delimitations of this research includes the sample size of 20 total participants with only 15 officially having semi-structured interviews. In addition, to a limited sample size the participants were limited to a single women's basketball program. With additional participants from various women collegiate sports could help improve and

elaborate on the understanding of the results. The small sample size may limit the general findings as a larger group of participants could provide a broader perspective. By focusing on one sport program, the research provided an analysis of the unique experiences, challenges, and successes within this specific group. However, while this study focused on a specific women's group, the findings with a different collegiate women's basketball program may vary. Additionally, the decision to focus on this specific group of participants was from previous interaction and history with the program. While previous history with the program can allow for a deeper understanding and stronger rapport between the researcher and the participants, it could potentially lead to bias. The last delimitation would be the sole use of a naturalistic approach of his study rather than a mixed-methods design which could have included both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative research with semi-structured interviews and observations rather than including quantitative methods. While qualitative research allowed for the in-depth understanding of the female student-athlete experiences, including quantitative data could add an additional layer of support to the findings.

Limitations of this study include the participant responses may be influenced or impacted by their schedule. The sample size of this study was limited to a specific women's basketball program. Additionally, participants within this case study may not be candid in their responses. Despite these limitations, the case study provided meaningful insight to this specific women's basketball program and their success.

Future research should study a larger sample size or a variety of NCAA Divisions as this could allow for a more comprehensive understanding of women's basketball. Other sport programs could also be studied using Chickering and Reisser's Theory of Study Identity Development [5]. Additionally, future research could have a randomized participant selection to reduce potential biases and allow for a diverse range of participants from different athletic programs and universities.

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