

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

Communication Arts and Sciences

COLLEGE ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,
COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE

A Dissertation in

Communication Arts and Sciences

by

Susan Ruth Cacciotti Sherburne

© 2009 Susan Ruth Cacciotti Sherburne

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2009

The dissertation of Susan R. Cacciotti-Sherburne was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Miller-Day
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Dennis Heitzmann
Director, Counseling and Psychological Services

Jon Nussbaum
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Denise Solomon
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Dennis Gouran
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and Labor Studies and
Employment Relations
Graduate Officer

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

Little research has been conducted concerning how college athletes' participation in athletics affects their social development. This dissertation focuses on the differences in self-perceived interpersonal competence and communication competence across a sample population of Division 1A student-athlete and non-athlete participants. It also seeks to understand the barriers college athletes experience in romantic relationship initiation and maintenance.

Previous research suggests that college athletes spend less time socializing and communicating with individuals outside of their sport than non-athletes, perhaps affecting athletes' interpersonal and relational competence (Adler & Adler, 1991). The first phase of this research examined differences between athletes and non-athletes in communication and interpersonal competence. Using a web-based survey, the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988) and the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis 1988) were administered to both college athletes and non-athletes. Data collected from the web-based survey revealed no significant differences between athletes and non-athletes in self-reports of communication or interpersonal competence.

As part of this initial phase, student-athletes, through open-ended, web-based survey responses and focus group discussions identified prominent barriers to the development of satisfying personal relationships—lack of time, lack of understanding from others, uncertainty resulting from not understanding a person's intentions, and a partner's recognition of the athlete's athletic and academic commitments. Identifying these barriers is an important starting point to understanding the impact of personal relationships on athletic performance. When asked

if an unhappy personal life affects their athletic performance, 86.4% of college athletes in this study answered that their athletic performance was negatively affected at least some of the time. The barriers identified in this research suggest a starting point for interventions that will assist athletes in managing their personal relationships.

Building on the findings from the first phase of this dissertation research, the second phase was devoted to developing a brief curriculum for college athletes to increase social competence and improve management of personal relationships. The proposed educational curriculum provides lessons on communication basics, fostering healthy relationships, and managing conflict and stress.

Findings from this dissertation call attention to the unique relational issues college athletes' experience. In addition, future research should be directed toward a better understanding of how time constraints, partner's intention and partner's understanding affect the social development of student-athletes. In light of the finding that distress in the personal lives of athletes negatively impacts athletic performance, athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff would be well served to address personal relationships in curricula with student athletes. Positive change in an athletes' communication, relationship and conflict management skills could, in turn, enhance the quality of their romantic, social and team relationships. Future research is needed to examine the relationships among these variables more completely and to test the efficacy of the proposed brief curriculum in enhancing student athletes' social competence and improving personal relationships.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Personal Introduction	1
Some Initial Observations.....	1
Social Interactions	3
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Chapter 2: Reivew of the Literature	10
College Athletes and Interpersonal Relationships.....	10
Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Competence	12
College Athletes and Personal Development	16
Uncertainty and Intimacy in Athlete Relationships.....	20
Life Span Development, Relationships and Student-Athletes.....	21
Translational Research.....	23
Research Goals.....	24
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	27
Mixed Method Design	27
Defining Constructs	29
Data Collection.....	29
Samples.....	29
Focus Groups	31
Survey Procedures	32
Measures.....	34
Focus Group Procedures	38
Focus Group Protocol.....	39
Data Analysis.....	40
Quantitive Data Analysis	40
Qualitative Data Analysis	41
Trustworthiness Criteria	43
Chapter Summary.....	45
Chapter 4: Results.....	46
Descriptive Statistics.....	46
Scale Reliabilities.....	49
Research Questions	51

Student-Athletes and Relational Development	58
Qualitative Findings	60
Open-Ended Student-Athlete Responses	60
Lack of Time	60
Lack of Understanding	61
Stereotyping	62
Focus Group Findings	63
Theme One: Student-Athletes' Social Experiences with Peers	66
Theme Two: Athletic Participation's Impact on Romantic Relationships	75
Chapter Summary	82
Chapter 5: Discussion	84
Limitations	95
Implications for Future Research	97
Chapter 6: Translational Research	100
Brief Educational Curriculum	102
Conclusion	111
References	113
Appendix A Student-Athlete Recruitment Email to Coaches.....	125
Appendix B Student-Athlete Recruitment Email	126
Appendix C General Student Recruitment Email.....	127
Appendix D Student-Athlete Focus Group Recruitment Email	128
Appendix E Web-based Survey	129
Appendix F Web-based Informed Consent Form	134
Appendix G Student-Athlete and Relational Development Scale	136
Appendix H Focus Group Questions	137
Appendix I Focus Group Informed Consent Form	138

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Number of Participants by Gender and Athletic Status	30
Table 4.1: Number of Participants by Gender and Athletic Status	47
Table 4.2: Number of Participants by Ethnicity and Athletic Status	48
Table 4.3: Number of Participants by Class Distribution and Athletic Status.....	49
Table 4.4: Correlation Matrix	50
Table 4.5: Component Matrix	51
Table 4.6: SPCC Subscale Means and Standard Deviations..... for College Athletes and Non-Athletes	53
Table 4.7: ICQ Subscale Means and Standard Deviations..... for College Athletes and Non-Athletes	54
Table 4.8: Regression Analysis.....	56
Table 4.9: Regression Analysis	57
Table 4.10: Regression Analysis using Athletic Status and..... Gender as Coded Variables	58
Table 4.11: Means, Standard Deviations, Minimums, Maximums..... and Frequencies for the Effects of an Unhappy Personal Life on Athletic Performance	59
Table 4.12: A Thematic Framework	64

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my doctoral advisor, Michelle Miller-Day, and my committee members Dennis Heitzmann, Jon Nussbaum and Denise Solomon. Their commitment, insight and guidance to this research project have been invaluable.

Further, I am grateful to the student-athletes and non-athletes who gave so generously of their time, and so openly shared their ideas. Special thanks go to Penn State's Athletic Director, Tim Curley, for his support of this project.

The constant reassurance of my colleagues at Penn State's Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes has been very helpful throughout this process. My sincere gratitude goes to Russ Mushinsky, Director of the Morgan Center, for his continued encouragement of and assistance in attaining my personal and educational goals.

Additionally, my family has been a great source of inspiration in my education. Parents (mine and my husband's), brothers, brothers and sisters' in-laws, and all my nieces and nephews have motivated me to accomplish more than I thought I could. For their love and support, I am truly grateful. Enough appreciation can never be given to my parents, Carl and Linda Cacciotti, who at a young age instilled in me a love of education and the belief that I could do anything I set my mind to accomplish.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Mark Sherburne, who listened with unending empathy and offered a new breath of confidence as often as needed. His unwavering support and constant reassurance has helped make possible the completion of my graduate studies.

CHAPTER ONE

Personal Introduction

In January 1995, I began a part-time position as an assistant life skills coordinator with Penn State University's Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes. My primary task was to develop and implement a speaker's bureau program for varsity student-athletes. Additionally, I assisted with curricular development and taught a one-credit health class. My responsibilities have since expanded to include oversight of personal, leadership, and community outreach development opportunities for student-athletes, along with additional teaching responsibilities, and academic advising for the women's basketball team. My daily individual and group interaction with college student-athletes has enabled me to observe the social lives of these athletes and to discuss with them their personal struggles. Thus, I have a unique informal vantage point from which to collect information about the challenges college athletes face. From this vantage point, my primary professional aim is to gain a better understanding of how a student's athletic talent may be related to his or her social development. This dissertation represents an initial effort toward that aim. This study is a systematic investigation of how college student-athletes' communication competence, interpersonal competence, and romantic relationships are related to their involvement in Division 1A athletics.

Some Initial Observations

Over the past 13 years of teaching student-athletes I have observed many patterns of behavior and experiences. One of the most striking things that I notice each semester, when walking into a classroom filled with freshmen student-athletes at the beginning of each semester, is the seating arrangement. I have taught nearly fifty different classes that included significant numbers of student-athletes and the one consistency across all of these classes is that student-

athletes' prefer to sit in close proximity to their teammates, rather than randomly among the non-athletes in the class. I have learned that student-athletes perceive "security" in proximity.

However, sitting near one's teammates in the classroom inhibits interaction with strangers that could allow student-athletes to practice their social skills. Since student-athletes are concerned about demands on their time, using classroom time to meet and get to know non-athletes would expand their opportunity for social interactions. Sitting with one's teammates, and thus limiting the interaction with others in the class, seems to be missing an opportunity to develop social skills.

Through teaching and advising these athletes, I have learned that time to practice social skill development is constrained because the academic and athletic stresses associated with being an undergraduate increase significantly from high school to college. As students transition into college, many athletes realize that academic standards are higher than those they experienced in high school. Student-athletes also must reestablish themselves athletically. By the time classes begin, first-year students in such fall-semester sports as football, women's volleyball, men's and women's soccer and field hockey have usually discovered that the elite athletic status they enjoyed in high school is in jeopardy. They often realize that their college teammates are equally, if not more talented, and they frequently start to question their own abilities. Higher expectations in the classroom and on the playing field may serve to undermine an athlete's self-image. An all-star athlete who played a key role on his or her multiple state championship high school teams may enroll in college and initially fail to complete the strength and conditioning programs or may find their new role on the bench. Adding to those challenges are academic demands. Many athletes who were "A" or "B" students in high school earn "C's" and "D's" after the first round of college exams. Student-athletes frequently share stories of their academic struggles with me in

my role as an academic advisor, and tell me they fear losing their athletic status. I have observed that an important aspect of a student-athletes' transition into college sports is the process of reestablishing an athletic identity, which in turn can have implications for self-esteem and self-confidence. The need to regain this sense of personal competence manifests itself in many ways.

Social Interactions

When I began my job as a life skills coordinator and academic/athletic advisor, I realized I held a stereotype about student-athletes. I expected them to be verbally and socially competent and confident. To my surprise, many were not. A high percentage of student-athletes actually needed to be coached on initiating social conversations and translating classroom based mock experiences into competent interactions in real social situations. I learned that playing before crowds of up to 100,000 people did not necessarily give student-athletes the confidence they needed to speak to or otherwise interact with fans.

One program at the Pennsylvania State University that is beginning to address enhancing the communication skills of student-athletes is the "Heart of the Lion" outreach program. This program aims to give student-athletes a chance to enhance their communication skills while making a positive impact in the community. Student-athletes practice their communication and interpersonal skills by speaking and/or reading to youth ranging from pre-school to high school age. Student-athletes write letters to fourth-and-fifth graders about handling success and failure, and the importance of participating in extracurricular activities. As part of a shadow program, student-athletes invite sixth graders to class and training for a day. These kinds of programs provide student-athletes a "safe" venue to practice both communication and interpersonal skills.

Even if student-athletes do not believe they need to enhance social skills for classroom interactions, they are given the message by Penn State administrators and coaches that these

social skills are required for dealing appropriately with the sports media and their fans. In written documents and in interpersonal interactions, coaches make it clear that they expect student-athletes to communicate effectively. As soon as I began working with Penn State Intercollegiate Athletics, I found the staff took pride in creating and upholding positive academic and athletic standards. This message is sent when coaches correspond through telephone calls and email notes with high school students who are recruitable prospects, and is reiterated when these recruits visit campus. When recruits decide to sign with the University, they are provided with a clear message that they will be required to communicate well with others, including the media. As soon as student-athletes enroll, administrators and support staff continually make clear their expectation that each athlete will do well academically, athletically, and socially within the community. In my experience, some student-athletes embrace this message and have little trouble making the adjustment. Others lack the necessary skills for success in one or more areas, and struggle with the transition to college. Although current research offers some insight on how to enhance the performance of student-athletes in the classroom and within the athletic arena, it sheds almost no light on how being an athlete affects a student's social interactions either privately and publicly. A better understanding of how student-athletes' manage social interactions is important because social competence enhances student-athletes' ability to succeed in college, may improve student retention, and can enhance the public image of the athlete who is a representative of the university. Due to the media exposure student-athletes receive; social competence is not a luxury, but a necessity.

In my experience, student-athletes soon recognize that they function in an environment where fans demand a certain amount of access to their personal lives. Administrators, coaches, alumni and other fans expect what student-athletes do off the field will reflect a positive personal

lifestyle and institutional image. Therefore, the potential negative impact that may result from poor communication and social skills suggests a need to further explore how student-athletes can better prepare for their new role.

As a life skills coordinator and academic/athletic counselor, I am in the position to hear student-athletes talk about their interpersonal relationships. From years of listening to this talk, I have identified patterns of interpersonal struggles that seem unique to the student-athlete experience. For example, many of the student-athletes with whom I work have high-profile media exposure and they adopt interesting ways to compensate in their personal lives for such public exposure. One athlete said she felt media attention affected the way in which she interacted with her classroom peers. She noticed that other students often looked at her or would be reading about her in the student newspaper as she sat beside them, but would not initiate a conversation with her. She told me this troubled her because she was shy and would not begin talking with them on her own. Nevertheless, she knew it was important to learn how to interact with her classmates. She confided that her fear of interaction made her first year on campus a challenge, and admitted she needed to find the confidence and skills to begin to interact with others outside her athletic peer group.

Learning to balance media attention with interpersonal interactions also presented a problem for another student-athlete who, upon his arrival in class, received a standing ovation from his classmates after a “big win.” He confessed to feeling awkward in that situation, stating that he was not the only person responsible for the win, nor was he comfortable with that kind of public attention. He explained that he preferred classmates to view him simply as another student, without disrupting the academic routine to acknowledge him. This young man also said that public visibility caused problems with romantic relationships. He shared that he tends to be

constantly wary of the intent of his female peers, asking himself if their interest in him stems from his prowess as an athlete or interest in him as a person. My work with student-athletes convinces me they have unique interpersonal challenges. This is yet another reason I want to further investigate student-athletes' social interactions.

Statement of the Problem

According to Welsh and Bierman (2001), social competence includes the social, emotional, and cognitive skills that individuals need for successful social adaptation. Although parents are the primary source of social and emotional support during the early years, peers begin to play a significant role in an individual's social-emotional development in later years. During adolescence, peer relationships become particularly important to the development of self. A key developmental task of young adulthood is the formation of identity and an essential part of this formation process is when adolescents "try on" different social roles as they interact with their peers. Peers serve as a "stepping stone" as adolescents move away from their emotional dependence upon parents and toward autonomous functioning as an adult. Skills acquired during adolescence, especially late adolescence and early adulthood, are associated with effective interpersonal relations in adult life, including relations with co-workers and romantic partners (Welsh & Bierman, 2001). The proposed research assumes that social competence is important to the relational and psychosocial development of emerging adults and that college athletes, as a special population of emerging adults, experience unique challenges that may impede development of their social competence.

Coppel (1995) described college athletes, especially those at Division 1A institutions, as a special population. They face numerous stressors that influence their social maturity, self-esteem, social evaluative anxiety, and development of satisfying personal relationships.

Confronted by the demands of school and their sport, athletes often leave little room in their lives for anything else. According to Miller and Kerr (2002), athletes compromise their social activities as they progress through their collegiate years and struggle to fulfill athletic and academic responsibilities. Time previously allocated to their social lives while in high school is not available after they enter college. Their teammates provide an immediate and convenient social network on campus and alleviate loneliness and stress that often accompany major life changes (Gardner, Jewler, & Robb, 1995). So, while non-athlete college students usually broaden their social networks and achieve satisfying relationships that provide socio-emotional support, college athletes tend to restrict interpersonal relationships to peers within the sport subculture (Blinde, 1989). Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993) identify lack of opportunity as a barrier to the initiation and intensification of relationships for all individuals who follow the traditions of Western romantic relational development. Given the demands on their time and their limited social network, college athletes appear to be a population with unique considerations for how they develop interpersonal relationships during emerging adulthood.

College athletes live an atypical lifestyle and experience intense pressure to perform well athletically, academically, and socially (Greenspan & Anderson, 1995). According to Adler and Adler (1991), a number of factors can affect the athletic, academic and social development of student-athletes: fatigue from training, traveling, and competition; insufficient time for studying; isolation from the general student population; and pressures from coaches and alumni. Meeker, Stankowich, and Kays (2000) stated that these stressors often complicate a college athlete's experience and decision-making, and impede their progress as developing young adults. Late adolescence is a period when individuals normally attempt to achieve new and more mature relations with peers of both genders, identify with a masculine or feminine role in society, accept

their physique, and attain emotional independence from parents and other adults (Rice, 1998). This complex process requires time and attention. To achieve success in their sport, college athletes typically rank sport training and related activities as their top priority. They often sacrifice social lives and experiences to pursue athletic success (Coppel, 1995), leaving themselves vulnerable to interpersonal and academic difficulties. According to Miller and Kerr (2002), restricting their social lives is one of the most significant time-management strategies athletes use to manage their athletic and academic commitments. Blinde (1989), Leonard (1986), Lewis (1993), Miller and Kerr (2002), and Parham (1993) all suggested that social restriction is a common means of coping with role conflict and role overload among student-athletes. According to Arnett (2000), such coping can be detrimental to an athlete's life-span development because emerging adulthood is a period when individuals need time to explore the potential for emotional and physical intimacy, and focus on preparing for adult work-roles. A limited focus on sport development and academics can thus be detrimental to college athletes. According to Mather and Winston (1998), student-athletes experience a restriction on their social life which is an important component of successful maturation at a critical time of development. What remains unclear are the kinds of interpersonal difficulties college athletes experience, and how, specifically, their social development may be impeded by these difficulties.

The few studies that exist on the social development of student-athletes indicate that college athletes tend to develop skills within their sport and in the classroom, but sacrifice developing aspects of interpersonal competence such as initiating contacts with new individuals, providing emotional support to others, self-disclosing, and resolving conflicts (Bates, Luster, & Vandenberg, 2003; Buhrmester, 1990). This is problematic because studies such as McGaha and Fitzpatrick (2005) revealed that social competence is positively related to relational satisfaction

in romantic relationships between college students. Socially competent students have communication skills that facilitate their relationships with faculty and peers, which in turn contribute to the successful completion of their academic careers (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005). Consequently, social competence is also an important dimension of academic success.

In addition to limited social opportunities, student-athletes are taught to question the intention of those trying to get to know them. This guarded interaction appears to increase student-athletes' dyadic uncertainty, therefore, causing them to alter their communication with those "outside" the athletic community. When an athlete demonstrates heightened levels of interpersonal caution, self-disclosure and intimacy are affected. This increased level of uncertainty when meeting those outside the athletic community sheds light on why student-athletes often prefer to have in-group interactions.

Surprisingly little research focuses on the interpersonal relationships or social competence of college athletes. The limited research available, however, suggests that the narrow breadth of college athletes' social experiences may negatively impact athletes' social and interpersonal competence (Mather & Winston, 1998). This research suggests there may be systematic differences in the level of interpersonal competence between student-athlete and non-athlete populations. Moreover, my informal observations and interviews over the past thirteen years suggest that differences exist between college student-athletes and non-athletes' in the realm of social development. Therefore, in this dissertation, I seek to compare college student-athletes' and non-athletes' self-perceived communication and interpersonal competence, and to explore the challenges college athletes face initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. An important first step toward understanding the issues related to this topic is a review of the relevant literature.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

College Athletes and Interpersonal Relationships

Much of the sports psychology research on interpersonal relationships has focused on the coach-athlete relationship (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Wylleman, 2000). This research tended to use a trait approach to describe coaches' personality characteristics (Barnett et al.) or to determine "how a coach coaches" (Jowett & Cockerill; Wylleman). More recently, Jowett and her colleagues developed a single case study approach, utilizing exploratory qualitative methodology and quantitative strategies to investigate athlete-coach relationships (Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006). Meanwhile, Poczwardowski, Barott, and Hanschen (2002) developed a qualitative-interpretive framework to investigate the dynamics and context of athlete-coach dyads. Sport relationship research has also focused on how parents influence the athletic development of youths involved in competitive sport. Smoll and Smith (1989) termed this line of research the "athlete triangle." Hellstedt (1987, 1995) studied the coach-parent-athlete interactions in view of parental influence and pressure, and Brustad (1988) provided valuable empirical data on aspects of the athlete-parent relationship. In an extensive study, Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1984) identified the influences of significant adults on young wrestlers (negative maternal interactions, parental pride and satisfaction, and parental pressure to wrestle.); and Brustad (1988), in his study of young male and female soccer players, described parental support and acceptance, and parental expectations as distinct characteristics of parental responses to young athletes' sport involvement. In addition to studying coach, parent and athlete relationships, historically, student-athlete research has concentrated on the athlete's academic development (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Fizek & Smaby, 1999; Meyer, 1990;

Miller & Kerr, 2002). Although the importance of interpersonal relationships has begun to come to the foreground in research on competitive sport (Wylleman, 2000), much of the research has focused on academics and athletics, the athlete-coach relationship and the athlete-coach-parent relationship.

Although little is known about how a college athlete develops interpersonal relationships beyond the coach-athlete relationship, it is an important phenomenon to consider. According to Welsh and Bierman (2001), the ability to develop effective social competence skills and behaviors is required for the individual's healthy social development. Social competence describes individuals' social effectiveness and speaks to their ability to establish and maintain high quality, mutually satisfying relationships while avoiding negative treatment. While younger children interact with peers to engage in fantasy play allowing them to assume different roles and to take another's perspective; adolescents' social interactions provide an opportunity to learn about reciprocity and intimacy (Welsh & Bierman, 2001). Training, traveling, and competition fatigue, insufficient study time, and social isolation can impact these important interactions (Adler & Adler, 1991). This can be detrimental to the athlete's life span development, as emerging adulthood is a period when individuals need time to explore the potential for emotional and physical intimacy and become more focused on preparation for adult work-roles (Arnett, 2000). A limited focus on sport development and academics can, therefore, be particularly problematic for college athletes. With limits on social time due to academic and athletic demands, and increased in-group team participation, athletes have less time and more limited social opportunities than non-athletes to practice these skills. An important consideration of this research is the impact these time and in-group constraints have on an athlete's social and interpersonal development.

Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Competence

According to Egland and Spitzberg (1996), *communication competence* is one of the most fundamental judgments people make about others' behavior. In their review, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) identified six broad categories of competence: fundamental competence, social skills and competence, interpersonal competence, linguistic competence, communicative competence and relational competence. The authors stated that the list is not exhaustive, but rather a general grouping by which communication competence can be categorized. Spitzberg and Cupach suggested that the most basic form of communication competence is fundamental competence: "an ability to adapt effectively to the surrounding environment over time" (1984, p. 31). The critical feature of this definition is adaptability, which is a generally accepted feature of communication competence (Duran & Kelly, 1984). Competence is frequently defined as quality, which in turn is generally considered a function of appropriateness and effectiveness. Appropriateness is the judgment that behavior fits a situation. Appropriate behavior avoids violation of relationally or situationally sanctioned rules and is viewed as acceptable or legitimate within the context. Effectiveness is the extent to which an interactant fulfills preferred objectives or outcomes, relative to factors such as effort, options, and choices (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Effective communication, therefore, achieves valued objectives with the interactant. The more appropriate and effective the interactant is, the more competent he or she is likely perceived (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Within the delicate balance of relationship negotiation, a person's sense of conversational competence should influence the course and management of the relationship (Hansen, Christopher, & Nange, 1992).

Canary and Spitzberg (1989) suggested that the study of communication competence could be advanced by examining individuals' evaluations of interactional conflict, since conflict

and interpersonal evaluation are closely intertwined. Sillars and Scott (1983) indicated that an individual's attributions of another person's intent and locus of conflict responsibility influence the individual's impressions of the partner. Research has demonstrated that certain behaviors during conflict are associated with impressions of competence. Cupach (1982) found that destructive conflict tactics are viewed as less competent than avoidant tactics, which in turn are viewed as less competent than productive tactics. Both conflict and competence can be viewed as integral to relational development and maintenance. The relational impact of conflict is thought to be determined less by its occurrence, and more by its form and the subsequent evaluations the form evokes. Accordingly, the partner's communication behaviors during conflict are evaluated according to criteria of competence that are linked to relational outcomes (Canary & Cupach, 1988). According to Simmons and Andersen (1986), interaction competence and relational development are strongly associated constructs. The perceived competence of a partner's interaction within a conflict incident may critically mediate the impact of the episode on relational outcomes. Additionally, the structure of conflict lends itself to the study of competence. Individuals in conflict often perceive themselves as pursuing incompatible goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). Such goals involve routine activities, but often entail important personal consequences and emotional involvement. Competence in communicating is defined as the effective attainment of goals in a manner that is appropriate to the relational context (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Conflict, therefore, places individuals in a bind with regard to impression management, since the accomplishment of the individual's goals (effectiveness) threatens the partner's goal accomplishment and therefore, the partner's evaluation of the individual's appropriateness. Given the perceived mutual incompatibility of goals, individuals in conflict face the dilemma of negotiating a successful outcome while upholding the relational and

situational expectations of the partner. Therefore, conflict provides an interesting perspective for the study of communication competence.

In addition to the relational implications, according to Blood, Blood, Tellis, and Gabel (2001), communication competence research suggests that poor self-perceptions of communication competence inhibit communication learning and reduces interactions and increases social withdrawal. Moreover, individuals' perceptions of their partners' receptiveness and their own perceptions of their competence as an effective communicator may also play important roles in communication development and learning (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Duran and Kelly (1988) reported significant correlations among communicative competence, social experiences, and self-perceptions of performance. They speculated that a cyclical relationship could reinforce negative self-perceptions about communication interactions and at the same time heighten an individual's anxiety and fear of the situation. Additional studies have revealed that individuals who have negative self-perceptions of communicative competence (compared to individuals with positive self-perceptions of communication competence) report fewer social experiences and increased anxiety (Duran & Kelly, 1988), shyness (Cheek & Buss, 1981), and loneliness (Zakahi & Duran, 1984), and are less willing to initiate communication and social interaction (MacIntyre, 1994). Duran and Kelly (1988) suggested six dimensions of communicative adaptability: social composure (feeling relaxed in social situations), social experience (enjoying and participating socially), social confirmation (maintaining the other person's social image), appropriate disclosure (adapting individual disclosures appropriately to the intimacy level of the exchange), articulation (using appropriate syntax and grammar), and wit (using humor to diffuse social tension). According to Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher (2004), social composure and social experience are related to communication apprehension and anxiety,

and social experience and social confirmation are related to loneliness. Understanding how an individual labels his or her communicative abilities is an important consideration as it has multiple relational implications.

Query, Parry, and Flint (1992) defined communication competence as the “perceived tendency to seek out meaningful interaction with others, render support, be relaxed, appreciate others’ plight, and turn-take appropriately” (p. 80). Therefore, how individuals perceive their communication competence would seem to relate to their social interaction within close personal relationships, thus affecting interpersonal competence. *Interpersonal competence*, as defined by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, and Reis (1988), includes initiating relationships, self-disclosure, providing emotional support, asserting displeasure for others’ actions and managing interpersonal conflicts. Like communication competence, interpersonal competence includes one’s ability to initiate relationships and offer support within those relationships. However, it is possible for an individual to be competent in the area of empathy and turn-taking communication skills (communication competence), but not be able to appropriately and effectively disclose personal information or manage conflict appropriately (interpersonal competence). For example, imagine athletes who meet someone they are interested in getting to know better. After the initial exchange, the athlete realizes that the person to whom he or she is speaking knows a great deal about the athlete’s personal background from reading the newspapers, athletic media guides and programs. The athlete, in turn, may be hesitant to disclose more personal, intimate information due to a lack of trust in the other person’s intended use for that information.

Research in the area of interpersonal competence suggests that individuals who are interpersonally competent are more likely to build and use networks of the relationships that provide support in the face of stressful life events (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986). In light of

this finding, lack of interpersonal competence for college athletes could be particularly detrimental. Anecdotal information indicates that balancing multiple time demands, uncertainty of others' intentions, and managing one's romantic relationships are challenges a college athlete faces. Yet, there is very little research which systematically examines the unique social challenges of college athletes as a special population. Although we can infer from general relational development research that close personal relationships are consequential for college athletes, more information is needed about the importance of communication and interpersonal competence in influencing the interpersonal development of this special population.

College Athletes and Personal Development

The initiation of any interpersonal relationship brings its own set of challenges. Complicating the relational development process for college athletes is the possibility that friend and romantic relationships may be based on a shared social image; that is, people relate to the student because of who they are in an athletic context (Coppel, 1995). Coppel asserts that this image of the athlete only in terms of athletic prowess and not as a person with other attributes can make athletes feel uncertain about others' motives and insecure in their own ability to relate. Additionally, heightened levels of uncertainty and distrust can foster the belief that maintenance of the relationship depends on successful athletic performance.

Another aspect of a high profile student-athlete's life is that of increased attention from fans. Although the increased attention might initially be thought to enhance the initiation phase of relational development as the opportunities to meet new people are increased, it can also have damaging effects on the maintenance of an existing relationship. The increased attention can place additional stress on the existing relationship, therefore making it necessary for the couple to reestablish their behavioral norms (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a) about acceptable and

unacceptable behavior within the relationship. In a situation where the high profile student-athlete is in a newly developed relationship and must balance that relationship with an increased attention from fans, the relationship will likely experience more mutuality, definitiveness, and future uncertainty. The partners' feelings, the state of the relationship and the future of the association are all in question (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a). This is potentially problematic for the student-athlete relationship, as increased levels of uncertainty in each of these areas have been found to decrease levels of self-disclosure (Dainton, 2003).

According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), prediction and explanation are at the core of uncertainty. During an initial interaction, each individual has several possible predictions regarding how the other is likely to think or behave. The individual must choose that which appears most probable, and then select from his/her own possible response behaviors (Berger, 1988). This choice can present a challenge for high profile student-athletes. If student-athletes have limited experience with their high profile status, in that the status is new or not understood, they will likely respond without consideration of the influence of their status. However, if student-athletes recognize their status, and if their status has affected past exchanges, they will likely have increased uncertainty. This increased uncertainty will exist since the ability to predict the others' behavior is more varied. This idea becomes clearer when considering Knobloch and Solomon's (2005) definitions of self, partner, and relational uncertainty. Self-uncertainty refers to individuals' inability to predict or explain their own attitudes and behaviors, while partner uncertainty refers to an individual's inability to predict or explain the other's attitudes and behaviors. Relationship uncertainty is defined as the inability to predict or explain the relationship status separate from the self and the partner. Berger (1979) suggested that individuals reduce uncertainty when they anticipate future interactions with the other individual,

when they believe the other individual will offer greater rewards than costs, and when the other individual deviates from the predicted behavior. All three areas are likely affected when considering a high profile student-athlete population. First, time constraints and the person's intentions for wanting to meet the student-athlete may impact the anticipation of future interactions. Additionally, depending on what type of relationship the student-athlete and the individual expect, the perceived cost and rewards of the interaction will likely be affected. Finally, considering how the other person behaves and the amount of experience the student-athlete has with his or her high profile status may determine if the student-athlete is able to reduce his or her uncertainty.

Another area that might well affect the process of relational development for high profile student-athletes is their ability to share commonalities with the other person. Although the perception and the likelihood is that high profile athletes have more access to potential dating partners, they will likely experience more problems with the initiation of the relationship as they have less in common with the other person. Individuals with fewer commonalities are more likely to have higher levels of uncertainty. Consequently, when individuals have greater uncertainty, they often experience less liking and intimacy. Uncertainty, therefore, is an important factor that affects the desire to develop relationships (Bradac, 2001).

Since uncertainty reduction also applies to individuals in various relationship stages (Sunnafrank, 1986), student-athletes will likely experience higher levels of uncertainty through the maintenance of their relationships. In their romantic relationship research, Knobloch and Solomon (2005) asserted that relational uncertainty creates difficulties in recognizing and assessing messages regarding the state of the relationship, therefore, making it challenging for

individuals to interact. In short, their research indicated that uncertainty is salient not only in initial interactions, but for established intimate relationships as well.

One of the ongoing debates regarding uncertainty reduction theory is the motivation for which an individual will seek to reduce uncertainty. Brashers (2001) uncertainty management theory suggests that individuals are not always motivated to reduce uncertainty. Whereas, when the predicted consequence of reducing uncertainty is perceived as negative, individuals are less likely to reduce uncertainty. This is particularly problematic for high profile student-athletes, especially for those who have extensive experience dealing with their high profile status. They are challenged by a want to reduce uncertainty and therefore increase intimacy; at the same time recognizing that they need to remain guarded about the individual's intentions. Experienced high profile student-athletes have been taught to question the intentions of a potential partner and, therefore, might perceive that reducing their uncertainty will have a negative effect on the relationship.

Uncertainty reduction theory is centered on the assumption that when uncertainty is high, individuals are more likely to engage in information seeking behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975); therefore, assuming that the purpose of reducing uncertainty is strictly to attain knowledge and understanding through the process of information exchange (Sunnafank, 1986). However, other research in this area proposes that uncertainty is an experience that may create anxiety or an uncomfortable state, particularly in a new environment, and that if the information is perceived to be negative, information might not be sought (Brashers, 2001). Consideration must be given to the impact heightened levels of anxiety would have on a student-athlete's decision to disclose or seek information. Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, and Brusckke (1998) suggested that an individual would gather information to better predict and explain unfamiliar

behaviors in an attempt to reduce anxiety. If this is so, one might question if a student-athlete's communicative experience level would impact his or her decision to seek or disclose information.

Uncertainty and Intimacy in Athlete Relationships

Recent research suggests that elevated levels of uncertainty about intention combined with less time and opportunity to experience a variety of interpersonal relationships may inhibit the development of effective communication skills (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2000). College athletes face a unique challenge in this area. Anecdotal evidence indicates that parents and coaches teach athletes to be aware and on guard as they enter social relationships. Furthermore, college athletes are encouraged to question the motives of a person with whom they are initiating a relationship, being wary of those who might want to get close to them to learn about team injuries (for gambling purposes) or simply to gain social status by being involved with the athlete (J. Bove, personal communication, September 4, 2006). John Bove has been a football coach and the Compliance Director at Penn State University for the past twenty years. He works with the NCAA, the FBI, and organized crime members to educate student-athletes about the dangers associated with gambling. One of Mr. Bove's responsibilities is to make student-athletes aware that information they possess about their team and teammates can be attractive for those involved with gambling; and that the information used for illegal purposes can result from an unknowing relationship that develops between an athlete and a bookie or a bookie's runner. Such caution, although well meaning and necessary, may in fact heighten social anxiety in student-athletes (Miller & Kerr, 2002). According to Anderson (1999), social anxiety is a barrier to beginning or maintaining relationships and can increase the chances that athletes will experience communication apprehension. If a college athlete doubts the motives of his or her partner, he or

she might do less to articulate thoughts and feelings about the relationship, and thus hinder its development.

In addition, college athletes are often under pressure to manage their own self- image, while simultaneously managing their media-created image. College athletes' awareness and management of their image is necessary. Tension frequently exists between the athlete's true definition of self and the definition created by the media (Harrison, 1981). The struggle to balance possibly competing images may deter the development of effective communication skills, and increase the stress a college athlete faces when deciding what to disclose when initiating a relationship. This struggle will likely have an impact on the athlete's interpersonal competence.

Life Span Development, Relationships, and Student-Athletes

According to Buhrmester (1990), communication competence is important to the socio-emotional development of young adults. Without it, they are likely to have fewer relationships and difficulty in achieving intimacy in those relationships, leading to greater risk for adjustment problems during life transition periods. During the transitional period into adulthood, personal relationships provide emotional assistance and psychological support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). The ability to create and maintain relationships becomes increasingly important further into adulthood (Samter, 2003). Recent research suggests that an individual's long-term social and emotional adaptation, academic and cognitive development, and citizenship are enhanced by frequent opportunities to strength social competence (Welsh & Bierman, 2001). Therefore, college student-athletes, whose time for social development is often reallocated to athletics and academics, may encounter problems adjusting socially and in the classroom. According to Samter (2003), specific competencies are "salient throughout adolescence and adulthood in that

they allow individuals to access and engage peers” (p. 661). These competencies, which speak specifically to interpersonal competence include: verbal and nonverbal responsiveness, the ability to initiate and sustain interesting conversations, the ability to self-disclose, the ability to offer emotional support, and the ability to manage conflict (Buhrmester et al., 1988). Student-athlete deficiencies in these areas are a concern because according to Hartup (1992), competency practice and efficiency with peers contributes a great deal to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which individuals function as adults. Athletes are expected to demonstrate competence in verbal and nonverbal responsiveness with the media, offer emotional support to teammates in need, and to be able to initiate and sustain interesting conversations with alumni and fans; however, time to develop these competencies is often limited. Although self-disclosure is a key competency area, student-athletes are taught to have guarded conversations when attempting to get to know someone while also needing to develop intimacy to advance a relationship. This tension is cause for concern about how college athletes ascertain social competence.

In addition to recognizing the effects athletic participation has on social development, Wylleman (200) suggests a need for further exploration into how one’s personal life impacts their athletic performance. Such research will lead to a better understanding of athletes’ “perception or models of how relationships impact their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well as their athletic performance” (Coppel, 1995, p. 196), and thus help athletes and those in their psychological and social network to open lines of communication, develop mutual understandings, and recognize their interdependence (Gardner et al., 1995). It is still unclear, however, what kinds of interpersonal difficulties college athletes’ experience, if these difficulties are unique to athletes, or how their social development may be impeded by these difficulties.

Therefore, to gather more in-depth descriptions and probe further into college student-athletes' perceptions of their interpersonal competence and romantic relationship development, descriptive research should be conducted specifically with college student-athletes. A better understanding of how athletics affect a student-athlete's social development is important and the translation of these findings into practical training for student-athletes is essential.

Translational Research

Collegiate athletic administrators, coaches, and student-athlete support staff recognize the need to translate research findings into practice. According to many scholars such as Pillemer, Sutor, and Wethington (2003), the long-standing gap between research and application must be closed; theory and practice must be integrated. Hudgins and Allen-Meares (2000) stated that although research is valuable in its own right, "translational research" can provide a new model to address the dichotomy between theory and practice. Petronio (1999) suggested that the communication field is receptive as it has a long history of translating theory into practice; citing the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* dating back to 1999. The reverse is also true in that basic researchers lose the opportunity to test theories of human behavior to increase fundamental knowledge (Pillemer et al., 2003). According to Petronio (1999) attention has shifted from "basic research" to an approach that addresses everyday problems by using what we learn through research.

At the federal level, there is a growing emphasis on systematic translation of basic behavior research findings into the development interventions could improve "real-world." Proponents of translational research hold that useful scientific knowledge is not exploited to sufficiently help persons with illness, disability, and disadvantage (Pillemer et al., 2003). According to Lomas (1993), *diffusion* is a passive process where information is received and

utilized by a small group of “highly motivated” individuals. On the other hand, *dissemination* is a more active process that targets individuals to make them aware and assist them in using relevant information. According to Orlandi (1996), diffusion and dissemination only reach small groups of individuals, while *directed diffusion* is a strategically planned effort to expand, encourage, and accelerate the dissemination and diffusion processes.

Petronio (2007) suggested the clarity of the informational content and the information delivery system as challenges to the dissemination and diffusion processes. According to Miller-Day (2008), the flawed delivery system can be attributed to the static systems that use limited and inadequate media. For example, most modes of delivery of research communication are through academic journal or book publication. There is little use of multi-media presentation that includes a combination of graphics, photography, technology and the written word. Therefore, as a fifth goal, constituting the second phase of this dissertation, I will translate the findings from this study into a curriculum for further development and use by student-athletes, their parents, and/or athletic support staff. In chapter 6, a brief 3-week educational curriculum is proposed that aims to assist college student-athletes to enhance their communication and interpersonal skills while gaining a better understanding of relational development within the context of college athletics. The curriculum’s target audience includes college student-athletes and those who provide support services for them.

Research Goals

Given the presumed significance and unique challenges of communication, interpersonal competence, and relationship development in college student-athletes’ lives, as well as the lack of systematic research in this area, the following are the specific goals and related research questions that guided this study:

The first goal was to examine differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in self-reported communication competence. This goal was accomplished by addressing the following research questions.

RQ1: Are there significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of self-perceived communication competence?

RQ2: Do college student-athletes and non-athletes perceive significantly different levels of communication competence across different communication receivers (stranger, acquaintance, or friend)?

The second goal was to examine differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in regard to interpersonal competence by addressing the following research questions.

RQ3: Are there significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of interpersonal competence?

RQ4: Do college student-athletes and non-athletes report significantly different levels of interpersonal competence across dimensions (initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management)?

The third goal was to examine how college student-athletes perceived their communication and interpersonal competence as it related to personal relationship development.

RQ5: Do student-athletes and non-athletes report significantly different levels of perceived challenges to relational development?

The fourth goal was to explore the associations between communication competence and interpersonal competence in a college student-athlete sample by addressing the following research questions.

RQ6: What is the strength and direction of the relationship between communication and interpersonal competence for college student-athletes?

RQ7: What is the strength and direction of the relationship between communication and interpersonal competence for non-athletes?

In addition to the research goals presented above, focus group data were used to accomplish a fifth goal—to complete knowledge transfer from basic research on the social development of college athletes found through web-based survey and focus group data into a curriculum framework proposal for further development in the classroom or during athletic training sessions.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

This research was conducted in two phases. Phase one of this dissertation examined communication competence and interpersonal competence in college student-athlete and non-athlete samples and examined barriers to college athletes' romantic personal relationships. Phase two focused on integrating the findings from the first phase into a communication and interpersonal competence curriculum proposal for use with college athletes. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design and methodology of the first phase of this dissertation research, while chapter 6 will describe the second phase. Specifically, this chapter will provide information about the choice of a mixed method design, define core constructs, describe the study sample, instrumentation, and procedures for the collection and analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative data.

Mixed Method Design

Phase one of this research employed a sequential mixed method design; that is, a design that includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, with one type of data providing a basis for collection of the other type (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The advantages of a mixed method design are that this design uses the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, provides a more comprehensive view of the phenomena being studied and does not limit the data being collected. In this study, quantitative data (a web-based survey) were collected first with a qualitative component (open-ended questions) and then with a more in-depth examination using focus group discussion as follow-up. Mixed method design was useful for this study. The initial quantitative data (survey data) provided a descriptive overview of college athletes' and non-athletes' attitudes toward their communication and interpersonal

competence allowing for the examination of within and across group associations. The follow-up focus group discussion data provided a more in-depth exploration of college athletes' perceptions of communication and interpersonal competence, and barriers to developing satisfying personal relationships. This provided an opportunity to further explore the findings from the survey. The qualitative data also provided additional insight into how competence was perceived by athletes in the context of their own personal relationships.

Qualitative research methods are useful to understand what people value and the meanings they attach to their own personal experiences. As Merriam (2002) writes, "The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (p. 3). Focus group research, in particular, is an appropriate methodological choice when a researcher seeks to know "what people do, know, think and feel" (Patton, 2002, p. 145). The advantage of focus group interviews are that they are socially oriented and provide an atmosphere more natural and relaxed than a one-to-one interview. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups are especially useful in gaining access and checking tentative conclusions. The focus group format also allows for flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arise in the discussion. Krueger (1988) asserts that since this method is easily understood and the findings appear believable, the results have high face validity. Although problems can arise with power dynamics in focus group discussion, this can be managed and focus groups allow for more interviews at one time (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In addition, Marshall and Rossman suggest that focus groups are an effective data collection tool for program design. Focus groups were used as the data collection tool in this study to provide a "tentative check" of survey data findings, expand understanding of the quantitative findings, and

to collect in-depth information on athletes' perceptions of the role of athlete status on personal relationship development.

Defining Constructs

As stated in chapter 2, for this research project, "college student-athlete" is defined as one who participates in both academics and sports. "Communication competence" is defined as "the ability to adapt messages appropriately to the interaction context" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 31), and "interpersonal communication", according to Buhrmester et al. (1988), is defined as social interaction within close personal relationships. In addition, "high-profile athlete" will be defined a Division 1A college athlete who has been reported on at least three times in the local and/or national press.

Data Collection

Four steps guide descriptive research: (a) isolate an issue/problem, (b) choose an appropriate sample of participants, (c) collect valid and reliable statistics, and (d) analyze and state conclusions (Gay, 2000). These steps were used to guide the present research. First, the issue was isolated by reviewing the current literature in the communication and sport psychology fields. In addition, the researcher's observations of college student-athletes for the past thirteen years were considered, and a power analysis was conducted. The power analysis indicated that 34 subjects per group would result in a 95% chance of obtaining statistical significance using a t -test ($p < .05$), assuming a large effect size of .50 (Cohen, 1988). Observations through classroom instruction and one-to-one discussion guided the selection of an appropriate sample of participants as described below.

Samples

An email invitation to participate in the survey study was sent to 650 student-athletes and 66 student-athletes consented. Survey data were then collected to assess communication competence and interpersonal competence in the sample of 143 college students consisting of student-athletes ($n = 66$, 46.2%), and collegiate non-athletes ($n = 77$, 53.8%). Of the 143 students, males comprised 41% of the sample ($n = 58$) and females 59% ($n = 85$). Participants were asked to self-report their ethnicity by identifying with one of five groups. Eight participants identified themselves as African American, 14 identified themselves as Asian, 115 identified themselves as Caucasian, 3 identified themselves as Hispanic and 3 identified themselves as other (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Number of Participants by Gender and Athletic Status

Gender	Athletic Status		Total
	Varsity Student-Athlete	Non-Student-Athlete	
Male	27	31	58
Female	39	46	85
Total	66	77	143

A variety of methods were used to recruit Penn State student-athletes to participate in the web-based survey. First, each varsity coach received an email asking that he or she nominate 5-6 student-athletes to participate in the study (Appendix A). As an incentive, the coach was offered a summary of the findings to be available at the conclusion of this dissertation. In addition, an email was sent to the Student-Athlete list serve (Appendix B). The email invited athletes to

participate in the study by completing a web-based survey that would ask their thoughts about their communication skills.

To include non-athletes in the web-based survey, participants were recruited from a sample of college students enrolled during the summer of 2007 in a basic communication course (Appendix C). The course served as a general education requirement for all students at the University, and students in the course were offered course credit equal to 2% of their total grade for participating in this research study. Participants were asked to complete a web-based survey that would ask them about their communication skills.

Focus Groups

A purposive sampling procedure was used to select participants for the focus group interviews. Purposeful sampling is a useful tool for selecting participants from a known subpopulation for a specified purpose (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). To recruit focus-group participants, a criterion-based selection procedure was used, which facilitated the selection of individuals who possessed characteristics related to this study's central questions. Criterion-based selection may include extreme, typical, unique, reputational, or comparable case selection (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Using this method of sampling assures high internal validity. In this study, the criteria used for the selection of focus group participants included (a) status as a high profile student-athlete, and (b) membership on a varsity athletic team for at least one year. These criteria were used for selection because high profile varsity athletes could offer perspective about the unique challenges faced by those who are attempting to balance getting an education while playing a varsity sport. For this study, "high-profile athlete" was defined as a Division 1A college athlete who had been reported on at least three times in the local and/or

national press. Traditionally, “high-profile” teams at Penn State University are: football, men’s and women’s basketball, women’s soccer and women’s volleyball.

To ensure that most participants would be able to meet the criteria, coaches of high-profile men and women’s varsity athletic teams were asked for their assistance in recruiting at least two of their athletes to participate in one of two focus groups. After each coach suggested a list of athletes, the athletes were contacted via email (Appendix D). Twelve high-profile student-athletes were selected to participate in one of two scheduled focus-group discussions. All of the athletes were on a full scholarship and had participated in college athletics for at least one year. The first group consisted of five females (4 = Caucasian; 1 = African American) representing four different varsity athletic teams. The second focus group consisted of seven male varsity athletes (5 Caucasian; 2 = African American) all from the same high-profile team.

Survey Procedures

To collect valid and reliable data to address research questions 1-7, a web-based survey was designed choosing valid and reliable measures of the study variables coupled with demographic questions. To develop the survey, the researcher examined published measures of communication competence and interpersonal competence for those instruments with reports of high levels of reliability.

An important part of survey research is conducting a pilot test. According to Hocking, Stacks and McDermott (2003), a pilot test is a preliminary effort whose purpose is to examine the research procedures and instrument used to correct any problems that might occur before the study is conducted. After the first draft of the survey was completed, individuals who were familiar with the topic were asked to review the instrument. The survey was reviewed by committee members, student-athletes, Morgan Academic Support for Student-Athlete staff, and

varsity athletic coaches. The combination of these field experts, along with the examination of the literature, assisted with revising the instrument for clarity and face validity.

The final draft of the web-based survey was divided into four sections (Appendix E): (a) personal/demographic information, (b) college students and college student-athletes' self-perceived communication competence (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), (c) college students and college student-athletes' interpersonal competence (Buhrmester et al., 1988), and (d) student-athletes' perceptions of personal relationships and the relational development process. Sections a-d consisted of Likert-type scales to assess the study variables, and the final section included an open-ended question to allow for more detailed responses.

The survey was made available to participants on-line via the Survey Monkey web site. Use of this web-based data collection method was selected as it allows for more participant privacy and convenience, and provides instant data collection and efficient data entry. Since part of the population being studied included high profile college student-athletes, it was determined that participant privacy and time constraints were of heightened concern. Paper and pencil surveys are less autonomous and require time for face-to-face contact with the participant. Additionally, convenience and enhanced privacy were thought to have been more appealing to a non-athlete population as well.

After the decision was made to collect data on-line, a search of possible on-line sites occurred. After reviewing several sites, Survey Monkey was selected. Survey Monkey is web-based survey software that enables a researcher to design a survey, collect responses and analyze results. Survey Monkey promises consumers that they “employ multiple layers of security to make sure that your account and your data remains private and secure” (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). To use the services, the researcher purchased a site

membership for \$19.95 per month. All services provided by Survey Monkey were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Once the final version of the survey was completed online, a committee member and two student-athletes conducted a trial completion of the survey. A few minor adaptations were made (e.g., altering the programming to require certain items to be completed before the participant could progress in the survey) and the survey was deemed ready for administration.

Students and college student-athletes who agreed to participate in the study were directed to a website where they could access the web-based survey. On the website, each participant was asked to read a copy of an informed consent form (Appendix F). Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could discontinue participation at any time. After providing active consent by checking on the box indicating "I agree," participants were asked to complete the survey (Appendix E) and submit it electronically. Upon completion and submission of the survey, both college student-athletes and non-athletes were directed to the final page of the survey, which thanked the participants for their involvement.

Measures

Self-perceived communication scale. To test research questions one and two, the researcher used the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC) (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). According to Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, and Ayres (1997), this self-evaluation, 12-item scale is the best measure of self-perceived communication competence. Participants were asked to estimate their communication competence with three communication partners (strangers, acquaintances and friends). An overall SPCC score was obtained ranging from 0 (completely incompetent) to 100 (completely competent). According to Blood et al.

(2001), higher SPCC total scores (> 87) indicate good self-perceived communication competence, while lower scores (< 59) suggest poor self-perceived communication competence.

The SPCC has proven to be internally consistent in previous studies. The alpha reliability estimates for all 12 items have ranged in other studies from .67 to .92 (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Additionally, a number of studies support its construct criterion-related validity. For example, SPCC has been reported to correlate positively with self-esteem (Chesebro, McCroskey, Atwater, Behrenfuss, Cawelti, Gaudino & Hodges, 1992; Rosenfeld, Grant III, & McCroskey, 1995), willingness to communicate (McCroskey, 1992), and sociability in adolescents (Rosenfeld et al., 1995).

In the present study, the reliability of this scale, using the Cronbach's alpha test for internal consistency, was measured. Internal consistency is the amount of agreement a measure's items have with each other (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). The use of Cronbach's alpha is most appropriate when several items have been designed to measure the same concept. The numeric range should fall between 0 and 1, with an alpha 0.7 or greater considered adequate. Alphas falling below .7 lack internal consistency (SPSS, 1999). In the present study, the alpha for the SPCC measure was .95. This suggests a high consistency in responses by participants.

Interpersonal competence questionnaire. The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire assessed interpersonal competence (ICQ, Buhrmester et al., 1988) and addressed research questions three and four. The 40-item instrument consisted of 8-item subscales. The subscale scores can be used separately, with higher scores indicating more comfort and competence in the interpersonal domain.

The five subscales include initiation ("Asking or suggesting to someone new that you get together and do something"), negative assertion ("Saying 'no' when a date/acquaintance asks

you to do something you don't want to do"), self-disclosure ("Revealing something intimate about yourself with someone you're getting to know"), emotional support ("Being able to patiently and sensitively listen to a companion 'let off steam' about outside problems he/she is having"), and conflict management ("When having a conflict with a close companion, really listening and not trying to 'read his/her mind'"). The respondents rated ICQ items on a 5-point scale that indicated their level of competence and comfort in handling each situation, with higher scores indicating greater comfort and competence (1 = "I'm poor at this; I would avoid this situation if possible", and 5 = "I'm extremely good at this; I would handle this situation very well"). Buhrmester et al. (1988) reported previous Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the subscores ranging from .77 to .87 with a mean of .83. In this present study, the alpha for the ICQ scale was .92 with subscales scores of initiation .90, negative assertion .84, self-disclosure .83, emotional support .88, and conflict management .83.

Student-athletes and relational development. There are no existing measures available to assess college student-athletes' perceptions of challenges related to the development of their romantic relationships; therefore, items were developed specifically for this study to measure these perceptions. Seven items were written based on statements made by college student-athletes to the investigator and documented over the past several years. Student-athletes have shared concerns that a potential relational partner might only be interested in the athlete because of his or her athletic status. In addition, working with student-athletes on a daily basis has given this researcher an intimate view of the time student-athletes spend on their sport. Therefore, questions concerning athletes' perception about intention, time constraints and perceived relational challenges were included. Three of the items were designed to measure both athletes and non-athletes' perceptions toward others' relational intentions. Two items were designed to

measure both athletes and non-athletes' attitudes about the amount of time available for romantic relationships. The final two questions were asked only of varsity athletes and were designed to measure their perceptions regarding romantic relationships, athletic participation, and athletic performance. For the first six questions, participants rated each of these items on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The seventh question was open-ended and provided participants with a text box to collect responses.

The reliability of new instrumentation is often subject to question. Therefore, it is important to test the inter-item reliability of the new scale to determine how items fit together with one another. In this study, SPSS was used to run an exploratory factor analysis on the six close-ended questions asked on part four of the survey. Factor analysis is a statistical technique that identifies groupings of scale items (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The use of factor analysis is important in establishing construct validity. In this study, after an exploratory factor analysis was completed (the factor analysis is reported fully in the results chapter) it was determined that four of the six items be retained for the final scale. The four remained without jeopardizing the internal consistency of the scale. The results indicated that the use of four items produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.69. Appendix G contains the complete Student-Athletes and Relational Development scale.

In addition to the Likert-type items, to probe college student-athletes' perceptions of the unique challenges they face in personal relationships, college student-athletes were provided with a text box and asked to respond to an open-ended question: "As a student-athlete, what challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?" This type of open-ended question provided an opportunity for the participant to provide qualitative detail about their personal experiences with romantic relationships.

Focus Group Procedures

According to Morgan (1997), developing an interview guide helps to control the discussion within the focus group and allows both the researcher's and the participants' needs to be met. Although there are several basic formats for the interview guide, Morgan (1998) suggests that the funnel structure is most common. This format allows the discussion to begin in a broad, less structured manner and enables participants to share their perspectives before moving into a more structured approach as the discussion progresses. For this research study, since little is known about how college student-athletes perceive their communication and interpersonal competence, the funnel structure provided the researcher to begin the interview by discussing participants' perspectives on these types of competence, probing for personal experience and taking care to solicit feedback on initial findings from the quantitative survey. For example, focus group participants were asked to share their ideas about how being a student-athlete affects their ability to meet others.

The interview schedule was designed to move from discussion of interpersonal and communication competence to perceptions of specific challenges college student-athletes face in developing personal relationships and include discussion of how romantic relationships are perceived to impact athletic performance. (See Focus Group Questions in Appendix H).

Morgan (1998) suggests that a moderator-led focus group allows for participant interaction that helps reveal and expand on key issues; and that a moderator's effectiveness is reliant upon experience working with groups in addition to prior experience with the research participants. With this in mind, the researcher served as the focus group moderator. The researcher has extensive experience and training in facilitating group discussion through my work as a drug and alcohol intake and assessment counselor, a family planning community

educator, an academic advisor, and college instructor. Additionally, I have worked with student-athletes in a variety of contexts throughout the past thirteen years.

Focus Group Protocol

Recruited athletes were assigned to either a male or female focus group session. Through past experience working with college student-athletes, the researcher believed that separating the athletes by gender would allow them to speak more openly about their experiences with romantic relationships. Prior to the start of each group, student-athletes were asked to read a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix I) stating the purpose of the study, specifying their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and giving permission to include results of the study in aggregate in future publication. The participant and the researcher signed two copies of the consent form; one was given to the research participant, and the researcher kept the other copy. Next, the importance of confidentiality was reviewed with the participants. To further ensure confidentiality, participants were given a code number to use instead of their name. In addition to the code number, participants received a letter, either F or M, which corresponded with their gender. For example, in the all-female group, the participants were labeled 001F, 002F, 003F, 004F and 005F. The same format was followed in assigning a code number to each of the participants in the all-male focus group. During the focus group discussion, participants were asked to identify themselves by their assigned number prior to answering a question. Throughout the focus group discussions, the moderator also addressed each participant by their code number. If a participant used his or her name or the name of one of the other participants, the name was converted into the participants' corresponding code number. All participants were referred to in the transcripts and the narrative by their assigned code number to protect their identities.

Once the participants signed the consent forms and received their assigned code, the focus group discussion began. Each discussion lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and was audio taped using a digital audio recorder. Each focus group took place in a private room within an academic building on campus. For the first focus group, participants were asked to move their desks into a circle and the audio recorder was placed onto a desk in the middle of the circle. For the second focus group, participants were seated around a conference room table and the recorder was placed in the middle of the table. Upon completion of the first focus group, the digital recording was uploaded as an audio file onto the researcher's computer. The audio file was listened to repeatedly and transcribed into textual form by the researcher. The same procedure was followed after completing the second focus group.

Data Analysis

Gay (2000) stated the final step in conducting a descriptive research project is to analyze and state conclusions. To accomplish this final step, all quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. Each data collection method yielded different types of data that permitted examination of communication and interpersonal competence within college student-athlete and non-athlete samples.

Quantitative Data Analysis¹

The first step in the analysis of the survey data was to calculate the descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, standard deviations, and Pearson Product Moment Correlations. Next, inter-item correlations were run on each of the existing scales, and an exploratory factor

¹ The steps of this analysis are reported in more detail in the next chapter. The following is provided as an overview.

analysis was performed on the Student-Athlete Relationship Development scale. As a result of the factor analysis, it was determined that two of the six initial items on the scale (“As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy,” and “I wish I had more time to myself”) be deleted so as not to threaten the internal consistency of the scale. Scale reliabilities using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient were then calculated on each measure. A series of *t*-tests were used to reach data-driven conclusions.

In this study, independent *t*-tests were used to answer each of the first four research questions. Results from the *t*-tests address the questions of whether college athletes and non-athletes have similar ideas about their interpersonal and communication competence. For research questions six and seven, a Pearson Product Moment Correlations test and a multiple regression analysis was used. A correlation is a statistic that measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two quantitative variables. The strength of the relationship between the variables is determined by the closeness of the points on a straight line and the direction of the relationship is determined by whether one variable generally increases or decreases when the other variable increases (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Multiple regression analysis was used following the correlation test to determine if gender, athletic status and/or communication competence could predict a participant’s interpersonal competence. Finally, results from the web-based quantitative analysis were used to inform the development of a set of questions that directed two college student-athlete focus groups.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To probe college student-athletes’ perceptions of the unique challenges they might face in their personal relationships, student-athletes were provided a text box at the end of the web-based survey and asked to respond to an open-ended question: “As a student-athlete, what

challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?” Responses to the open-ended text box question: “As a student-athlete, what challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?” as well as the focus group data were coded inductively using the constant comparison method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). This method takes place on three levels: line-by-line data coding, generating categories that represent the data, and identifying core themes that cut across cases. Prior to completing level one, the researcher must carefully read the data and listen to the audiotapes (focus groups only) (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), transcribe the audio recording, then review and reflect on the data line-by-line in an attempt to identify salient ideas in the text and create “open” codes. A code is a label given to a unit of data derived directly from participant responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study, digital audio tapes were transcribed within one week following the completion of the focus group. The tapes were listened to repeatedly, and as the data were transcribed, open codes were linked to comments in the text salient to the research question at hand. For example, when asked about the unique challenges college athletes face in trying to begin romantic relationships, participant responses suggested a lack of available time. Two of the participants stated: “I think in a way it kind of inhibits meeting other people because we spend so much time with each other...”; “...we have such a high commitment on us to perform and do well in the classroom so it’s kinda, it limits our ability to go out as much...”

Open coding began with the first focus group transcripts and this led to the generation of categories of common ideas across responses. The process of category generation involves noting patterns of meaning expressed by respondents and as categories of meaning are identified in the text by the researcher, he or she conceptualizes how to represent it and provide it with a descriptive label (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As concepts and patterns of meaning were

identified in the transcription from the first focus group discussion, I looked for ways the concepts and patterns within the discussion were similar and different to each other. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), categories should be internally consistent, but distinct from one another. To further enhance the internal consistency, I then also compared the emergent ideas from the first focus group discussion to the open-ended responses from the survey.

Next, the same procedures for data transcription and analysis were followed within one week of completion of the second focus group discussion. After completing the coding for the second focus group transcript, I identified over-arching conceptual themes that collapsed conceptual categories across the focus group discussions into a parsimonious grouping of explanatory concepts (selective coding). Following the same analytic procedures of constant comparison, saturation was attained across all the emergent themes. Saturation occurs when no new categories, concepts, dimensions or incidents emerge during analysis of new cases. Analysis can reach closure when all categories of meaning are saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Categories of responses were then interpreted to fall into parsimonious groupings of meaning (themes) within and across groups. A theme is defined by querying the text for the main ideas salient to the participants and may be located through repetition, restatement, or intensity of the ideas in the text (Charmaz, 2000). When considering both open-ended text box and focus group responses, a total of two over-arching themes were identified as salient to participant experiences. These included student-athlete social experiences with peers and athletic participation's impact on romantic relationships. These themes will be discussed in chapter four.

Trustworthiness Criteria

Credibility. When using focus groups for data collection, it is critical to ensure that the researcher and the data are credible and trustworthy. First, the credibility of the researcher was

established. According to Patton (2002), the credibility of the researcher is dependent upon training, experience, track record and self-presentation. Through doctoral coursework, counseling education and working in several roles within the athletic community, I was not just a researcher requesting information from these students. I had a history and had established trust within this population. Second, data triangulation was used to provide multiple perspectives on the phenomena of interest. Method triangulation involves using a variety of methods to collect and analyze data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In this study, I employed data triangulation, collecting information from athletes, as well as, non athletes; and method triangulation by using focus group discussions in conjunction with collecting open- and closed-ended survey responses.

Transferability. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the ability of the researcher to provide enough descriptive data so that there is sufficient detail to allow other researchers to transfer the findings to another similar setting (Barnes et al, 2005). In addition, according to Patton (2002), to ensure transferability of findings it is important to select a strategic sample of participants who have knowledge of, and experience with, the phenomenon of interest; therefore, serving to produce knowledge that can inform future research. To ensure this study's transferability high profile college athletes served as focus group participants, and I described data collection and analytic methods in detail so that other researchers could apply these findings to comparable groups, and potentially duplicate this study.

Dependability. In addition to credibility and transferability, it is important that qualitative studies are also dependable. One way to establish dependability in qualitative research designs is through the demonstration of confirmability. Being able to track the data collection source enhances confirmability and is often completed using an audit trail. In this study, I reviewed and transcribed all audio-tapes from both focus groups and a committee

member checked initial accuracy of this transcription. Moreover, all excerpts reported in chapter 4 are marked with unique identifiers for quick access to the original source information.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the design and methodology used in phase one of this study, describing a mixed methods approach including both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. This chapter also provided a description of the procedures for participant selection, a definition of core concepts, a description of the study sample, instrumentation, informed consent, and procedures for the collection and analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative data.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Phase one of this study examines the results from a web-based survey administered to college student-athletes and non-athletes from a Division 1A institution. The instrument was designed to collect demographic data and attitudinal perspectives about self-perceived communication and interpersonal competence. In addition to web-based survey results, this chapter presents the results of two focus groups exploring how college student-athletes perceive their communication and interpersonal competence as related to romantic relational development. From these focus groups, significant themes emerged identifying barriers to satisfying personal relationships for college athletes. The second part of chapter 4 is organized around these themes.

Descriptive Statistics

A web-based survey was administered to collect data about communication and interpersonal competence across a sample of college students. The web-based instrument was comprised of four parts. Part one requested information about the participants' sex, ethnicity, current semester standing and participation in varsity athletics. Part two was entitled "How I Communicate," and asked participants to respond on a scale of 1 to 100 about their communication competence (SPCC, McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Part three asked participants to use a Likert scale to report their feelings about their ability to communicate with a friend (ICQ, Buhrmester et al., 1988). Finally, part four of the survey asked participants to address their feelings specifically about romantic relationships. All participants were asked to respond to the first five questions in part four of the survey. Only those participants identifying themselves as varsity student-athletes were asked to respond to the last two questions in part

four. The first of the final two survey questions asked, “As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy.” This question was drafted as a result of the researcher’s personal observation and informal discussion with college student-athletes throughout the past thirteen years. The final question used an open-ended format and asked only the college student-athlete participants to respond to the question: “As a student-athlete, what challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?” This type of open-ended response provided an opportunity for the participant to provide detail about their own experiences with romantic relationships.

Respondents included 143 college students; 40.5% ($n = 58$) males and 59.4% ($n = 85$) females. A total of 46.2% ($n = 66$) responded that they were varsity student-athletes and 53.8% ($n = 77$) indicated that they were not varsity student-athletes. More than one-quarter of the females (27.2%; $n = 39$) responding to the survey were female student-athletes and 18.8% ($n = 27$) were male student-athletes. Table 4.1 displays demographic information regarding the participants’ gender and athletic standing. As can be seen by the frequencies cross tabulated in Table 4.1, there is a non-significant relationship between gender and athletic status, $X^2(1, N = 143) = 0.006, p \geq .05$.

Table 4.1

Number of Participants by Gender and Athletic Status

Gender	Athletic Status		Total
	Varsity Student-Athlete	Non-Student-Athlete	
Male	27	31	58
Female	39	46	85
Total	66	77	143

In addition to gender and athlete status, participants were asked to indicate their ethnicity from one of five categories, including African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic and other. The fewest participants (2.0%, $n = 3$) identified themselves as Hispanic or other, with 5.6% ($n = 8$) identifying as African American, 9.8% ($n = 14$) as Asian, and the largest 80.4% ($n = 115$) as Caucasian.

Due to the preponderance of participants classifying themselves as Caucasian, the categories were recoded into two groups—white and non-white. The white category is composed of participants who identified as Caucasian. The non-white group included participants who identified themselves as African American, Asian, Hispanic or other on the survey.

Table 4.2 displays the ethnicity of the sample by athletic status. Caucasian participants were closely distributed between college student-athletes (52.2%) and non-athlete (47.8%) categories, while non-white participants were not as evenly distributed between athletes (16%) and non-athletes (84%). A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between ethnicity and athletic status. The relationship between these variables was significant, $X^2(1, N = 143) = 10.83, p < .001$.

Table 4.2

Number of Participants by Ethnicity and Athletic Status

Ethnicity	Athletic Status		Total
	Varsity Student-Athlete	Non-Student-Athlete	
Non-white	4	21	25
White	60	55	115
Total	64	76	140

Table 4.3 shows the class distribution and athletic status of the subjects. In this study, athletes and non-athletes were distributed across sophomore ($n = 29$, 20.3%), junior ($n = 34$, 23.8%), senior ($n = 36$, 23.1%), and 5th year classes ($n = 12$, 8.4%). Varsity athletes and non-athletes were not equally distributed across the freshmen class. A chi-square test was performed and showed that there is a significant relationship between class distribution and athletic status, $X^2(1, N = 143) = 34.05, p < .001$.

Table 4.3

Number of Participants by Class Distribution and Athletic Status

Class Distribution	Athletic Status		Total
	Varsity Student-Athlete	Non-Student-Athlete	
Freshman	5	27	32
Sophomores	16	13	29
Juniors	17	17	34
Seniors	21	15	36
5 th Year	7	5	12
Total	66	77	143

Scale Reliabilities

The Student-Athletes and Relational Development scale was constructed specifically for this study. The reliability of new instrumentation is often subject to question; therefore, item correlations were conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4.4. Based on the correlation results, it was evident that item six, “As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy” should be deleted.

After correlation matrix assessment was completed and item six was deleted, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), factor

analysis is a statistical technique that identifies groupings of scale items. Factor loadings are the basis for imputing a label to the different factors. Items in this study loaded on one factor, and I used a criterion of factor loadings greater than 0.50 (see Table 4.5) (Nunnally, 1978). Four of the five remaining items met this criterion. The item that did not load at a 0.50 on the factor (“I wish I had more time to myself”) was deleted. The alpha reliability estimate for the remaining four items was calculated at 0.69. Thus, four of the six items initially considered for the Student-Athlete and Relational Development were retained for the scale.

Table 4.4

Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Protect feelings	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. More time to self	.27**	--	--	--	--	--
3. Question intention	.40**	.33**	--	--	--	--
4. Time to meet others	.22**	.18*	.26**	--	--	--
5. Protect from others	.43**	.34**	.54**	.26**	--	--
6. Affect on performance	-.17*	-.11	.044	-.01	.03	--

Note. $N = 143$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4.5

Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Protect feelings	.57
More time to self	.46
Question intention	.72
Time to meet others	.60
Protect from others	.75

Note. Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

Research Questions

According to Cohen, Sherrod, and Clark (1986), research in the area of social competence suggests that individuals who are interpersonally competent are more likely to build and use interpersonal relationships that provide support in the face of stressful life events. Therefore, a lack of communication and interpersonal competence can be detrimental. In addition to the need to develop interpersonal competence, a student-athlete also needs to perform in the classroom and on the playing field. It is unclear, however, how these additional demands impact a student-athlete's relational development. Little research has been conducted to systematically examine the social challenges of college athletes and if these differ from those of non-athletes. Consequently, the following research questions were addressed.

RQ1: Are there significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of self-perceived communication competence?

The first research question posed in this study sought to examine if there were significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in self-perceived communication

competence. The first part of the on-line questionnaire asked participants to rate twelve statements between 0-100, to reflect the degree to which they believe they demonstrate communication competence in their interactions with strangers, acquaintances and friends. An overall SPCC score was obtained ranging from 0 (completely incompetent) to 100 (completely competent). An independent sample t-test was used to address research question one. The first research question queried if there would be significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of self-perceived communication competence. This research question was answered by comparing the mean responses of athletes and non-athletes on self ratings of communication competence. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between college student-athletes ($M = 81.28, SD = 15.64$) and non-athletes ($M = 80.97, SD = 14.25$), $t(141) = 0.12, p = nsd$.

RQ2: Do college student-athletes and non-athletes perceive significantly different levels of competence across different communication receivers (stranger, acquaintance, friend)?

Table 4.6 depicts the mean differences between student-athletes and non-athletes in their perceived communication competence while talking with strangers, acquaintances and friends. The difference in the means for the stranger subscale was 12.26, for the acquaintance subscale the mean difference was -0.32, and for the friends subscale it was -8.35. None of the mean differences showed significance when using a t-test analysis (stranger, $t(141) = 0.905, p = nsd$; acquaintance $t(141) = -0.029, p = nsd$; friends, $t(141) = -0.95, p = nsd$).

Table 4.6

SPCC Subscale Means and Standard Deviations for College Student-Athletes and Non-Athletes

Variable	Student-Athlete		Non-Athlete	
	M	SD	M	SD
Stranger	286.45	81.56	274.19	79.97
Acquaintance	328.78	65.79	329.10	62.26
Friend	360.08	57.71	368.43	47.70

RQ3: Are there significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of interpersonal competence?

The third research question required a test of differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in terms of interpersonal competence. Therefore, the mean scores for interpersonal competence were compared across athletes and non-athletes. Participants were asked to assess their interpersonal competence by rating 40-items and selecting their answers based on a five-point Likert scale: (a) I'm poor at this, (b) I'm only fair at this, (c) I'm OK at this, (d) I'm good at this, (e) I'm extremely good at this. An independent sample t-test was used to evaluate the means of the student-athlete and non-athlete groups being compared. The difference in the means was not significant between college student-athletes ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.51$) and non-athletes ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.48$), $t(141) = 0.65$, $p = nsd$.

RQ4: Do college student-athletes and non-athletes report significantly different levels of interpersonal competence across dimensions (initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, emotional support, conflict management)?

Table 4.7 shows the results of t-tests assessing the differences between student-athletes and non-athletes regarding their interpersonal competence across dimensions of initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management. Test results

indicated no significant differences in how student-athletes or non-athletes perceive their communication competence skills across varying dimensions of initiation, $t(141) = 0.51, p = \text{nsd}$; negative assertion, $t(141) = 0.53, p = \text{nsd}$; self-disclosure, $t(141) = 0.31, p = \text{nsd}$; emotional support, $t(141) = 0.26, p = \text{nsd}$; and conflict management, $t(141) = 0.59, p = \text{nsd}$.

Table 4.7

Means and Standard Deviations of College Student-Athletes and Non-Athletes ICQ Subscales

Variable	Student-Athlete		Non-Athlete	
	M	SD	M	SD
Initiation	27.39	6.68	26.75	6.31
Negative Assertion	25.86	5.90	25.35	5.65
Self-Disclosure	23.26	5.40	22.98	5.19
Emotional Support	33.06	4.15	32.87	4.72
Conflict Management	27.54	4.81	27.04	5.29

RQ5: Do student-athletes and non-athletes report significantly different levels of perceived challenges to relational development?

Participants were asked to respond to the first five questions in part four of the survey.

Results of an independent t -test comparing athlete and non-athlete responses showed no significant differences when assessing the perceived relational development challenges between college student-athletes ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.72$) and non-athletes ($M = 2.85, SD = 0.73$), $t(141) = 0.53, p = \text{nsd}$.

RQ6: What is the strength and direction of the relationship between communication competence and interpersonal competence for college student-athletes?

RQ7: What is the strength and direction of the relationship between communication competence and interpersonal competence for non-athletes?

The intent of research questions six and seven was to determine the associations between communication and interpersonal competence among college student-athletes. Therefore, bivariate correlations for college student-athletes were computed. A similar process was followed to determine the association of non-college athletes' ideas about their communication and interpersonal competence. For both student-athletes ($r = .46, p < .01$) and non-athletes ($r = .31, p < .01$) there was a significant correlation between communication and interpersonal competence. To further explore these results, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis using interpersonal competence as the dependent variable, and communication competence and athletic status as the predictor variables, was conducted. The researcher first regressed communication competence and athletic status on interpersonal competence. Then, to further investigate research questions six and seven, an interaction term (SPCC and athletic status) was added. As a result of previous research regarding the association between communication competence and interpersonal competence, the researcher decided to enter SPCC scores into the model first. The results indicated that communication competence, but not athletic status was a significant predictor of interpersonal competence, $F(2, 140) = 12.47, \Delta R^2 = .15, p < .05$. As shown in Table 4.8, the data in Step 2 were analyzed to test whether the effect of communication competence on interpersonal competence was different for athletes and non-athletes. The overall relationship of the interaction term (athletic status and SPCC) did not indicate significance, $F(3, 139) = 8.57, \Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05$.

Table 4.8

Regression Analysis

	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	Beta
Step 1			
(Constant)	2.53	.25	
SPCC	.01	.00	.39*
Athletic Status	-.05	.08	-.05
Step 2			
AS*SPCC	-.01	.01	-.43

Note. Dependent variable: Interpersonal Competence (ICQ)

* $p < .05$.

In addition to the seven initial research questions, post-hoc analyses were conducted. Although gender was not a variable in the study's proposed research questions, analyses including gender were conducted post hoc to assess its impact on competence. These analyses were conducted based on emergent findings from the focus groups. Findings from the focus groups suggested gender differences in managing conflict; therefore, the researcher decided to re-run the athletic status, interpersonal, and communication competence regression used to answer research questions six and seven with the inclusion of gender as a variable. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well predictor variables: athletic status, communication competence (SPCC), and gender scores predicted the criterion variable, interpersonal competence. Not surprisingly, step 1, demonstrated a significant relationship between the criterion variable and the SPCC predictor variable, $F(3, 139) = 8.31$, $\Delta R^2 = .15$, $p < .05$. To determine if the effect of communication competence on interpersonal competence was different for athletes and non-athletes and/or for men and women, step 2 of the model included the interaction terms: athletic status and SPCC; athletic status and gender; and SPCC and gender. Step 2 of the model did not garner significant results when testing the interaction terms, $F(3, 136) = 0.38$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p > .05$. However, results indicated significance for the three-way

interaction term using the multiple regressors: athletic status, SPCC and gender. Step 3 of the model examined how considering athletic status, SPCC and gender prediction of the dependent variable (interpersonal competence) would differ according to variable combinations of the independent variables, $F(1, 135) = 12.60$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .001$. Table 4.9 summarizes the regression results.

Table 4.9

Regression Analysis

	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	Beta
Step 1			
(Constant)	2.49	.27	
SPCC	.01	.00	.38*
Athletic Status	-.05	.08	-.05
Gender	.03	.08	.03
Step 2			
AS*SPCC	-.01	.01	-.48
AS*Gender	.10	.16	.23
SPCC*Gender	.00	.01	.09
Step 3			
AS*SPCC*Gender	-.04	.01	-8.34*

Note. Dependent variable: Interpersonal Competence (ICQ).

$R^2 = .15$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ($p < .001$).

* $p < .001$.

Analysis of the two-way and three-way interaction results showed the inclusion of gender into the model to be significant. Therefore, to evaluate the association within each of the four subgroups' respondents (male athletes, female athletes, male non-athletes and female non-athletes), a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted using each subgroup as the model's reference group (see Table 4.10). Results showed a significant negative association between communication and interpersonal competence for male non-athletes, and results approached significance for male athletes. Although results were not significant for female

athletes and non-athletes, both groups showed a negative association between communication competence and interpersonal competence.

Table 4.10

Regression Analysis using Athletic Status and Gender as Coded Variables

Gender	Athletic Status	
	Athlete	Non-Athlete
Male	$\beta = .25$ Partial = .07 $p > .05$	$\beta = -2.15$ Partial = -.22 $p = .01$
Female	$\beta = -2.68$ Partial = -.25 $p > .05$	$\beta = -.39$ Partial = -.09 $p > .05$

Note. $\beta > 1$ because product terms are in the model.

Student-Athletes and Relational Development

Wylleman (2000) suggests the need to learn more about the impact of interpersonal relationships and athlete development, and Coppel (1995) states that doing so will assist student-athletes in determining how relationships impact their thoughts, feelings, behaviors and athletic performance. Therefore, the intent of the final questions of the web-based survey was to assess student-athletes' feelings, specifically about romantic relationships. Those participants identifying themselves as varsity student-athletes were asked to respond to the last two questions in part four of the survey. The first of the final two survey questions asked, "As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy."

Table 4.11 shows the means and standard deviations for college student-athlete responses to the question assessing the affects of an unhappy personal life on athletic performance. Nine student-athletes reported never having their unhappy personal life impact their athletic performance, 24 reported affects some of the time, seventeen had effects often, ten said the affects occurred very often, and six stated always having an unhappy personal life affect their

athletic performance. Overall, fifty-seven, 86.4%, of college athletes suggested that an unhappy personal life affects their athletic performance at least some of the time. An independent sample t-test was used to determine if there were significant differences between gender and the impact of an unhappy personal life on athletic performance (1 = never and 5 = always). This question was answered by comparing the mean responses of male and female athletes on self ratings of the impact of an unhappy personal life on athletic performance. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between male student-athletes ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.11$) and female student-athletes ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(64) = 0.51$, $p = nsd$.

Table 4.11

Means, Standard Deviations, Minimums, Maximums and Frequencies for the Effects of an Unhappy Personal Life on Athletic Performance

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
66	2.70	1.16	1	5

Table 4.11 (continued).

Means, Standard Deviations, Minimums, Maximums and Frequencies for the Effects of an Unhappy Personal Life on Athletic Performance

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Never	9	13.6	13.6
Sometimes	24	36.3	49.9
Often	17	25.8	75.8
Very Often	10	15.2	90.9
Always	6	9.1	100.0
Total	66	77	100.0

Qualitative Findings

Open-Ended Student-Athlete Responses

To probe college student-athletes' perceptions of the unique challenges they might face in their personal relationships, student-athletes were provided a text box at the end of the web-based survey and asked to respond to an open-ended question: "As a student-athlete, what challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?" Sixty-eight participants responded, however, 7 indicated that they were not a student-athlete. Therefore, data was collected from 61 student-athlete participants. Analyses of their open-ended responses revealed three primary areas of concern when beginning a romantic relationship. These areas included: increased time commitments, lack of partner's understanding, and negative stereotyping of athletes.

Lack of Time

The majority (36, 59%) of student-athlete participants who responded to this question referred to concerns about balancing time with their sport and with their partner. These student-athletes suggested their time commitments included practice time, athletic competition and travel time, working with their strength coach, participating in conditioning activities, individual skill instruction with coaches, and flexibility exercises with an athletic trainer. This, is in addition to attending classes, submitting coursework on time, participating in team or individual community service projects, managing a personal life to include friends and family members, participating in career planning (i.e., securing internships, drafting a resume, conducting a job search and interviewing), and other general tasks required of all college students.

Responses to this open-ended item elicited a plethora of challenges for student athletes, but one of the most frequently cited constraints was “lack of time.” The following represent a sampling of responses illustrating this constraint.

“It is difficult to begin a romantic relationship when all of your time is either dedicated to practice or school work. It is unfair to start a relationship that you do not have time to build on.” (male; 3rd semester)

“The amount of time that is needed to put into a successful relationship is not always there. I have been dating a girl for three years now and I believe that it is most challenging when I am traveling for competitions. This is due to the lack of time for communications as well as the time I must put in for concentrating.” (male; 6th semester)

“Balancing school, sports, personal needs, and the relationship. When playing a varsity sport, it is very time consuming, so it’s hard to find time for everything else on top of finding significant time for a romantic relationship.” (female; 5th semester)

“Time constraints with class, practices, & homework...Trying to find time to spend time together.” (female; 3rd semester)

“Attempting the balancing act, maintaining quality grades, athletic performance, and relationships.” (male; 8th semester)

Lack of Understanding

The second largest area of concern was in reference to having their romantic partner understand the time demands and difficulty the student-athlete faces in attempting to balance school, their sport, and the relationship. Eighteen (29.5%) student-athletes stated concerns about their partner’s ability to understand their commitment to athletics. This is related to the first challenge, but is substantively different. Instead of the challenge being the lack of time itself, it was the lack of understanding from one’s romantic partner that provided the challenge. Responses frequently referred to the difficulty a non-athlete romantic partner has understanding the constraints experienced by the athlete. Student-athletes expressed comments such as:

“The other person not understanding the time commitments or the level of importance and identification you attach to your position as a student athlete.”(female, 9th semester)

“Some problems I have faced is the girl I am talking to doesn’t understand what it takes to be a division 1 athlete and all the time it takes, especially with football; with workouts beginning at 6 in the morning..” (male, 5th semester)

“The person I’m dating understanding the time commitment I have. Also, them understanding I might be tired, or just focused and not angry or upset.” (male, 8th semester)

“If the other person is not an athlete, it’s sometimes hard to get them to understand the commitment that you have to your team and that most of your time is devoted to your sport. I have found that it is hard to balance time with the girlfriend and time hanging out with teammates.” (female, 3rd semester)

According to these responses, athletics appears to restrict the time one can spend with a romantic partner and may divert focus and attention away from a romantic partner. The challenges seem to be compounded when the romantic partner does not understand the reasons behind the lack of time and attention provided by the athlete.

Stereotyping

Student-athletes (21.3%) also expressed concern about the negative stereotyping associated with athletes regarding academic capability and the capacity to maintain monogamous romantic relationships. These stereotypes are perceived to contribute to non-athletes being intimidated by athletes. For example, some respondents indicated:

“Depending on if the other person is a student-athlete or not, the hump of letting people know you are not just an athlete/jock is hard. For non-student-athletes the stereotype is harder to get over, than for student-athletes.” (male, 8th semester)

“The other person being intimidated by who you are, what you do and how aggressive you must sometimes be and defend yourself so you are not labeled as just “another dumb jock”. (female, 10th semester)

“There is just not a lot of time for romantic relationships especially when trying to date another athlete. Also I feel many guys are intimidated by trying to date female athletes.” (female, 2nd semester)

Analysis of the open-ended responses revealed several areas of concern for athletes pertaining to the initiation of romantic relationships: increased time commitments, partner’s

understanding, and negative stereotyping of athletes. Considering these ideas and the lack of significant differences found between athletes and non-athletes when comparing results on the SPCC, ICQ and Student-Athletes and Relational Development scales, two focus groups were conducted to further explore college student-athletes' perceptions of the unique challenges they face as it relates to the initiation and development of their romantic relationships.

Focus Group Findings

The cumulative results of both focus group interviews revealed concern about the affect of athletic status in two different social domains: social experiences with peers and impact on romantic relationships. These social domains and the categories of responses within each are presented in table 4.12.

Table 4.12

A Thematic Framework: Social Domains of Concern for Student-Athletes

Theme: Student-Athletes' Social Experiences with Peers		
Category	Conceptual Definition	Example
Meeting Non-Athletes	Interacting with peers who are not varsity athletes	"I think that being a student-athlete has increased the ability to come into contact with people... if you are on the football team and wear football warm-ups and someone asks you "oh, you're on the football team" and it's an easy way to strike up a conversation."
Negative Stereotyping	A harmful image associated with being an athlete	"I think the negative aspect of being a student-athlete especially in our case at football is people can have a negative stereotype on you..."
Intimidation	Associating athletic participation with fear	"...You know he's, I'm sure that he is kind of intimidated by it because not many females can compete at this level and be successful..."
Intention Questioning	Concern for the purpose an individual has for wanting to meet an athlete	"So I think it's just getting to know the person and by that you can usually tell right away what their intentions are."
Role Modeling	A person who serves as an example and whose behavior is emulated by others (Wikipedia, 2008)	"...you're supposed to be a certain way and supposed to be a role model for people..."
Higher Social Standards	Adhering to elevated behavioral standards	"...it makes you hold yourself to a higher standard because people are looking up to you and they want to speak to you and you know they remember that experience for quite a while that they were able to talk with you."
Same Group Interaction	Spending time with other varsity athletes	"I think in a way it kind of inhibits meeting other people because we spend so much time with each other..."
Common Athletic Experiences	Shared daily demands	"...we share the same trainer and he was getting treatment for one injury, I was getting treatment for another..."

Table 4.11(continued).

A Thematic Framework: Social Domains of Concern for Student-Athletes

Theme: Athletic Participations' Impact on Romantic Relationships		
Category	Conceptual Definition	Example
Time Constraints	Limitation of one's personal time	"But I mean we have such a high commitment on us to perform and do well in the classroom so that it's kinda, it limits our ability to go out as much, but I mean, we can still socialize it's just not, I guess as, we don't have as many opportunities."
Academic Balance	Maintain one's academic commitments along with one's athletic and social obligations	"I mean, going through college we are up usually as athletes at about 7:00 a.m. we have lifts, we have classes, we have practices. There's not going to be time..."
Social Balance	The ability to socially interact without jeopardizing one's academic and athletic responsibilities	"I think it's just more of the fact that the normal student body has more opportunities to go out whereas student-athletes maybe have like once or twice a week to go out."
Increased Stress	Enhanced anxiety	"But you put everything, everything you worked so hard for is right in your hands so like, do you give more to your significant other and let go of your dream or do you follow your dreams and hope that your significant other follows?"
Finding Time Together	Ability to spend time with your partner	"I'm dating another athlete right now and at times it's harder because he's traveling..."
Impact of Conflict on Athletic Performance	How problems within a relationship impact one's ability to perform athletically	"The negative part is relationships carry a lot of baggage with them and there's a lot of mental stress with them too. So if you carry that onto the field it can be a huge distraction and take you out of the game."
Positive Emotional Support	Unconditional acceptance by one's relational partner	"Having someone to come home to that you can trust..."

Several recurrent ideas emerged from the focus group discussions with athletes about their romantic relationships and Division 1A student-athlete status. The categories of responses were grouped into two over-arching explanatory domains of concern.²

Student-Athletes' Social Experiences with Peers

College student-athlete respondents described a variety of unique experiences when recounting efforts to initiate and maintain social relationships with peers. The initiation stage of relationship development seemed to be particularly challenging for many of the respondents. According to Knapp (1983), relationship initiation is the first stage of relationship formation. First impressions are essential in this stage since an individual is meeting others for the first time. The focus group data revealed several patterns in the responses pertaining to relationship initiation and maintenance. Three categories of concerns emerged as salient to the student athletes: difficulty in meeting non-athletes, role modeling, and same-group interaction. This section explores how college athletes describe their social interactions.

Meeting non-athletes. Interestingly, the college athletes' descriptions of the social interaction process demonstrate a range of conscious awareness of the impact of negative stereotyping. Even more significant is their view of the impact of misrepresented intent and unwarranted intimidation perceptions.

In general, all twelve athletes talked about their athletic participation as an opportunity to meet a wide variety of both athletes and non-athletes. Two of the athletes discussed the benefit of coming into contact with an assortment of different people. Both mentioned that their athletic

² Percentages cannot be reported in any meaningful way when describing the results of focus group discussions due to the semi-structured and emergent nature of these discussions.

participation is a way to begin a conversation with someone new (male: 007, female: 004). This represents a type of strategy athletes might use to initiate a relationship. For example, one male (007) described his thoughts on the benefit athletes have in meeting people:

I think that being a student-athlete has increased the ability to come into contact with people such as BB H classes or even if you are on the football team and wear football warm-ups and someone asks you “oh, you’re on the football team” and it’s an easy way to strike up a conversation.

Female: 004 shared a similar sentiment about the pervasive role being an athlete has on initial social interaction:

I think that, even when I’m introduced to new people and you’re trying to find some intros to conversations and that sort of thing is one of the first things that you say is “I play soccer here” or “I play this sport here” or “I’m a student-athlete.” That’s one of the first things, I think that’s how we often identify ourselves so as soon as you say that to somebody else that’s like just like she was saying that’s one of the things that you’re kind of elevated a little bit, that’s how people start to know you. So when you’re meeting people it’s “this is who she is, this is who he is” you’re identified with your sport.

In the next example, one of the athletes talked about the effect of stereotyping on social interaction.

Male: 004: I think the negative aspect of being a student-athlete especially in our case at football is people can have a negative stereotype on you like since there’s been a couple of situations that’s gone on, people automatically assume you’re a part of it just because you’re assigned to that organization or team.

To illustrate how social interactions with non-athletes can be affected by stereotypes, one male athlete and two female athletes discussed perceptions of intimidation. In the first example, male: 003 suggests that non-athletes might perceive athletes as cocky or having a personal click. He uses the word intimidated to describe the stereotype about athletes that exists below the consciousness of non-athletes. In the following excerpt, male: 003 suggested that this perception impacts the initiation of a relationship because “some people are intimidated to come up to you or

even try to make friends.” This idea is supported by two of the female athletes who believe that negative stereotypes about female athletes impede initial contact by male strangers.

Female: 005: It’s sort of like guys almost want to feel like the strong masculine one. And like being like a female athlete kind of has a little bit of a masculine side to it. So it’s like we’re doing things that a lot of girls can’t do. We’re lifting, we’re competing and it’s stuff that isn’t like, girls are kind of seen in society as being like more feminine and more like, I’m trying to think of the best word for it, but like being softer whereas we have more of like a hard side because we’re used to competing and being banged up I guess. And I think it’s intimidating for guys to see a girl out there doing something maybe he can’t do. It’s like almost, he kind of feels kind of inferior.

Another female athlete who played basketball supported the idea that male non-athletes might have a hard time dealing with a female athlete. Speaking about her newly developed romantic relationship she said:

Female: 003: My boyfriend he’s a non-athlete and he’s kind of like, you know the whole idea of me being a basketball player he’s got the idea that it’s going to be a huge time commitment and you can kind of sense that he’s like you know “I’m not going to mess with you” because I’m always going around flexing my muscles. You know he’s, I’m sure that he is kind of intimidated by it because not many females can compete at this level and be successful.

Meeting non-athletes impacted the participants in this study in another interesting way. Many participants discussed their perceived need to question the intention of those who want to meet them. More specifically, these athletes had considerable concern regarding the purpose an individual had for wanting to meet them. There appears to be differences in the responses of male and female athletes regarding this concept. During the focus groups, athletes were asked to share their thoughts about questioning the intention of others and to discuss strategies they use to better understand another person’s intentions. One male athlete shared the following about questioning other’s intentions:

Male: 007: I think that it kinda goes along with how the different steps that are taken in that relationship. Such as if the person comes up to you and the first conversation you have is “Oh you’re a Penn State Football player” or whatever and then every interaction after that is just about football. You as a football player can’t really get off that subject

every time you talk to this person they're always asking "What does Coach Paterno think about this?" Or "Is the quarterback doing this or that? How's the next game look?" And if as a player you can't really seem to get away from that image then I guess that it would stay... (researcher: Then would you question the other person's intentions?)... Um, to an extent. I think sometimes you can tell if they're truly sincere in knowing what you think about a situation or if it's just that they want the scuttlebutt.

Male: 005 added: Another thing is when you meet people who know that you're on the football team you have to question is does that person like me because of who I am or do they like me because of what I do and who I belong to. So it's just, it leads you to question their intentions I would say.

The male athlete focus group unanimously agreed that it was important to be aware that someone's desire to meet you might be connected with your athletic participation. As the discussion progressed, certain strategies to address this phenomenon emerged. For example, male: 001 stated:

Uh, you have to just go about, just question them, just talk to them and try to deal away with the situation, deal away with football, like try to get deeper into who that person is so that it can be a more intimate conversation than just football.

Male: 004 agrees: Yea, I agree with Person #1. It's more of a trial and error type thing. You know, cause we get a chance to meet so many different people and there's always going to be a few people that are sincere and a few people that aren't. So I think it's just getting to know the person and by that you can usually tell right away what their intentions are.

Male: 002 shares this trial and error approach: I think being on such a big campus when we have opportunities to meet people the people that we meet know somebody else that knows somebody else. I think we're all connected in some sort of way because we have so many guys on campus that know so many people, I think as athletes we have to try to judge who's being real, and who's not. And the people that aren't being real are trying to get stuff out of you just because you're a football player and the stereotype comes through.

Interestingly, female athletes did not share the same concern for a person's intentions when they themselves were meeting someone new; however, they shared concern for their high profile male counterparts. One female athlete expressed her concerns this way:

Female: 005: I think also especially like for the male athletes, if they date a non-athlete female, it's almost like, is she dating me because I am an athlete or is she dating me for me. I think especially with some of the athletes who may be more well-known around

the Penn State community it's like, well does she really like me or does she want to date me because of what my name is.

Another one of the female athletes suggested that this concern is more prevalent for high profile male athletes. She suggested:

Female: 001: I would say it's more dominant I guess in some sports. I mean the ones that are getting a little more, I guess, coverage. Because they're aiming, they're more prevalent to go pro and that kind of stuff, you know what I mean. And so they're name is out there a little bit more. And they're like well my girlfriends this or my boyfriends that.

One of the female athletes pointed to the gender differences experienced by male and female athletes as it relates to their social interaction. When responding to a follow-up question acknowledging that some of the participants had referenced this phenomenon exists for male athletes, female: 003 responded:

Definitely, oh yea, for sure. I definitely know that. I just think girls in general, like regular college students they might feel less confident so whenever they can like, cause usually in college you're trying to find yourself. So whenever even if you can get one bit of attention from like a male athlete it's a huge deal. And I feel like a college student dating a female athlete it's not so much because we're not, you know, even though we're good athletes we're still not respected as much as males with sports. It's just how it is.

Overwhelmingly, the female athletes agreed that high profile male athletes are typically more concerned about the motivations others have for initiating relationships. One woman said, "I don't think as much. I can't say because I haven't been in that situation" (female: 005) and another (female: 003) stated, "I really don't think it happens as much for female athletes."

Although the male and female athletes had different views on their need to question the intention of an individual with whom they might begin a relationship, they still reported a complex array of positive and negative concerns about socializing with non-athletes. Both the male and female athletes articulated that negative and preexisting stereotyping affected their ability to interact with those who are not college athletes. Additionally, they shared concerns about their image as an athlete and if that image negatively impacted relationship development.

Role modeling. The second category of meanings that emerged describe an awareness of college athletes as role models. As discussed in chapter 2, the idea of athletes as role models was prevalent across both college and professional sports. Role modeling is particularly common among high profile college athletic teams. Being a role model refers to understanding that your behaviors are of consequence since they are often followed by others (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). It is critically important for college athletes to recognize how their self-presentational goals impact the image they convey to others. According to Andersen (1999), objective personal qualities have little to do with one's image, especially during relational initiation. One's image is more often comprised of "what others think we are" (Anderson, 1999). Therefore, from an interpersonal perspective it is important that athletes understand role modeling and relational initiation. This category included descriptions of how athletic participation influences role modeling and how expectations of being a role model impact communication and interpersonal competence.

It was easy for both male and female student-athletes to describe and make sense of their participation in sports impacting their perceptions of being a role model. During the focus group, male: 004 described expectations for him as a role model:

I think also that being a student-athlete and being like seen on such a high stage sometimes like during games and all, and after games if you talk to fans and those sort of people it's like you know, you're supposed to be a certain way and supposed to be a role model for people and I think that helps too because you have to be on your best behavior and also it's just normal you have to act the same way at all times.

The idea of being a role model was strongly tied to understanding that, as an athlete, you represent more than yourself, and that you are expected to uphold higher standards. For example, female: 005 stated:

I think also you're very aware of the fact that you're not just representing yourself but you're representing someone else. And so you're almost more aware of what you're

saying and how you're communicating it because you don't want to say something that can kind of come back and reflect negatively. Like when you're in a business setting and you're going to be representing your company, you've already been trained to be aware of what you're saying and that's how it comes across.

Another female athlete agreed:

Female: 001: I think that it kind of holds us to have to as far as communicating goes because you know you're meeting people who really enjoy watching you play it makes you not only in communication but it makes you hold yourself to a higher standard because people are looking up to you and they want to speak to you and you know they remember that experience for quite a while that they were able to talk with you.

All of the male athletes who participated in the discussion shared similar ideas about being a role model and the need to adhere to higher standards. Male: 004 stated:

I think also that being a student-athlete and being like seen on such a high stage sometimes like during games and all, and after games if you talk to fans and those sort of people it's like you know, you're supposed to be a certain way and supposed to be a role model for people and I think that helps too because you have to be on your best behavior and also it's just normal you have to act the same way at all times.

Another male athlete agreed:

Male: 003: I definitely feel that it makes an impact because you're not, when you're an athlete you're not just representing yourself, you're representing your whole organization, and for that matter you have to take into account what you say, what you do, and how you do it because they perceive one person or one athlete in that matter and they're gonna think everyone else is the same...

In summary, the athletes in this study were aware that being a role model is part of many college athletic programs. Their awareness about being a role model ranged from directly stating the expectation to articulating a need to adhere to a higher behavioral standard. Further, the athletes recognized that an individual's expectation about their behavior would impact the relational initiation and development that takes place.

The impact of same group interaction. The third category of meanings that emerged in the talk of participants related to the positive and negative impact of interacting with those in the athletic community. A primary step in the relational initiation phase of development is that of

attraction. According to McCroskey and McCain (1974), individuals are attracted to each other on the basis of their ability to complete tasks, their physical appearance, or the sociability. Task attraction is one's desire to work with someone to fulfill instrumental goals. Athletic teams, as a function of their creation, can encourage this type of task attraction. In addition, since athletic teams often share space in arenas and on playing fields, their proximity often gives student-athletes the opportunity to meet and be attracted to one another. Focus group discussion centered on the idea of the increased support and commonality of athletic peers and also recognized the time limitations imposed by college athletic participation.

Male athlete 001 suggested that the time demands of the team can hinder social interaction beyond the team. He stated:

I think in a way it kind of inhibits meeting other people because we spend so much time with each other and we kind of create clicks and whatnot and sometimes that works for us and sometimes it works against us because a lot of people just see a bunch of athletes all together and we spend so much time like doing what we do like our sport we kind of like get pushed off aside from like the regular college life.

Another male athlete talked about why it is sometimes easier to make social connections within your own network:

Male: 002: I also think, um, since we're, we have some of the biggest guys on campus than other sports, uh when we have some of our linemen walk into a party and they're 6'6", 300 lbs. everybody just kind of stops what they're doing and stares at you.

One of the female athletes discussed common schedules and shared opinions about competition as two reasons athletes stay within their peer group.

Female 004: I think it's easier to meet other athletes. Kind of connecting with question number one just as far as where we're spending time between weight rooms and training rooms and hang outs. Most of my friends in college were student-athletes dating other student-athletes. I think it seems completely unrelated. And also growing up in a sports culture then really being in the competitive sports culture in college I just find it's easier to connect with other athletes.

In addition to commonality of ideas, athletes shared similar daily demands both mentally and physically. All the female athletes participating in the focus group agreed that having relationships within your athletic peer group framed romantic relationships a bit differently than with non-athletes. According to female athlete 005, common athletic experiences make for an easier romantic transition. For example:

I met my boyfriend in the training room. Like, we share the same trainer and he was getting treatment for one injury, I was getting treatment for another. And I was just like, he's cute. And I'm friends with so many of his teammates, you're around them all the time and it sort of develops from there. But I think, like _____ says, like a lot of times when you're with other guys you're already in relationships with them because you're around them and you see each other. But like they see you in the worst possible state that you could be in. Like in the beginning you kind of want to like impress him, look cute, but like you're coming in to lift after them to see them but no. They're going to see you like sweating, screaming and crying falling down, like when the trainers have killed you. Like there's no way to hide your bad side from another athlete.

Female athlete 001 simply stated: "completely agree", and one of the other women offered the following as an example:

Female: 003: Definitely. I met my ex-boyfriend in the gym, like working out. Like usually people meet at the bar in college or at a frat party or something. We were at a gym. We were gross, I was sweaty. Like it just wasn't the most attractive thing, but I guess it works for athletes

In summary, male and female athletes expressed mixed experiences as they related to college athlete peer group interaction. As a few of the women indicated, same group interaction can have a positive impact on initially meeting a potential partner. Task attraction and proximity are a few of the ways that student-athletes' relational initiation can be affected by participation in their sport.

These data reveal that participation in college athletics also offers unique challenges for romantic relationships. Athletic participation can impact relationships in a variety of ways. In

this study, athletes pointed to time constraints, increased stress and positive support systems as ways their romantic relationships were affected by their being a college athlete.

Athletic Participation's Impact on Romantic Relationships

One of the expectations of involvement in collegiate athletics is that the student be able to perform in both the classroom and within the athletic arena. With increasing demands in both areas, there is little room for personal or social time. Therefore, according to Wylleman (2000), there is a need to learn more about the impact of interpersonal relationships and athlete development. The second social domain of concern for student athletes was the impact of athletic performance on developed (and developing) romantic relationships and the affect romantic relationships can have on athletic performance. As part of the focus group discussion, athletes' explained the role of athletic participation on romantic relationships in terms of time constraints, increased stress, and positive support systems. Their discussion revealed how some college athletes balance the development of their romantic relationships with the demands placed upon them as a result of their athletic participation.

Time constraints. As in the open-ended survey responses, the athletes in this study articulated awareness that each of them has less time to devote to their social development than to their athletic or academic pursuits. This recognition was apparent in the comments of all participants in both focus groups, as well as in many of the comments made by student-athlete participants who responded to the open-ended item in the web-based survey. When asked about the biggest challenges for college athletes attempting to begin or to further develop a romantic relationship, time or the lack of time available was an overwhelmingly consistent response. For example, male athlete 007 stated:

I'd say time management. Same goes with classes. I mean, you spend five hours at the building every day and then you come back to your apartment and you just spent five

hours going through grueling practices and meetings and it's kind of hard to just flip the switch and go back to your normal every day life. And especially when you live with your teammates. And just kind of allocating certain time to your significant other.

Male athlete 003 agreed: I agree. I think it's especially hard when you first come from high school and get to college because you meet so many different new people. Like he said, you have roommates, so your roommates are going to have more friends and then you're going to be around those friends. And I think it's just a whole trust issue, things start coming on because, especially if it's a back at home relationship because when you talk on the phone and you friends have females around. You have no control over it because you have three other roommates and they're going out more and meeting more people like and it's just like it's a hard situation I believe. So I think the best relationships happen I think are when you meet someone at your university and they already know how things are, how people react to you. They already have an understanding of how the whole thing goes. Then they can relate to you instead of with someone, like just being new to someone like in a back home relationship.

One of the other male participants compared the challenges faced by college athletes to that of a college non-athlete.

Male: 004: I think, in that statement, I think it's just more of the fact that the normal student body has more opportunities to go out whereas student-athletes maybe have like once or twice a week to go out. Where, I mean, the regular student body can go out any time of the week if they really wanted to. But I mean we have such a high commitment on us to perform and do well in the classroom so that it's kinda, it limits our ability to go out as much, but I mean, we can still socialize it's just not, I guess as, we don't have as many opportunities.

The female athletes agreed. Female athlete 002 added, "Definitely a time commitment as far as sport goes." In addition to the concern about time available to begin relationships, many of the athletes shared concerns about finding adequate time to devote to a romantic relationship once it had begun. Both male and female athletes spoke of the benefits and drawbacks of being in a romantic relationship. The support system provided by a trusting romantic relationship was valued, but no matter how supportive, concerns about finding time together, having the other person understand the athletic commitment, and the impact of relational conflict on performance was not to be dismissed.

Increased stress. A salient issue for these college athletes was the realization that romantic relationships can impact time and in some cases, performance. Balancing athletic participation, academic demands, and peer group interaction is a juggling act of scheduling for most athletes, add to that the time and emotional presences necessary to begin and maintain a romantic relationship, and the juggling act often becomes unmanageable. As suggested by the focus group participants, adding to the stress of that challenge is balancing schedules when both individuals in the relationship are college athletes.

Male athlete 003 explained: ...football means so much to everyone on this team, especially a lot of the guys on this team, like, they've been doing it for so long that sometimes I believe from a personal standpoint that you get caught up more in giving more of your time to football than you do your relationship. And that would lead to less communication, or you get stuck in the middle you play and try to work football and then like football has been there your whole life and that significant other has been there a few months or a couple of years. But you put everything, everything you worked so hard for is right in your hands so like, do you give more to your significant other and let go of your dream or do you follow your dreams and hope that your significant other follows?

Female athlete 003 added some insight as to why athletes might be drawn to dating each other.

I think that also the respect value too. I mean, going through college we are up usually as athletes at about 7:00 a.m. we have lifts, we have classes, we have practices. There's not going to be time for like late at night hanging out and stuff and that's what a lot of other relationships in college you know consist of or going out to parties and stuff. Our bodies wouldn't be able to handle that. So I think usually athletes seem to date athletes because it's just easier.

One of the female athletes shared similar concerns about coordinating the schedules of two college athletes:

Female 005: I'm dating another athlete right now and at times it's harder because he's traveling, he's on a different season than I am so he's traveling when I'm home and I'm traveling when he's home.

Another female athlete shared that she believes the strict time constraints imposed by athletic and academic demands are a deterrent to romantic relationships.

Female 002: ...in our sport everything is all out all the time. You know what I mean? And also our time commitment, like we have no life of our own. Every hour of the day is spent doing the duties that other people want us to do. So when we have freedom we're like, what the heck, lets go, we're ready and we appreciate when we can get a free moment.

Athletes discussed several concerns about how use of the very limited available time they have might impact their athletic and academic performance. Part of concern about time availability was illuminated by whether the athlete perceived his or her partner is able to understand his or her unique lifestyle as a college athlete. Disagreements about time shared together and lack of understanding about the value and importance of the athletes' commitments (i.e. weight training, practice, film sessions, and classes) were very real concerns for college athletes beginning or involved in romantic relationships. Recognizing this as an area of concern for athletes, focus group participants were asked how romantic conflict impacted athletic performance.

Both male and female athletes pointed to the positive and negative impact of relational stress on athletic performance. One of the male athletes described the impact as follows:

Male 002: Say you get into a fight with your significant other, and bringing that onto the practice field and the coaches are going to get on you and you tell them that you just got into a fight with your girlfriend. They're not going to really care about that because that's none of their business and you shouldn't be bringing that on the practice field or the field for that matter. You have to be mature enough to block those things out for those two hours and then get back to it when you're done. You can't bring that to your work.

Another male athlete shared his concerns:

Male 001: The negative part is relationships carry a lot of baggage with them and there's a lot of mental stress with them too. So if you carry that onto the field it can be a huge distraction and take you out of the game.

The male athletes recognized that relational conflict could impact performance by being a distraction to your sport focus. However, more than the female athletes, the males spoke about the expectation to separate the two. For example, male 005 explained it this way:

I think, with the romance situation I think it's just like school work. I mean you have to be able to, you might be swamped with work or you might get in a fight with your girlfriend, but you have to be able to, once you get on that practice field devote your time to your other teammates and to the people that are supporting you like your fans, your fan base, your alumni, you just have to be able to balance you know, each situation. Leave the football stuff on the football field and leave the personal stuff outside. So it's just like balancing it, that's probably the hardest part.

Male athlete 006 supported the idea of keeping romantic relationships and athletic participation separate. He stated: "...I also agree that you have to leave it off the field or use it as motivation if something like that's bothering you."

The female athletes had concerns that romantic conflict had a more negative impact on the performance of female athletes. The women shared their thoughts regarding the question, "Do you agree or disagree that athletic performance is affected by romantic relationships?"

Female 001: the stress of the sport already I think it would affect athletic performance because in time you don't have enough time to like sit down and talk about it and work it out so it just like keeps snowballing to the point where it can affect performance over time.

Female 002: I definitely agree, I've seen it happen plenty of times. And I've seen how it can affect, especially a woman's or girl's performance because females tend to be a little bit more emotional and they kind of carry their heart on their sleeves so they say sometimes. So I definitely think if conflict has arisen they're very much at risk for a lower performance level.

Female 003: I agree with both of their statements. I think as females too we definitely we take break ups harder. And we really go look into things and we think a lot about them. And I think we have a harder time like separating our feelings from competition, from practice, we're just very more there. I think a lot of guys can maybe cover it up, I've seen it happen, or distract themselves. But I think as females we're right there with it and it's hard to separate it. Even with competition, even with, I think it's just our nature. You know, even like the motherly nature in us we just we can feel things a lot harder.

Female 005: the whole like fights and break ups and stuff, I've seen girls who've been in like really bad relationships like at the end. Like they're fighting all the time and breaking up and getting back together, fighting and breaking up and getting back together. It's like that affect their play, they kind of bring, not like a negative attitude but they're upset from the fight and that comes on the field and it carries over. But then it's like when the break up does happen it's like they're free from all that stress and they're a completely different player. It's like they're happy and they're not worried about what's going to happen when they get home. And then I see girls who have like really bad break ups and it's like they're distraught about it, they miss practice, they can't focus, like they're tired because they might have been up all night like crying about it or talking about it or trying to work it out with their boyfriend and it's like they're just not there.

Although male and female athletes shared different concerns about the degree to which athletic performance might be affected by romantic relationships, both groups discussed the benefits that romantic relationships can offer. One of the primary benefits for both male and female athletes was the personal support system a romantic relationship could provide.

Positive emotional support. One of the positive aspects of romantic relationships is the ability of the significant other to provide both instrumental and emotional support to the athlete. With increased uncertainty about the intention of others and the high standards and time demands placed upon college athletes, the ability to share with someone the athlete trusts is helpful. Both the male and female athletes commented on the benefits of the emotional support that are provided by their romantic relationships. For example, one of the male athletes suggested it was positive to have someone "to come home to." He said: "Definitely relationships for a positive would be having the support, definitely having the support. Having someone to come home to that you can trust that you can hopefully know that's not in it for who you are, I mean for what you are" (male 003).

Another male athlete recognized the benefits of romantic relationships this way:

Male 001: One of the positives is that's another person to add to your support group. It can be somebody sitting in the fan section cheering you on. That's always going to make you feel good. You know guys would like to show off for their girls or whatever.

Three of the other male athletes discussed their ideas about the benefits of romantic relationships.

Male 004: I also think that even you know like the negatives everyone said with the extra baggage and the stress and all that, you can also turn that to a positive when you get on the practice field or the game field, um, just because exercise supposedly helps you relieve stress and all that so I feel like it depends on how you handle it mentally. I mean everybody's different, everybody handles stress different, everybody handles pressure different, so I think it just depends on, you know, if you take like a fight or something real serious and you don't really let it go then it's going to have a negative effect. But if you can kinda channel it and just use the stress as a way to play better then and like let it go, I think that's a positive.

Male 006: I would say being in a relationship is definitely a positive because it gives you someone you can talk to about your day. If you have a bad day on the field or you get a bad grade on a test, or something, it's someone that you can go to and relate to, if they're the same age and they're going through school you can talk about things with them and they'll always be there for you.

Male 007: I've actually used my relationship as kind of like a stress reliever. ...I'm going to do my best to get this down but worst comes to worst I still, you know, I'm going home to my girlfriend or whatever. It's kind of like a family situation where no matter what happens on the practice field you're still going to have your girlfriend at the end of the day and you can kind of use it as a stress reliever like that or at the same time it does add stress to your life just with handling time management and you know worrying about their feelings and everything, so it kind of goes both ways.

Like their male counterparts, female athletes suggested that romantic relationships could provide varying types of emotional support. Additionally, two of the female athletes mentioned feeling motivated by having their significant other as a fan.

Female 001: I feel like the sport in general is pretty stressful. I mean, even it's like a full-time job and you know if there are some issues generally speaking having a romantic relationship is kind of like something positive that's happening. So when you're at your lowest point and like I can't do this, it usually helps to bring you up.

Female 4: the first time my boyfriend came to visit and watched me play. Oh my gosh, I was so fired up and played so much harder just knowing someone that I had that relationship was there supporting me. So in a way it was a really good effect. I mean it did affect it and it changed at least mentally and I guess it shouldn't because it was just different than having my parents there. I mean they had seen me my whole life but so I think it has the potential to do both. And in either way it's emotional. It's an emotional high or it's an emotional low and both of those are so important to channel into sports.

Another female participant shared the following example.

Female 005: Like I'd agree with that like when my boyfriends at my games I want to impress him. I gotta get out there and like give it all. Because I know, he's an athlete so he kind of understands more when he's watching. So it's like, oh I gotta go all out.

In summary, time constraints, increased stress and positive emotional support systems are all ways athletic participation was perceived by participants to impact relationships and vice versa. The participants acknowledged that these variables may not be significantly different than those experienced in romantic relationships of non-athletes; however, they articulated a belief that the time constraints are unique to athletes and these time constraints can negatively affect both the relationship and athletic performance. In addition to time, participants perceived that relational stress can have more negative consequences for athletes since it can have unfavorable effects on athlete performance. During the focus group discussions, athletes recognized the unique challenges they face regarding romantic relationships, but also articulated acknowledgment that the benefits of romantic relationships make it well worth tackling these challenges.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results of the first phase of the dissertation, addressed seven research questions, and provided detailed descriptive information about particular challenges faced by many student-athletes. The quantitative survey data revealed no significant differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes regarding communication competence, interpersonal competence, or romantic relational development, but the qualitative responses of student-athletes on the survey revealed a variety of potentially unique challenges for athletes when initiating personal relationships. When beginning a romantic relationship, student athletes

were challenged by increased time commitments, lack of partner's understanding, and negative stereotyping of athletes.

Focus groups were subsequently conducted to provide a more detailed and in-depth examination of student athletes' perspectives on athletic status and romantic relationship development. The qualitative data from the focus groups pointed to concern about the affect of athletic status in two different social domains: social experiences with peers and impact on romantic relationships. When initiating relationships with peers, student athletes were concerned with meeting non-athletes, the pressure of being a role model, and the impact of initiating relationships with other student athletes; while the concerns about the impact of athletic participation on developing romantic relationships included time constraints, increased stress, and obtaining support from significant others. Student athletes perceive that their relational constraints differ from non-athletes, specifically due to the unique time constraints of athletes and the risks of relational stress impacting athletic performance. The next chapter will provide additional discussion of these findings and explore the implications of the findings for future research.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This chapter provides a review of the first phase of this dissertation, discusses the findings, and suggests some potential limitations and implications for future research and practice. The second phase of the study will be presented and discussed in chapter six.

Underlying assumptions of the first phase of this dissertation research are that interpersonal competence is important to the relational and psychosocial development of emerging adults, and college athletes, as a special population of emerging adults, experience unique challenges that may impede the development of their interpersonal competence. As stated in chapter 1, college athletes have a unique lifestyle and experience intense pressure to perform well athletically, academically and socially (Greenspan & Anderson, 1995). According to Adler and Adler (1991), a number of factors can affect the athletic, academic and social development of student-athletes: fatigue from training, traveling, and competition; insufficient time for studying; isolation from the general student population; and pressures from coaches and alumni.

The few studies that exist on the interpersonal competence of student-athletes indicate that college athletes develop skills within their sport and within the classroom, but sacrifice developing aspects of interpersonal competence such as initiating contacts, providing emotional support to others, self-disclosing, and resolving conflicts (Bates, Luster, & Vandenbelt, 2003; Buhrmester, 1990). This is problematic since studies reveal that interpersonal competence is positively related to satisfaction in romantic relationships between college students. Socially competent students have communication skills that facilitate their relationships with faculty and peers, which in turn contribute to the successful completion of their academic careers (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005). The first phase of this dissertation was designed to gain a better

understanding of the relationships among communication competence and interpersonal competence for both student-athletes and non-athletes and explore student-athlete beliefs about how romantic relationships affect their involvement in varsity athletics.

The goal of the first two research questions was to examine the differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in their self-reported communication competence. Quantitative measures were administered through a web-based survey to both college athletes and non-athletes. Using McCroskey and McCroskey's (1988) Self-Perceived Communication Scale to measure communication competence, the survey results indicated no statistically significant differences between college student-athletes' and non-athletes' self-perceived communication competence. Nor were there significant differences between groups within any of the three subscales of the measure (communication with stranger, acquaintance, and friend). Contrary to previous research suggesting lower levels of social competence among student-athletes than non-athletes, when operationalizing social competence as *communication competence*, there was no appreciable difference between athletes and non-athletes. Previous research suggests that athletes' social competence is jeopardized as a result of their limited time in varying social contexts. Additionally, in working with student-athletes, the researcher observed self-doubt when a student-athlete was asked to speak with a professor or to go into a classroom to speak to younger students. Therefore, the researcher believed that comparing how student-athletes and non-athletes perceived their ability to communicate, especially across stranger, acquaintance and friend contexts would have provided insight into differences that might exist between these two groups of students.

To address the second two research questions, and to examine the differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes in regard to interpersonal competence, the Interpersonal

Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1988) was used to survey participants. The subscale scores were used separately to determine if student-athletes and non-athletes would report significantly different levels of interpersonal competence across the dimensions of initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, emotional support, and/or conflict management. Participant responses indicated no statistically significant differences between the two groups either in terms of interpersonal competence or within any of the domains of interpersonal competence. Considering interpersonal competence as a foundational component of social development, the researcher believed that differences between the two populations would exist. Specifically, differences within the initiation and self-disclosure subscales were expected. It was thought that a student-athlete's lack of time for socialization would impact their relational initiation ability, and their instruction (by coaches and parents) to question a potential relational partner's intention would influence their desire and decision to self-disclose.

A bivariate correlation, to answer the final two research questions, suggested that for student-athletes and non-athletes there was a significant correlation between communication and interpersonal competence. Further exploration of this finding through multiple regression analysis indicated a significant two-way interaction between interpersonal and communication competence, but did not find athletic status to be a significant predictor. However, the inclusion of gender into the model garnered a significant three-way interaction effect when considering communication competence, athletic status, and gender. Further analysis of the communication competence beta scores for the four subgroups: male athlete, male non-athlete, female athlete, and female non-athlete, was warranted to better understand the effect for each subgroup.

Results indicated a significant negative association between male non-athletes when considering self-perceived communication and interpersonal competence. Male non-athletes,

who scored high on the assessment of more general communication skills as assessed through their SPCC score, reported lower scores when assessing specific interpersonal communication skills measured by the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire. This negative association could be attributed to male non-athletes' recognition that communicative skills in public domains are different than skills necessary for private interpersonal communication. Although results were not significant for female athletes and non-athletes; females, like male non-athletes, reported a negative association between communication and interpersonal competence. Therefore, results from three of the four subgroups showed that respondents who perceived themselves to have effective public communication skills, did not suggest the same level of confidence in their abilities to communicate on an interpersonal level. This finding, however, did not hold true for male athletes. Results of the male athlete subgroup approached significance, indicating that male athletes who believed they had communicative ability also thought they possessed good interpersonal skills. This result could be a function of a general confidence in male athletes' perceptions of self, especially within the domain of public communication. It could be that confidence in communicative skills in one area, public communication, is also perceived as effective for private interactions.

Assessing the results of the male athlete subgroup with the findings from the other three subgroups it appears that male athletes could have a false perception of success regarding their ability to communicate, believing that success in public communication translates to effectiveness in more private interpersonal communication. Their female athlete counterparts, however, suggest that perhaps being especially competent in public does not increase their effectiveness within interpersonal relationships. This difference in perceived competence between male and female athletes can be further explored when considering findings from the

focus group discussions among athletes only. In these discussions, female athletes' primary concern about interpersonal competence was how conflict might impact their athletic performance; while the primary concern for male athletes was uncertainty about others' motives for establishing a personal relationship. Female athletes suggested that unresolved conflict could impact their athletic performance. They shared concerns about how they resolve conflict, and how the lack of effectively doing so could be potentially problematic, athletically. Male athletes, however, shared concerns about why a person would want to get to know them, and explained how their perceived intention about the other person would alter their initial interactions and their desire to self-disclose. This focus group finding appears to be in conflict with the finding that male athletes suggest an association between communication and interpersonal competence. However upon further consideration, one could conclude that male athletes overgeneralize their communicative abilities, and are not educated enough about interpersonal and communication competence to label their uncertainty and lack of self-disclose as skill-deficient and potentially problematic. Therefore, in light of this divergent finding, further exploration and education is warranted.

Responses collected from the web-based open-ended textbox responses of student-athletes told a different story about student-athletes' perceptions of their social development. The concerns reported in the qualitative survey responses focused on challenges athletes faced with initiating social relationships and were less related to perceptions of overall communication or interpersonal competence. Moreover, the lack of significant findings when comparing athletes and non-athletes may possibly be because—although student-athletes have less opportunity to develop social skills with non-athlete peers—they may develop their communication and interpersonal skills in other relationships such as teammates, coaches, and alumni. One function

of an athletic team is the ability to work together to accomplish a common goal. Therefore, it may be that student-athletes have an increased opportunity to develop their communication skills within the context of team development. Since effective communication between team members and coaches is essential to build championship teams, communication and interpersonal competence within a team setting is a necessity. It appears that although student-athletes have less time to spend with peers outside their sport, their lack of time does not reportedly limit their ability to develop communication competence.

When assessing the results of this study, in addition to considering the dynamics created by a team environment, it is also necessary to consider the selected scales that made up this survey. The SPCC and the ICQ scales asked for student-athletes to assess their own competence. It could be the case that student-athletes' confidence in themselves within the athletic arena translated to a confidence in communication competence. In addition, self-report measures are open to social desirability biases and are affected by an individual's ability to be self-perceptive. According to McCroskey (1986b, p. 3), "In the case of communication competence, self-report scales may be very useful if we want to know how communicatively competent a person *thinks* he or she is. If we want to know how competent the person *actually* is, such scales may be useless, because the person very likely does not know." The combination of a student-athlete's ability to be self-perceptive and the challenges created by using a self-report measure likely influenced the results of the web-based survey.

Although student-athletes were not significantly different in terms of communication skill from their non-athlete counterparts, student-athlete participants in this study did report beliefs that their athletic status affects their ability to initiate and maintain relational development. Student-athletes responded to the open-ended text box question, "As a student-athlete, what

challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?” and participated in focus group discussions about athletics and personal relationships. The results revealed that athletic status was perceived to impact social experiences with peers and the development of romantic relationships.

Student-athlete participants stated that one of the challenges they faced as athletes was the ability to meet and interact with peers outside of the athletic community. Managing their academic, athletic and training schedules allowed little time to socialize. Many student-athletes suggested that it was easier to socialize and date within the student-athlete community. Research suggests that individuals are attracted to those with whom they are in close proximity and have repeated interaction. Proximity gives individuals the opportunity to get to know one another better (Brehm, 1992). College athletes spend much of their time with other student-athletes making peer group interaction outside the athletic community more challenging.

In addition to lack of time, student-athletes suggested that they were concerned about a person's intentions behind initiating a relationship. Concern about “real intentions” tended to increase the athlete's uncertainty when initiating relationships. Athletes stated that they were often unsure if an individual wanted to get to know them because they exhibited characteristics that the other person was attracted to, or if the other person wanted to get to know them because of their elite athletic ability. Constantly having to assess another person's intentions increased the athlete's uncertainty. This was particularly challenging in the initiation stage of relational development, and impacted the athlete's perception of their need, desire and ability to self-disclose personal information.

During the initial stages of developing a personal relationship, the athletes in this study perceived the “getting to know you” stage as particularly one-sided. Berger and Calabrese (1975)

stated that the entry stage of relational development is characterized by behavioral norms. The contents of the interactions are often “demographic and transactional” and initial questions center around where a person’s from, if they have pets, etc. For student-athletes, especially high profile athletes, much of this entry stage information is public knowledge through the media, therefore leaving initial encounters one-sided. In this scenario, athletes need to attain information from the other person, but the need for them to self-disclosure is minimal. It would appear that when initiating relationships an athlete’s ability to gradually self-disclose is somewhat unnecessary. That, coupled with the continual messages athletes receive about questioning the intentions of those who want a relationship with them, impacts their decision-making regarding uncertainty.

It is with good reason that athletes might remain uncertain and not move into the next phase of relational development when their celebrity status is considered. Hogg and Haines (1996) stated that individuals are attracted to members of high-status groups for at least three reasons: high-status individuals are typically valued by others, provide their partners with reward by association, and benefit from a halo effect; whereas the individual’s positive qualities are over generalized. None of these reasons suggest that another person might want to get to know an athlete for the positive personal qualities he or she possesses. For this reason, student-athletes have hesitation when meeting and getting to know a non-athlete for the first time. This can be problematic as it influences the range of experiences an athlete might have in developing social competence. The importance of social competence and satisfying social relationships is life-long. Studies have revealed that friendship is a critical source of social and emotional support that protects against the negative effects of stress (Welsh & Bierman, 2001).

In the web-based survey, athletes did not report differences within their competence when compared with their non-athlete counterparts. This finding indicates that athletes, at least

those participating in this study, perceive themselves as competent communicators who have other concerns that they relate to their involvement with college athletics. One such notion centers on the idea of dyadic incompetence. That is, do athletes perceive their ability to communicate as competent, but question the ability of those within whom they are speaking? For instance, it is important to consider the other person's communicative abilities when speaking to what the person might perceive to be a "celebrity" status athlete. The behavioral norms adjust within this exchange and therefore, have the athlete adapt to a non-traditional relational exchange. This adaptation can impact an athlete's level of uncertainty, which will influence the progression of both the conversation and the relationship. Interactions with those "outside" the athletic community give rise to questioning and hesitation.

Conversely, proximity and task attraction make socialization within the student-athlete community appealing. In addition, there appears to be less concern, when athletes socialize with athletes, about misunderstandings of a person's intentions and negative stereotyping. Student-athletes believe that their shared experiences as varsity athletes assist them in communicating and further developing relationships. Additionally, student-athletes who participated in the focus group understood their role of being held to higher behavioral standards as role models. According to Afifi and Burgoon (2000), an individual's expectations become their reality, regardless of the other person's actual behavior. This, in turn, influences to whom a person will be attracted. This concept suggests that an individual's expectations of another person lead him or her to treat the person in ways that allow the person to confirm the individual's expectations. Varsity student-athletes who participated in the focus groups identified themselves as role models and held similar expectations of their athletic peers. The commonality of role

model expectations appears to be another way student-athletes relate, and find attraction, within their peer group.

Many student athletes did perceive that social competence, in terms of successfully initiating personal relationships, was hampered by athletic status. For these athletes, maintaining an academic and social balance, increased stress, and finding time together were common problems when initiating and/or trying to maintain relationships. These concerns were amplified when coupled with a decrease in the amount of time an athlete was able to spend thinking about or working on the relationship's development. Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2001) stated that interference and lack of opportunity can impede the progress of romantic relationships. Interference can occur when one romantic partner is too involved in other aspects of his or her life to spend time developing a relationship. This is especially a concern for college athletes who, in addition to balancing academic and social demands, also need to make time to train and compete in their sport. The additional responsibilities of their sport make balancing a romantic life more challenging than for non-athletes.

In addition to initiating a romantic relationship, the maintenance of an existing romantic relationship can be affected by participation in varsity athletics. According to Dindia and Canary (1993), relational maintenance is comprised of four common components. First, relational maintenance involves keeping the relationship in existence. Student-athletes interested in maintaining a relationship reported a need to find time to stay in contact with their significant other. Travel and competition schedules can present additional challenges for this population. In addition to staying connected, maintaining a relationship involves keeping it at a stable level of intimacy. In some cases, the student-athletes who participated in the focus groups described how stressful it was when a relational partner did not understand or support the athlete's commitment

to their sport. It may not be uncommon for college athletes to find themselves in a situation where they need to balance their commitments to a partner, to their sport, and to academics.

A third component of relational maintenance is keeping a relationship in satisfactory condition. This can, in part, be accomplished by using maintenance activities. According to Canary and Stafford (1994), a variety of strategic and routine behaviors can be used to maintain relationships. While strategic maintenance involves enacting behaviors that are intentionally designed to maintain a relationship, routine behaviors are less strategic, and are not used specifically for the purpose of maintaining a relationship. Having time available to enact these behaviors is a necessity to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition. Since an athlete experiences additional time constraints than others, having the necessary time to enact relational maintenance behaviors is a disadvantage to student-athletes' romantic relationships. A decreased ability to demonstrate maintenance behaviors also impacts the ability to keep the relationship in repair. According to Dindia and Canary (1993), the fourth component of relational maintenance occurs when the relational partners work together to prevent problems from occurring, and to correct problems when they do occur. An important part of keeping a relationship satisfying is preventing and correcting problems. Athletes who participated in this study pointed to their partner's lack of ability to understand their academic and athletic commitments and a lack of time together as potential conflict points for their relationships. When asked: "As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy," 86.4% of the student-athletes reported that it had been. With such a high response rate, the researcher further probed this question during the focus group discussions. Student-athletes spoke about how problems in a relationship could have a negative effect on their focus and concentration when participating in

their sport. The increased mental and emotional stress associated with such conflict added to stress already associated with participating in sport at such a high level of competition.

Finally, a positive aspect of romantic relationships for college athletes was the ability for the relational partner to provide both emotional and instrumental support. As a way of demonstrating intimacy, relational partners can show that they are there for each other in times of distress. Jones (2000) found that distressing events for college students included: problems with a romantic partner, academic performance, friend/roommate problems, family problems, family illness, death and personal illness/injury. Needing emotional support is particularly pertinent to college athletes because in addition to the aforementioned list of distressing events for college students, college athletes also experience stress associated with their sport. Managing relationships with one's teammates and coaches, meeting training goals, traveling and missing classes, and preparing for competition are additional stressors for which student-athletes need both emotional and instrumental support. Athletes participating in the study were assured by the unconditional support offered by being part of a healthy relationship.

The lack of statistically significant findings indicated that the constructs of interpersonal and communication competence may not have been the appropriate constructs to study when trying to understand the barriers college athletes experience in romantic relationship initiation and maintenance. Fortunately, the qualitative data revealed a variety of constructs such as uncertainty, interference, and lack of opportunity that will be more productive for future research.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. One prominent limitation of this study was the low representation of college athletes for this sample. The findings for this study would be best

strengthened by replication in a larger representative sample across multiple Division 1A universities.

A second factor that may have been a limitation to the quantitative portion of this study was the fact that data were gathered via the form of self-report. It is possible that survey response bias was a factor. In addition, due to the moderator's relationship with the focus group participants, experimenter bias could have been an issue. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups are "relatively robust" with regard to moderator problems. This is often the case as participants typically seek to help the moderator find the results they are searching to find. Social desirability bias or the inclination to present oneself in a manner that is favorably viewed by others, may have affected the validity of data collection in both phases of this study.

Another shortcoming of self-report data is the disregard for the shared communicative process. In this study, the researcher asked only the participants to evaluate their communication and interpersonal competence. This approach may help to explain the lack of significant findings in the survey data. Future research would be well-served to solicit feedback from both relational partners regarding their own and their partner's communication and interpersonal competence.

A final limitation to the generalizability of this study is the fact that it was carried out within a specific university with its own unique culture, strengths and weaknesses. The attitudes and experiences of college student-athletes who participated in this study are not necessarily the attitudes and experiences of college student-athletes in all 119 Division 1A programs throughout the United States. However, the student-athletes within this sample were varied representing both male and female student-athletes across all 29 varsity athletic sport teams, therefore allowing findings to be transferred to other similar situations.

Implications for Future Research

College student-athletes identified many challenges associated with balancing their lives as college students, athletes, peers and romantic partners. Further exploration into how these challenges affect an athlete's social development and romantic relationships would be beneficial in designing further educational curriculum. In addition, these challenges, when compared with the benefits associated with college athletics, could help to determine the need for additional athletic department support staff.

The findings of the web-based survey data suggest no significant differences between how college athletes and non-athletes report their communication and interpersonal competence. However, focus group discussions revealed distinct challenges that college athletes face pertaining to their social experiences with their peers and their romantic relationships. Findings from the focus groups yielded more information regarding athletes' feelings about specific romantic relationship challenges. According to Luntz (1994), these findings can be attributed to the fact that the focus groups provided homogenous, same gender groups with an in-group commonality. This dynamic within a focus group setting can enhance the interactional, synergistic nature of the group as human behavior studies have consistently proven that individuals will reveal their innermost thoughts only to those they believe share a common bond (Luntz, 1994). Therefore, continued use of this methodology is suggested for future research.

Studying variations within the student-athlete population, such as high profile student-athletes at division 1A institutions, and college athletes across all NCAA divisions; and the exploration of whether these experiences are unique to one group or characteristic of the entire college athlete population would provide valuable insight. In addition, study of non-division 1A athletes and the comparison range of athlete celebrity within the same institution would be of

interest. For example, assessing if division 1A athletes and non-division 1A athletes share the same relational experiences, and evaluating if golfers encounter the same relational concerns as football players.

This closer look into experiences across different sports would enhance understanding of the interplay that celebrity has on an athlete's relational experiences. In addition to more in-depth, qualitative exploration into the student-athlete-celebrity phenomenon, adaptation of the Student-Athletes and Relational Development scale would be appropriate. Rewording the relational scale to include that participant response should consider "peer" interaction might make more specific scale results and therefore enhance its usefulness.

Future research should also include the study of uncertainty, interference, and lack of opportunity as constructs for further exploration into the initiation phase of athletes' relational experiences. The study of how relational maintenance is altered through participation in varsity athletics could provide additional insight into athletes' romantic relational development. In addition, a better understanding of the relational development process for student-athletes could be enhanced by considering proximity and task attraction as variables for relational development within the student-athlete community. Finally, further examination of the emotional and instrumental support provided by college athletes' relational partners would advance knowledge in this area.

Since much of this dissertation research was exploratory in nature, it is intended to be transferable to other settings, not generalizable to the larger population. To test causality, it will be important to conduct quasi-experimental research with a large, representative sample selected randomly from different NCAA conferences and institution types. Further, longitudinal research should be conducted to allow for better understanding of specific developmental processes that

might occur as student-athlete progresses throughout four years of athletic participation. The lack of research regarding college athletes' social development and romantic relationships has created a gap in our current knowledge in this area of study. Therefore, there is much we do not know about the long-term effects of college athletic participation on social development and romantic relationships. In addition, research is also lacking in the area of how romantic relationships impact athletic performance.

Finally, findings from this study could make some important connections among interpersonal communication, athletic participation and wellness. The importance of communication in the quality of a college student-athlete's classroom, athletic and social life is enhanced. By pointing to the importance of communication and personal development for college athletes; athletes, coaches, parents, counseling and support staff, and sport psychologists can better appreciate the need for effective communication in all areas of the athlete's life. With this recognition, increased and enhanced education and support services can be offered. As more is done with this line of work, athletic administrators and coaches will come to understand the value of effective communication on the student-athlete experience and can offer the opportunity for a more well-rounded college experience that includes time for personal and social development.

CHAPTER 6

Translational Research

Competing time demands affecting social development are not a new issue for college athletes, however, in recent years it has been intensified (Sperber, 2001). The gap between professional and amateurism has narrowed and there is a heightened media attention on college athletics. In response to the increased demands placed upon student-athletes, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Division 1 A Athletic Directors Association created a total development program for student-athletes entitled the “CHAMPS/Life Skills Program”. The mission of the NCAA is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the student body (NCAA, 2002). The CHAMPS/Life Skills Program was created so that athletic departments could demonstrate their commitment to student-athletes by enhancing their experiences in five areas: academic and athletic excellence, personal and career development and community outreach.

Currently, however, the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program remains largely in its early stages of development and implementation, with little research examining its program concepts, methods, and efficacy (Meeker et al., 2000). As a result of this limited focus, there is a need to intersect the research in the field of sports psychology with that of interpersonal communication scholars, and enhance curriculum development specifically for college student-athletes. The second phase of this dissertation is focused on developing a brief educational curriculum based on the results of the first phase research. This curriculum may contribute toward addressing the need for applied research in the field of educating college student-athletes.

The following three lessons build on the current curriculum in the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program by adding components of basic communication skill development, an overview of

healthy relationship characteristics, and strategies to manage relational stress and conflict. Each lesson was developed in response to the findings provided through this study. These lessons, although best used sequentially, can also be used in a menu format; selecting what is most appropriate for the population with whom the educator is working. This framework is considered a first-step toward educating student-athletes about some of the challenges they might face as college athletes in developing relationships, while providing them with an awareness and knowledge about how best to address these issues.

Brief Educational Curriculum

The following lesson entitled “Communication Basics” was created to address athletes’ concerns regarding negative stereotyping and the amount of time available to invest in relationships. Recognizing and using appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication can increase the effectiveness of a communication exchange. Raising an athlete’s awareness about what is being said and how it is being communicated can be an asset for the athlete, whether in conversation with a romantic partner, professor, coach, or teammate.

LESSON: Communication Basics

Objectives: After this lesson, student-athletes will be able to:

- Explain the communication model and define verbal and non-verbal communication
- Explain the benefits of effective communication
- Explain the possible challenges associated with effective communication

Introductory Discussion: 10 minutes

Introduce the objectives of the lesson and the idea that effective two-way communication is essential in developing healthy personal relationships.

Ask student-athletes to brainstorm and list the following:

- a. Challenges to effective communication
- b. Challenges student-athletes face regarding effective communication
- c. Advantages of effective communication
- d. Advantages student-athletes face regarding effective communication

Discussion: 15 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share their lists of challenges and advantages.

Some student-athlete advantages and challenges might include: negative stereotyping, intention questioning, intimidation, role modeling, higher social standards, same group interactions, and common athletic experience

Review the communication model and make associations specifically with student-athlete communication concerns.

Discuss strategies to ensure two-way communication and behaviors that hinder the communication process.

Define verbal and non-verbal communication.

Activity: 10 minutes

Tell the students that the next exercise will give them practice with verbal communication. It will allow them to practice communicating specifically with their partner and will reflect some of the challenges with communication.

Ask students to break into dyads. Next, ask that one of the students be able to see the front of the room while the other sits back-to-back facing the back of the room (receiver). Ask the student facing the front of the room (sender) to describe the object that you are displaying. The goal is for each dyad to be able to draw the object with only one member of the dyad being able to see the object.

Discuss, in general, how this activity relates to the challenges in relational communication.

Activity Wrap-up: 5 minutes

Ask student-athlete to share their perspectives on the activity and how the activity translates into things they might experience in their personal communication as an athlete.

Facilitate a brief class discussion regarding reactions to the activity. How did it feel to be the sender or the receiver of the message in this activity?

Brainstorm: 10 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share practical strategies on how to more effectively communicate. Ask that they consider the following: negative stereotyping, intention questioning, intimidation, role modeling, higher social standards, same group interactions and common athletic experience.

Take Home Messages: 5 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share some ideas that they learned in this lesson.

Ask student-athletes to identify at least one strategy that they will commit to using within the next week to assist them in effective communication.

Lesson conclusion: This lesson was intended to educate student-athletes about effective communication. Specifically, student-athletes were asked to consider how being a student-athlete affected their communication in both positive and negative ways. According to participants in this research study, student-athletes may be concerned with the negative stereotypes their peers hold against them for being college athletes. Male athletes may question their academic abilities and be concerned about being labeled “players” (wanting to have sexual relationships with as

many women as possible), which may hinder their ability to effectively communicate with someone they had just met. In addition, athletes may be concerned about why someone might want to meet them. They are continually told by coaches and athletics staff that they need to protect themselves and to make sure that others want to get to know them as a person and not just as an athlete. This may make open communication with others a challenge. Female athletes may be concerned that male peers might be intimidated by them, leading to possible barriers to communication. Conversely, student-athletes may believe they are held to higher social standards than non-athletes. Being perceived as a role model for others may provide a communicative advantage when considering athletes, across sports', common athletic experience.

This lesson should raise a student's awareness of particular barriers to effective communication for college athletes. Gaha and Fitzpatrick (2005) stated that socially competent students have communication skills that facilitate their relationships with faculty and peers. Therefore, it is important for student-athletes to be aware of the impact their athletic involvement has on their communication with others. Lesson one is a first step to raising communicative awareness and an opportunity for student-athletes to begin to develop useful strategies that enhance their communication exchanges.

In addition to challenges with effective communication, athletes shared concerns about their potential partner's intentions. Having a better understanding of the relational development process and the characteristics that constitute a healthy relationship can help the athlete avoid unwanted situations. The lesson entitled: "Fostering Healthy Relationships" focuses on identifying characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, assessing relational development motives, and explaining the benefits of fostering healthy relationships. Education about the different types of relationships will assist athletes in assessing both their own and other's relational intentions.

LESSON: Fostering Healthy Relationships

Objectives: After this lesson, student-athletes will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Assess relational development motives.
- Explain the benefits of fostering healthy relationships.

Introductory Discussion: 5 minutes

Introduce the objectives for the lesson and the idea that interpersonal relationships affect one's quality of life.

Ask student-athletes some of the positive and negative motives for entering into a personal relationship.

Discussion: 20 minutes

Review the relational development process.

Discuss Knapp and Vangelisti's (1996) "Stages of Coming Together" model.

Explain Uncertainty Reduction Theory.

Activity: 10 minutes

Brainstorm with the student-athletes two lists of characteristics. One that includes characteristics identified in healthy relationships and a second list that includes characteristics of unhealthy relationships.

Next, ask student-athletes to think about their best friend. Once they have thought of that person, ask them to write three interpersonal characteristics about that person that they appreciate. Once the student-athlete has completed his or her list, ask the students to

identify three characteristics that they want from someone in a romantic relationship. Compare the lists and discuss why the lists might be more similar than different.

Lead a discussion on how the exercise relates to what someone desires in a relationship.

Activity Wrap-up: 10 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share their perspectives on the activity and how the activity translates into things they might experience in their personal relationships as a college athlete.

Ask the participants to reflect on their current relationships and to ask themselves if the people they are surrounding themselves with are people with whom they truly care to associate and determine why or why not?

Brainstorm: 5 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share practical strategies on how to recognize and facilitate the development of healthy relationships.

Take Home Messages: 5 minutes

Ask participants to observe both healthy and unhealthy relationships and to recognize the need for effective communication as part of developing healthy relationships.

Lesson conclusion: This lesson was intended to assist student-athletes in identifying characteristics of healthy relationships. College athletes who participated in this research study suggested that the intension of others and time constraints (maintaining a balance between time spent with academic, athletic and social relationships) presented problems within their interpersonal relationships. In addition, they shared that increased stress in each of the aforementioned dimensions of their lives was cause for concern. According to Barber and Eccles (2003), healthy adolescent relationships are characterized by open communication and high levels of trust and these healthy relationships help adolescents refine their sense of identity, develop interpersonal skills and provide emotional support. Since adolescents, and therefore college athletes, do not automatically know right and wrong behavior in dating relationships, without a clear understanding of what makes a healthy relationship they are at higher risk to tolerate relationships that might put them at risk (Sorenson, 2007). Therefore, this lesson sought

to focus on raising awareness of college athletes about the characteristics of healthy relationships and uncertainty reduction as they relate to the unique challenges athletes face in each of these areas. In addition, athletes in this study suggested that positive romantic relationships caused them much instrumental and emotional support. It is an important part of this lesson that student-athletes realize the potential benefits interpersonal relationships have to them as a person and as an athlete. Two important skills for athletes are the ability to assess their own and their potential partner's desire to enter a relationship, and the ability to assess their current (and future) relationships using a healthy relationship model.

Through this dissertation research, it was evident that student-athletes were concerned about the effects romantic relationships have on their athletic performance. These concerns included finding the time to divide between their sport and their relationship, their partner's understanding of their sport commitment, how disagreements with their relational partner could impact their athletic performance, and the management of conflict and stress. In light of these findings, a lesson entitled "Managing Relational Conflict and Stress" was developed. This lesson provides a review of the benefits for effectively managing conflict and stress.

LESSON: Managing Relational Conflict and Stress

Objectives: After this lesson, student-athletes will be able to:

- Identify factors that cause stress within relationships
- Explain the benefits of effectively managing conflict and stress.

Introductory Discussion: 10 minutes

Introduce the objectives for the lesson and the idea that managing conflict and stress effectively is essential in developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

Ask student-athletes to draft a list of items they believe contribute to conflict and stress within their relationships. Next, ask that they "star" those that are specific to their involvement in athletics.

Discussion: 15 minutes

Review the dimensions of conflict.

Discuss items that contribute to a student-athletes' relational stress. Some examples are: time for academics, athletics and social experiences, finding time with one's partner and/or family, or how conflict and stress impact athletic performance.

Activity: 10 minutes

Ask student-athletes to brainstorm how unresolved conflict affects their relationships and athletic performance.

Ask student-athletes to brainstorm how increased stress affects their relationships and athletic performance.

Discuss the strategies participants use to reduce the negative effects of both.

Activity Wrap-up: 10 minutes

Ask how well participants have been managing conflict and within their personal relationships.

Ask participants if learning about the effects of conflict and stress will assist them in leaving a conflict-filled relationship.

Brainstorm: 5 minutes

Ask student-athletes to share practical strategies for conflict and stress management, and to discuss healthy strategies for leaving a relationship.

Take Home Messages: 5 minutes

Ask participants to observe the conflict and stress management styles of those close to them.

Encourage participants to be aware of the need for effective communication as part of developing healthy relationships and managing conflict appropriately.

Lesson conclusion: This lesson was created to enhance student-athletes' understanding of the negative effects of unmanaged stress and conflict on their personal, academic and athletic lives. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is the negative feeling that occurs when an individual feels unable to cope with the demands placed upon them by their environment. For athletes who participated in this study, trying to juggle the demands from each dimension of their lives seemed overwhelming. Therefore, raising awareness about how the student-athlete interrupts and handles stress and conflict was warranted. In addition to the day-to-day stress an athlete experiences, involvement in an unhealthy relationship can cause even more stress. Sorenson (2007) stated that adolescents need to be taught the characteristics of a healthy relationship, how to differentiate between a healthy and unhealthy one, and how to leave if they find themselves in an unhealthy relationship. This is particularly true for student-athletes as time spent to attend to relationship concerns is time not dedicated to their academic and athletic commitments. Athletes in this study suggested that an unhappy personal life could impact their athletic performance. For that reason, and to assist with the healthy developmental journey into

adulthood, it is imperative that college athletes begin to raise awareness and acquire skills that will help them manage stress and conflict, and succeed in healthy interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was designed to examine differences in self-perceived communication interpersonal competence between college student-athletes and non-athletes. Additionally, it investigated perceived barriers to satisfying personal relationships for student athletes. Several findings from this study contribute to the current knowledge of student-athletes' competence and relational development.

The survey data did not reveal significant differences between college athletes and non-athletes in either self-perceived communication competence or interpersonal competence. This finding suggests that challenges in relational development that are unique to college athletes may not be related to low levels of communication competence, but may be due to other factors such as role obligations.

The findings from focus group discussions provided more detailed information about what those factors might be that contribute to challenges in athletes' personal relationship development. For example, the study generated evidence that athletic participation impacts meeting peers outside the athletic community and affects romantic relational development. In addition, in their discussions athletes suggested that a lack of time, uncertainty about the other person's intentions and impact on athletic performance contributed to their concerns about establishing satisfying personal relationships.

Findings from this research may have the potential to influence the direction of the educational efforts for college athletes. In many settings, it is difficult to address issues of social competence and personal relationships because of a lack of information about how to address these ideas for a student-athlete population. Educational interventions could enhance an athlete's perception of how relationships impact his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well as

their athletic performance (Coppel, 1995). Curricula allowing for a straightforward discussion of the challenges athletes face while initiating and maintaining their relationships would raise athletes' awareness about the issue and allow athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff an opportunity to provide educational intervention.

College athletes, like their peers, are complicated beings. In addition to achieving academically and socially, they are asked to progress athletically. The healthy social development of an athlete is part of the achievement of his or her individual excellence. Just as relational development is central to individual development, educators who work with athletes need to recognize the impact of personal relationships on students' athletic performance and team dynamics. Educational trainings by coaches and support staff about the importance of effective communication, healthy relational development and conflict management should be used to raise awareness about the relational challenges college athletes face.

The final phase of this dissertation research involved developing three lessons that could be integrated into a current curriculum or implemented as a stand-alone curriculum. This educational framework is designed to address relational issues college athletes experience. An overarching objective is that awareness and education in this area will enhance student-athletes' social development.

References

- Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1985). From idealism to pragmatic detachment: The academic performance of college athletes. *Sociology of Education*, 58, 241-250.
- Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1987). Role conflict and identity salience: College athletics and the academic role. *The Social Science Journal*, 24, 443-455.
- Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1991). *Backboards and blackboards: College athletes and role engulfment*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Afifi, W. A., & Burgoon, J. K. (2000). The impact of violations on uncertainty and the consequences for attractions for attractiveness. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 203-233.
- Anderson, P. A. (1999). *Nonverbal communication: Forms and functions*. Mountain View CA: Mayfield.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469-480.
- Barber, B., & Eccles, J. (2003). The joy of romance: Healthy adolescent relationships as an educational agenda. In P. Florsheim (Ed.), *Adolescent romantic relations and sexual behavior: theory, research, and practical implications*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Barnes, J., Conrad, K., Demont-Heinrich, C., Graziano, M., Kowalski, D., Neufeld, J., Zamora, J., & Palmquisl, M. (2005). *Generalizability and transferability*. Colorado State University Department of English.
- Barnett, N. P., Smoll, F. L., & Smith, R. E. (1992). Effects of enhancing coach-

- athlete relationships on youth sport attrition, *The Sport Psychology*, 34, 226-239.
- Bates, L., Luster, T., & Vandenbelt, M. (2003). Factors related to social competence in elementary school among children of adolescent mothers. *Social Development*, 12, 107-124.
- Baumeister, R. F., Wotman, S. R., & Stillwell, A. M. (1993). Unrequited love: On heartbreak, anger, guilt, scriptlessness and humiliation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 377-394.
- Berger, C. R. (1988). Uncertainty and information exchange in developing relationships. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 239-255). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Berger, C. R. (1979). Beyond initial interaction: Uncertainty, understanding, and the development of interpersonal relationships. In H. Giles & R. St. Clair (Eds.), *Language and social psychology* (pp. 122-144). Baltimore, MD: University Park Press.
- Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99-112
- Blinde, E. (1989). Unequal exchange and exploitation of college sport: The case of the female athlete. *Arena Review*, 13, 110-123.
- Blood, G. W., Blood, I. M., Tellis, G., & Gabel, R. (2001). Communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence in adolescents who stutter. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 26, 161-178.

- Bradac, J. J. (2001). Theory comparison: Uncertainty reduction, problematic integration, uncertainty management, and other curious constructs. *Journal of Communication, 51*, 456-476.
- Brashers, D. E. (2001). Communication and uncertainty management. *Journal of Communication, 51*, 477-497.
- Brehm, S. S. (1992). *Intimate relationships* (2nd ed.), New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Brustad, R. J. (1988). Affective outcomes in competitive youth sport: The influence of intrapersonal and socialization factors. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 10*, 307-321.
- Buhrmester, D. (1990). Intimacy of friendship, interpersonal competence, and adjustment during preadolescence and adolescence. *Child Development, 61*, 1101-1111.
- Buhrmester, D., Furman, W., Wittenberg, M. T., & Reis, H. T. (1988). Five domains of interpersonal competence in peer relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55*, 991-1008.
- Cheek, J. M., & Buss, A. H. (1981). Shyness and sociability. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41*, 330-339.
- Canary D. J., & Cupach, W. R. (1988). Relational and episodic characteristics associated with conflict tactics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 5*, 305-325.
- Canary, D. J., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1989). A model of the perceived competence of conflict strategies. *Human Communication Research, 15*, 630-649.
- Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1994). Maintaining relationships through strategic and routine interaction. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational*

- maintenance* (pp. 3-22). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Chesebro, J. W., McCroskey, J. C., Atwater, D. F., Behrenfuss, R. M., Cawelti, G., Gaudino, J. L., & Hodges, H. (1992). Communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence of at-risk students. *Communication Education, 41*, 345-360.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. *In the Handbook of qualitative research, 2nd, Edition*. Denzin and Lincoln, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.), New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Cohen, S., Sherrod, D. R., & Clark, M. S. (1986). Social skills and the stress protective role of social support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 963-973.
- Coppel, D. B. (1995). Relationship issues in sport: A marital therapy model. In: S. M. Murphy (Ed.), *Sport psychology interventions*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Cupach, W. R. (1982, May). *Communication satisfaction and interpersonal solidarity as outcomes of conflict message strategy use*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, Boston, MA.
- Dainton, M. (2003). Equity and certainty in relational maintenance. *Western Journal of Communication, 67*, 164-178.
- Daly, J. A., McCroskey, J. C., Ayres, J., Hopf, T., & Ayres D. M. (1997). *Avoiding communication: shyness, reticence and communication apprehension* (2nd ed.), Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Dindia, K., & Canary, D. J. (1993). Definitions and theoretical perspectives on relational maintenance. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 24*, 207-213.

- Duran, R. L., & Kelly, L. (1988). An investigation into the cognitive domain of competence: The relationship between communicative competence and interaction involvement. *Communication Research Reports*, 2, 91-96.
- Duran, R. L., & Kelly, L. (June, 1984). *Generalized communication competence: Most of the people some of the time*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Eastern Communication Association conference. Philadelphia, PA.
- Egland, K. L., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1996). Flirtation and conversational competence in cross-sex platonic and romantic relationships. *Communication Reports*, 9, 105-118.
- Fizel, J., & Smaby, T. (1999). Participation in collegiate athletics and academic performance. In J. Fizel, E. Gustafson & L. Hadley (Eds.), *Sports economics: Current research* (pp. 54-79). Westport, CN: Praeger.
- Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1992). Age and sex differences in perceptions of networks of personal relationships. *Child Development*, 63, 103-115.
- Gardner, J. N., Jewler, A. J., & Robb, A. (1995). *Your first year experience: Success strategies for Canadian students*. Toronto, Canada: Nelson.
- Gaudino, J. L., & Hodges, H. (1992). Communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence of at-risk students. *Communication Education*, 41, 345-360.
- Glasser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Gudykunst, W. B., & Nishida, T. (2000). Anxiety, uncertainty and perceived effectiveness of communication across relationships and cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25, 55-71.

- Guerrero, L. K., Anderson, P. A., & Afifi, W. A. (2001). *Close Encounters*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Greenspan, M., & Andersen, M. B. (1995). Providing psychological services to student-athletes: A developmental psychology model. In: S. M. Murphy (Ed.), *Sport psychology interventions* (177-192). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Hammer, M. R., Wiseman, R. L., Rasmussen, J. L., & Brusckke, J. C. (1998). A test of anxiety/uncertainty management theory: The intercultural adaptation context. *Communication Quarterly*, 46, 309-327.
- Hansen, D. J., Christopher, J. S., & Nange, D. W. (1992). Adolescent heterosocial interactions and dating. In V. B. Hasselt & Hersen (Eds.), *Handbook of social development* (pp. 371-394). New York, NY: Plenum.
- Harrison, R. E. (1981). Psychosocial dimensions of student-athletes: Implications for developmental studies. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 6, 113-115.
- Hartup, W. W. (1992). Friendships and their developmental significance. In H. McGurk, *Childhood Social Development: Contemporary Perspectives* (pp.175-206). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Hellstedt, J. C. (1987). The coach/parent/athlete relationship, *The Sport Psychologist*, 1, 151-160.
- Hellstedt, J. C. (1995). Invisible players: A family system model. In S. M. Murphy, *Sport interventions* (pp. 117-146). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Hocker, J. L., & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). *Interpersonal conflict* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Hocking, J. E., Stacks, D. W., & McDermott, S. T. (2003). *Communication research* (3rd ed.).

- Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Hogg, M. A., & Hains, S. C. (1996). Intergroup relations and group solidarity: Effects of group identification and social beliefs on depersonalized attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 295-309.
- Hudgins, C. A., & Allen-Meares, P. (2000). Translational research: A new solution to an old problem? *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*, 2-5.
- Jones, S. M. (2000). *Nonverbal immediacy and verbal comforting in the social support process*.
- Jowett, S., & Cockerill, I. M. (2003). Olympic Medallists' perspective of the athlete-coach relationship, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 4*, 313-331.
- Knapp, M. L. (1983). Dyadic relationship development. In J. Wiemann (Ed.), *Nonverbal interaction* (pp. 179-197). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Knobloch, L. K., & Solomon, D. H. (1999). Measuring the sources and content of relational uncertainty. *Communication Studies, 50*, 261-278.
- Knobloch, L. K., & Solomon, D. H. (2002a). Information seeking beyond initial interaction: Negotiating relational uncertainty within close relationships. *Human Communication Research, 28*, 243-257.
- Knobloch, L. K., & Solomon, D. H. (2005). Relational uncertainty and relational information processing: Questions and answers? *Communication Research, 32*, 349-388.
- Krueger, R. A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research. Part 1 of the ethnographer's toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Leonard, W. M. (1986). Exploitation in collegiate sport: The views of basketball players in NCAA Divisions 1, 11, and I11. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 9*, 11-29.
- Lewis, M. (1993). Athletes in college: Differing roles and conflicting expectations. *College Student Journal, 27*, 195-202.
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 91-103.
- Luntz, F. I. (1994, May 14). Voices of Victory. In *The Polling Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.pollingreport.com>.
- Lomas, J. (1993). Diffusion, dissemination and implementation: Who should do what? *Annals of the New York Academy of Science, 703*, 226-237.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1994). Variables underlying willingness to communicate: a causal analysis. *Communication Research Reports, 11*, 135-142.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mather, P. C., & Winston, R. B. (1998). Autonomy development of traditional-aged students: Themes and processes. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*, 33-50.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1992). Reliability and validity of the willingness to communicate scale. *Communication Quarterly, 40*, 16-25.
- McCroskey, J. C., & McCain, T. A. (1974). The measurement of interpersonal attraction. *Speech Monographs, 41*, 261-266.

- McCroskey, J. C. (1986b, April). *Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence*. Paper presented at a meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Cincinnati.
- McCroskey, J.C., & McCroskey, L.L. (1988). Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence. *Communication Research Reports*, 5, 108-113.
- McGaha, V., & Fitzpatrick, J. (2005). Personal and social contributors to dropout risk for undergraduate students. *College Student Journal*, 39, 141-160.
- Meeker, D.J., Stankovich, C.E., & Kays, T.M. (2000). *Positive transitions for student-athletes*. Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Meyer, B. (1990). The academic performance of female collegiate athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7, 44-57.
- Miller, P. S., & Kerr, G. (2002). The athletic, academic and social experiences of intercollegiate student-athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 25, 346-367.
- Miller-Day, M. (2008). Translational performances: Toward relevant, engaging, and empowering social science. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9.
- Morgan, D. L. *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (1997). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nunnally, J. (1978). *Psychometric theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Orlandi, M. (1996). Health promotion technology transfer: Organization perspectives. *Cancer Journal of Public Health*, 2, 28-33.

- Parham, W. D. (1993). The intercollegiate athlete: A 1990's profile. *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*, 411-429.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Petronio, S. (1999). Translating scholarship into practice: An alternative metaphor. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 27*, 87-91.
- Petronio, S. (2007). JACR commentaries on translating research into practice. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 35*, 215-217.
- Pillemer, K., Suito, J. J., & Wethington, E. (2003). Integrating theory, basic research, and intervention: Two case studies from caregiving research. *The Gerontologist, 43*, 19.
- Poczwadowski, A. P., Barott, J. E., & Henschen, K. P. (2002). The athlete and coach: Their relationship and its meaning. Methodological concerns and research process. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 33*, 98-115.
- Poczwadowski, A. P., Barott, J. E., & Jowett, S. (2006). Diversifying approaches to research on athlete-coach relationships. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 7*, 125-142.
- Query, J. L., Parry, D., & Flint, L. J. (1992). The relationship among social support, communication competence, and cognitive depression for non-traditional students. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 20*, 78-94.
- Rice, P. F. (1998). *Human development: A life-span approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Rosenfeld, L. B., Grant III, C. H., & McCroskey, J. (1995). Communication

- apprehension and self-perceived communication competence of academically gifted students. *Communication Education*, 44, 79-86.
- Rubin, R. B., Palmgreen, P., Sypher, H. E. (2004). *Communication research measures: A sourcebook*. New York: Routledge.
- Samter, W. (2003). Friendship interaction skills across the life span. In J. O. Greene & B. R. Burelson (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and social interaction skills* (pp. 637-684). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Scanlan, T. K., & Lewthwaite, R. (1984). Social psychological aspects of competition for male youth sport participants: Predictors of competitive stress. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 6, 208-226.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sillars, A. L., & Scott, M. (1983). Interpersonal perception between intimates: An integrative review. *Human Communication Research*, 10, 153-157.
- Simmons, K. N., & Anderson, J. S. (1986, May). *Communication competence and relationship development: Perceived changes of competence across relationship stages*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, Chicago, IL.
- Smoll, F. L., & Smith, R. E. (1989). Leadership behaviors in sport: A theoretical model and research paradigm. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 19, 1522-1551.
- Sorensen, S. (2007, July). Adolescent romantic relationships. *Act for Youth Center of Excellence: Research Facts and Findings*, 1-4.
- Sperber, M. (2001). College sports inc.: The athletic department vs. the university. In A.

- Yiannakis & M. J. Melnick (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in sociology of sport* (pp. 147-157). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (1984). *Interpersonal communication competence*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Sunnafrank, M. (1986). Predicted outcome value during initial interactions: A reformulation of uncertainty reduction theory. *Human Communication Research*, *13*, 3-33.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2001). *Using multivariate statistics* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddie, C. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Welsh, J. A., & Bierman, K. L. (2001). Social Competence. *Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence*. Tampa, FL: Thompson Gale.
- Wylleman, P. (2000). Interpersonal relationships in sport: Uncharted territory in sport psychology research. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, *31*, 555-572.
- Zakahi, W. R., & Duran, R. L. (1984). Loneliness, communicative competence, and communication apprehension: extension and replication. *Communication Quarterly*, *33*, 50-60.

Appendix A

Student-Athlete Recruitment Email to Coaches

Dear_____

I am writing to ask for your assistance. As you may know, I am working toward earning my Ph D. in Communication, Arts and Sciences and am currently seeking volunteers to participate in research I am conducting for my dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in studying how student-athletes perceive their communication skills. Therefore, I wanted to ask if you would consider asking your team members to participate.

All student-athletes who are interested in participating are asked to complete the survey. The survey will only take about 15 minutes, and will be confidential as is outlined in the consent form the student-athlete will review and sign prior to involvement in the study.

My observations and experiences in working with student-athletes have led me to realize that student-athletes have experiences unique from others when developing their communication skills. I believe this impacts their athletic, academic and social development and therefore, has led me to an interest in studying this topic. I intend to develop a curriculum using my research findings and am hopeful that both my findings and the curriculum will be of assistance to you and future student-athletes.

If you are willing to help me “recruit” student-athletes for involvement in this research project, please ask that they contact me at src122@psu.edu or my telephone at 814-865-0407.

I appreciate your considering my request and look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you!

Sue Sherburne
Doctoral Candidate
CAS Department

Appendix B

Student-Athlete Recruitment Email

Dear Student-Athlete,

I am writing to ask for your assistance. As you may know, I am working toward earning my Ph. D. in Communication, Arts and Sciences and am currently seeking volunteers to participate in research I am conducting for my dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in studying how student-athletes perceive their communication skills. Therefore, I wanted to ask if you would have some time to participate in a web-based survey that would allow you to share thoughts and experiences.

All student-athletes who are interested in participating are asked to complete the survey. The survey will only take about 15 minutes, and the information you provide will be confidential. Assurances of confidentiality will be outlined in the consent form you will review and sign prior to completing the survey.

If you are interested in sharing your ideas with me for this research project, please access the following web site where you will be directed to the survey. <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>

My observations and experiences in working with student-athletes have led me to realize that student-athletes have experiences unique from others when developing their communication skills. This has led me to an interest in studying this topic. I am hopeful that my findings will be of assistance to you and future student-athletes.

I appreciate your considering my request. Thank you!

Sue Sherburne
Doctoral Candidate
CAS Department

Appendix C

General Student Recruitment Email

Dear CAS 100A Student,

My name is Sue Sherburne and I am writing to ask for your assistance. I am working toward earning my Ph. D. in Communication, Arts and Sciences and am currently seeking volunteers to participate in research I am conducting for my dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in studying how general students and student-athletes perceive their communication skills. Therefore, I wanted to ask if you would have some time to participate in a web-based survey that would allow you to share thoughts and experiences.

All students who are interested in participating are asked to complete the survey. The survey will only take about 15 minutes, and the information you provide will be confidential. Assurances of confidentiality will be outlined in the consent form you will review and sign prior to completing the survey.

My observations and experiences in working with student-athletes have led me to realize that student-athletes have experiences unique from others when developing their communication skills. This has led me to an interest in studying this topic.

If you are interested in sharing your ideas with me for this research project, please contact me at src122@psu.edu.

I appreciate your considering my request and look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you!

Sue Sherburne
Doctoral Candidate
CAS Department

Appendix D

Student-Athlete Focus Group Recruitment Email

Dear Student-Athlete,

I am writing to ask for your assistance. As you may know, I am working toward earning my Ph D in Communication, Arts and Sciences and am currently collecting data for my dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in studying how student-athletes perceive their communication skills. Therefore, I wanted to ask if you would have some time to participate in a focus group with other student-athletes that would allow you to share thoughts and experiences.

The focus group will only take about 30 minutes, and the information you provide will be confidential. Assurances of confidentiality will be outlined in the consent form you will review and sign prior to beginning the focus group.

My observations and experiences in working with student-athletes have led me to realize that student-athletes have experiences unique from others when developing their communication skills. This has led me to an interest in studying this topic. I am hopeful that my findings will be of assistance to you and future student-athletes.

If you are interested in sharing your ideas with me for this research project, please contact me at src122@psu.edu.

I appreciate your considering my request and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you!

Sue Sherburne
Doctoral Candidate
CAS Department

Appendix E

Web-based Survey

Information About You

1. Please note your sex.

Male ___

Female ___

2. Please note your ethnicity

African-American ___

Asian ___

Caucasian ___

Hispanic ___

Native American ___

Other ___

3. Please indicate your current semester standing:

1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th 7th 8th 9th 10th other

4. If you are a student-athlete, please note your sport. _____

How I Communicate

Directions: Below are twelve situations in which you might need to communicate. People's abilities to communicate effectively vary a lot, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in each of the situations described below. Indicate in the space provided at the left of each item your estimate of your competence.

Presume 0 = completely incompetent and 100 = competent.

- _____ 5. Present a talk to a group of strangers.
- _____ 6. Talk with an acquaintance.
- _____ 7. Talk in a large meeting of friends.
- _____ 8. Talk in a small group of strangers.
- _____ 9. Talk with a friend.
- _____ 10. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
- _____ 11. Talk with a stranger.
- _____ 12. Present a talk to a group of friends.
- _____ 13. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
- _____ 14. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
- _____ 15. Talk in a small group of friends.
- _____ 16. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

How I Relate to Others

Directions: This instrument is composed of forty statements concerning feelings about communication with a companion (friend/date). Please work quickly, and record your first impression. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you:

- 1 – I'm poor at this; I would avoid this situation if possible.
- 2 – I'm only fair at this; I would have a lot of difficulty handling this situation.
- 3 – I'm OK at this; I would have some difficulty handling this situation.
- 4 – I'm good at this; I would be able to handle this situation.
- 5 – I'm extremely good at this; I would handle this situation very well.

- _____ 17. Asking or suggesting to someone new that you get together and do something
- _____ 18. Telling a companion you don't like a certain way he or she has been treating you
- _____ 19. Revealing something intimate about yourself while talking with someone you're just getting to know

- _____20. Helping a close companion work through his or her thought and feelings about a major life decision
- _____21. Being able to admit that you might be wrong when a disagreement with a close companion begins to build in to a serious fight
- _____22. Finding and suggesting things to do with new people whom you find interesting and attractive
- _____23. Saying “no” when a date/acquaintance asks you to do something you don’t want to do
- _____24. Confiding in a new friend/date and letting him or her see your softer, more sensitive side
- _____25. Being able to patiently and sensitively listen to a companion “let off steam” about outside problems she/he is having
- _____26. Being able to put begrudging (resentful) feelings aside when having a fight with a close companion
- _____27. Carrying on conversations with someone new whom you think you might like to get to know
- _____28. Turning down a request by a companion that is unreasonable
- _____29. Turning down a request by a companion that is unreasonable
- _____30. Helping a close companion get to the heart of a problem she or he is experiencing
- _____31. Having a conflict with a close companion, really listening to his or her complaints and not trying to “read” his or her mind
- _____32. Being an interesting and enjoyable person to be with when first getting to know people
- _____33. Standing up for your rights when a companion is neglecting you or being inconsiderate
- _____34. Letting a new companion get to know the “real you”
- _____35. Helping a close companion cope with family and roommate problems
- _____36. Being able to take a companion’s perspective in a fight and really understand his or her point of view
- _____37. Introducing yourself to someone you might like to get to know (or date)

- _____ 38. Telling a date/acquaintance that he or she is doing something that embarrasses you
- _____ 39. Letting down your protective “outer shell” and trusting a close companion
- _____ 40. Being a good and sensitive listener for a companion who is upset
- _____ 41. Refraining from saying things that might cause a disagreement to build into a big fight
- _____ 42. Call (on the phone) a new date/acquaintance to set up a time to get together and do something
- _____ 43. Confronting your close companion when he or she has broken a promise
- _____ 44. Telling a close companion about the things that secretly make you feel anxious or afraid
- _____ 45. Being able to say and do things to support a close companion when he or she is feeling down
- _____ 46. Being able to work through a specific problem with a companion without resorting to global accusations (“you always do that”)
- _____ 47. Presenting good first impressions to people you might like to become friends with (or date)
- _____ 48. Telling a companion that he or she has done something to hurt your feelings
- _____ 49. Telling a close companion how much you appreciate and care for him or her
- _____ 50. Being able to show genuine empathetic concern when a companion’s problem is uninteresting to you
- _____ 51. When angry with a companion, being able to accept that her or she has a valid point of view even if you don’t agree with that view
- _____ 52. Going to parties or gatherings where you don’t know people well in order to start up new relationships
- _____ 53. Telling a date/acquaintance that he or she has done something that made you angry
- _____ 54. Knowing how to move to a conversation with a date/acquaintance beyond superficial talk to really get to know each other
- _____ 55. When a close companion needs help and support, being able to give advice in ways that are well received

_____56. Not exploding at a close companion (even when it is justified) in order to avoid a damaging conflict

Personal Ideas

To follow are a series of questions that ask about your personal feelings and ideas. Please answer each item using the following scale. If you are a Penn State varsity student-athlete, please answer the last two questions. If you are not a varsity athlete, you do not need to answer the last two questions.

- 1 – Never
- 2 – Sometimes
- 3 – Often
- 4 – Very often
- 5 – Always

_____57. I feel I need to protect my feelings from people I do not know well

_____58. I wish I had more time to myself

_____59. I feel I need to question the intentions of people I do not know well

_____60. I wish I had more time to talk to someone I am interested in getting to know

_____61. I feel I need to protect myself from being taken advantage of by others

_____62. As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy

Open-ended Textbox Question

63. As a student-athlete, what challenges do you face when you begin a romantic relationship?

Appendix F

Web-based Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Welcome! To follow is information about how you can give your consent to participate in this study.

Title of Project: Self-Perceived Communication and Interpersonal Competence in College Student-Athletes

Principal Investigator: Susan Sherburne, 301 Morgan Center, University Park, PA 16802, src122@psu.edu, 814-865-0407

Advisor: Michelle Miller-Day, 234 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802, mam32@psu.edu, 814-865-3826

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to examine the self-perceived communication and interpersonal competence of college student-athletes.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to complete a web-based survey. The survey will center on your ideas as they relate to you as a Penn State student or student-athlete. The survey will not be linked to you in any way and will not include your name.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are minimal to no risks associated with your participation in this study.
4. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include a better understanding of how you perceive your communication skills.
5. **Duration/Time:** Your participation in this study will consist of the completion of a one-time web-based survey that will take approximately 15 minutes.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties. The Office of Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Penn State University's Social Science Institutional Review Board and Penn State University's Office for Research Protections may review records related to this project. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.
7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Sue Sherburne at (814) 865-0407 or Dr. Michelle Miller-Day at (814) 865-3826 with questions. You can also call this number if you have concerns about this research or if you feel that you have been harmed by this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have concerns or general questions about the research, contact Penn State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additionally, if you would like to further discuss your relationship experiences, you can contact Counseling and Psychological Services at (814) 863-0395.
8. **Payment for participation:** Student-athletes who participate will not receive payment for participation. CAS 100A students will receive research participation credit as discussed in the CAS 100A syllabus. If you are a CAS 100A student and do not wish to participate in this research, you may earn equivalent participation credit by watching a particular speech and providing a written critique (details provided on your personalized research participation

website).

9. Voluntary Participation: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study.

If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please select "I consent" below. If you do not agree to participate in this study, please select "I do not consent" below.

Please print this form to keep for your records.

This informed consent form (IRB# 25784, Doc.#1) was reviewed and approved by the Office for Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board at the Pennsylvania State University on June 19, 2007. It will expire on June 12, 2008. DWM

Appendix G

Student-Athletes and Relational Development Scale

To follow are a series of questions that ask about your personal feelings and ideas. Please answer each item using the following scale. If you are a Penn State varsity student-athlete, please answer the last two questions. If you are not a varsity athlete, you do not need to answer the last two questions.

- 1– Never
- 2 – Sometimes
- 3 – Often
- 4 – Very often
- 5 – Always

_____ 1. I feel I need to protect my feelings from people I do not know well

_____ 2. I wish I had more time to myself

_____ 3. I feel I need to question the intentions of people I do not know well

_____ 4. I wish I had more time to talk to someone I am interested in getting to know

_____ 5. I feel I need to protect myself from being taken advantage of by others

_____ 6. As a student-athlete, I feel my athletic performance is impacted if my personal life is unhappy

Appendix H

Focus Group Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our focus group discussion. I have a few questions I would like to ask that will assess your ideas about how student-athletes communicate. I encourage you to not only answer the questions, but to share stories that will illustrate your point. Please feel free to share examples from your own life or from that of your teammates or friends. I ask, however, that you do not share the identities of your teammates/friends.

Also, before you speak, please say the number I assigned you when you signed your consent form.

In what ways does being a student-athlete affect how you meet people?

What are some of the ways that being a student-athlete affects how you communicate...

In a public setting (around fans)

In a social setting

What do you think are the biggest challenges for a student-athlete who is trying to begin a romantic relationship?

What makes these factors so challenging?

Student-athletes in our survey indicated that they socialize differently than general students.

Why do you think that is?

What are the factors that contribute to these differences?

Do student-athletes begin romantic relationships differently than general students? Why or why not?

What are some of the differences?

What are the factors that contribute to this difference?

Student-athletes in our survey indicated that romantic relationships can sometimes affect athletic performance. I'm interested in learning more about this. Why do you think that is?

In what ways might romantic relationships affect athletic performance?

In what ways might partnerships affect athletic performance?

What about when you fight?

When the relationship fails and there is a break-up?

Appendix I

Focus Group Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

ORP USE ONLY: IRB#25784 Doc #2 The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Self-Perceived Communication and Interpersonal Competence in College Student-Athletes

Principal Investigator: Susan Sherburne, Graduate Student
301 Bank of America Career Services Center,
University Park, PA 16802
EMAIL: src122@psu.edu
TELEPHONE: 814-865-0407

Advisor: Michelle Miller-Day
234 Sparks Building,
University Park, PA 16802
EMAIL: mam32@psu.edu
TELEPHONE: 814-865-3826

9. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to examine the self-perceived communication and interpersonal competence of college student-athletes.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in a focus group with other student-athletes to answer questions regarding your attitudes and experiences about how you communicate. The questions will center on your ideas and experiences as they relate to you as a Penn State student-athlete. Your answers will only be linked to you by your gender and assigned letter, and will not include your name.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are minimal to no risks associated with your participation in this focus group.
4. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include a better understanding of how you perceive your communication skills. The benefits to society include a more accurate understanding of the challenges general students and student-athletes experience in developing communication and interpersonal competence.
5. **Duration/Time:** Your participation in this study will consist of the completion of a one-time focus group discussion that will take approximately 30 minutes.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential, and your name will not be used in reports or publications. If you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not tell others what individual participants said. Tapes from the focus group will be stored and secured at 301 Morgan Center in a locked file

cabinet, and only the principal investigator will have access to them. In three years, the cassette tape(s) will be crushed, the tape(s) shredded and the data will be deleted from the computer hard drive. The Office of Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Penn State University's Social Science Institutional Review Board, and Penn State University's Office of Research Protections may review records related to this project. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Sue Sherburne at (814) 865-0407 or Dr. Michelle Miller-Day at (814) 865-3826 with questions. You can also call this number if you have concerns about this research or if you feel you have been harmed by this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have concerns or general questions about the research, contact Penn State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additionally, if you would like to further discuss your relationship experiences, you can contact Counseling and Psychological Services at (814) 863-0395.
8. **Payment for participation:** Participants will not receive payment for participation in this study.
9. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Consent

Date

VITA
Susan R. Cacciotti-Sherburne

Education

Ph. D. in Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, May 2009
M. S. in Health Education, The Pennsylvania State University, May 1995
B. A. in Sociology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, August 1990

Professional Experience

Academic/Athletic Counselor March 2003-Present
Women's Basketball Team
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

Assistant Director June 2000-Present
Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

Instructor, BioBehavioral Health Department August 1997-Present
The College of Health and Human Development
Coordinator, Nagle CHAMPS/Life Skills Program
Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

Advisor March 1998-Present
Penn State Lionettes Dance Team
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

Teaching Experience

CAS 100A	Effective Speech
Counselor Education 301/496	Enhancing Leadership Among Student Advocates
Biobehavioral Health 048	Contemporary Health Issues and Student-Athletes
Health Education 297A	Coping With College
Health Education 046	Introduction to Human Sexuality
Health Education 045	Alcohol Awareness

Selected Presentations

“Effective Study Skills for First Year Students”, Morgan Center Summer Bridge Program
Pennsylvania State University, July 2008
“Recipe for Success: Developing a Comprehensive Life Skills Program”, NCAA Life Skills Conference
Savannah, Georgia, February 2007
“Maintaining Healthy Relationships”, Penn State Football Pre-Season Camp
Pennsylvania State University, August 2000-2006
“Developing a Comprehensive Life Skills Program”, Division 1A Athletic Director's Association
Dallas, Texas, September 2000