STEREOTYPES OF A BLACK MALE (STUDENT-ATHLETE) MISUNDERSTOOD, AND IT’S STILL ALL GOOD: THE LIFE OF ERIC CHRISTOPHER GARRETT

BY

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DISSEYIATION

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ABSTRACT

Overemphasis on graduation rates has relegated Black male student-athletes to their academic identity at the expense of their athletic identity. Intentionally or otherwise, the limited attention paid to Black male student-athlete’s salient identities in sport studies research has contributed to constraints placed on their goal of achieving a professional career and/or college degree (Bimper, 2014). The academic reform movements led by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been particularly complicit in institutionalizing restrictions on the identity of Black male student-athletes. The NCAA utilizes sport studies research to establish initial eligibility requirements, benefits restrictions, and practice and performance standards (Harrison & Boyd, 2007). These constraints have disproportionately penalized Black male student-athletes by creating a binary that leverages their academic identity against their athletic identity.

This study is an extension of the sports studies research used by the NCAA, but in a different direction. It examines Black male student-athlete identity development and argues that academic and athletic identities are complex and conflicting, which requires Black male student-athletes to negotiate and renegotiate their identities when confronted with binaries such as academic versus athletic expectations. This research conducts an instrumental case study. It uses one person’s circumstances to evaluate conflicting complexities associated with the wants of organizational and institutional units such as the NCAA and universities, to the wants of the student-athlete. The life experiences of the participant in this research inform us that intercollegiate athletics has a positive impact on academic success. It details how an athletic identity is salient, and how the Black male student-athlete is constantly negotiating the importance of earning both a college degree and being excellent in his sport.
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And to all my sistah scholars who endured this process or are in the midst of the struggle, FIGHT ON BLACK GIRL SCHOLARS, FIGHT ON!
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study provides insights into the experiences of a Division I former Black male student-athlete. Focusing on identity, this research considers the lived experiences of one student-athlete. Specifically the dissertation uses the former students’ narrative to highlight struggles, negotiations, interventions, and achievements not typically provided in related analysis.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reports that 16,146 Black male student-athletes participated in NCAA Division I revenue-generating sports (namely, football and basketball) during the 2014-2015 school year (NCAA, 2016). Black male student-athletes in that same year comprised 47% and 58% of football and basketball programs, respectively. Although the participation rates of Black male student-athletes alone are not ordinarily the concern of sport research, participation does have a direct link to graduation rates, which is a routinely examined indicator of student success within contemporary sport studies (Adler & Adler, 1989; Corbett, 2013; Harrison & Boyd, 2007; Lapchick, 1984, 2006, 2011; Martin, Gragg, & Kramer, 2013; Messer, 2006; Sailes, 1998). The correlation between participation and graduation rates gravely concerns the sport studies researchers who study the experiences of Black male student-athletes and academic institutions that are ultimately responsible for ensuring that all students earn a college degree. According to Harper (2016), in men’s basketball and football, Northwestern University was the only NCAA member institution that graduated Black male student-athletes at the same rate as all undergraduate students. This problem of sport participation has persisted for athletic programs, academic institutions, and Black male student-athletes beginning with intercollegiate athletic sports integration in the early 1950s (Lapchick, 2014).
While focusing on graduation rates is important, it fails to recognize the importance of exploring Black male student-athletes’ capacity to be simultaneously competitive collegiate athletes and academically successful students (Cooper, 2012). In addition to discussing those who graduate as an anomaly, the linguistic representation of Black male student-athletes primarily through the lens of underachievement rather than achievement also limits the experiences of these student-athletes. Bimper, Harrison, and Clark’s (2012) study, “Diamonds in the Rough” is a noteworthy exploration of the lives of seven academically and athletically successful Black male student-athletes of a Division I revenue-generating team. Characterizing these athletes as “stories of achievement”, the authors measure success using “academic standing for the assessment of academic performance”, which are useful toward reconstructing the lives of Black male participants of a Division I revenue-generating team (p.126). The premise of Bimper, Harrison, and Clark’s study was the need to change the focus from underperformance to the achievement of Black male student-athletes. The most compelling result, relevant to the present study, is their recognition of the complexities associated with Black males negotiating their roles as student-athletes. Ultimately, they conclude that identity management had a direct relationship with academic achievement.

Similarly, Bimper’s (2014) study builds upon the findings of his previous study by further examining the correlation between athletic and racial identities and the role they play on academic performance. Using the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS), the empirical results revealed a significant correlation between high athletic identity and low academic performance, but no other significant connection to racial identities or high academic performance variables (Bimper, 2014). Therefore, Bimper (2014) suggests that future research include additional
variables, qualitative assessment, and be longitudinal to gather more information about how Black male student-athletes’ develop their identities.

Building on the conclusion that identity development matters, this research seeks to illustrate how the identities of Black male student-athletes are impacted before, during, and after sports participation. It specifically seeks to examine the experiences of a Black male student-athlete using a qualitative methodological approach.

**Statement of the Problem**

This dissertation explores the link between identity negotiation, academic performance, and how lived experiences may powerfully contextualize a previously unexplored dimension of identity in black male student-athletes.

Researchers interested in examining Black male student-athletes have yet to develop a theory that situates the complexities of their identities (Bimper, Harrison & Clark, 2012). The “students first” mantra is emphasized in the NCAA core purpose, which states that the NCAA will “integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount” (NCAA Strategic Plan, 2004). Sport studies researchers interested in examining black male student-athlete experiences have used the NCAA’s mantra as the primary framework in studying them. However, some researchers argue that the use of this NCAA mantra as the foundation for scholarship and research related to the academic identity of Black male student-athletes is problematic (Hoberman 1997; Lauer, 2004). For instance, while many athletic programs and their academic institutions have been assessed for their role in low graduation rates, heavy discourse also included questions around personal responsibility (Adler & Adler, 1991; Edwards, 1980, 2000). For example, Cole and Andrews (2001) responded to the highly controversial 1997 book titled *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sports has Damaged Black*
*America and Preserved the Myth of Race*, to disrupt what they believed to be a racist characterization by John Hoberman of the experiences of black youth and their parents. Several scholars joined in the conversation around how the black male athlete experiences are represented in sport studies research (Curtis, 1998). The general concern expressed by sport studies scholars was the feeling that Hoberman intentionally ignoring the socio-cultural factors that influenced life choices for black people.

The “dumb-jock” stereotype, although originally applied to athletes from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, has, over time, become more synonymous with Black male student-athletes. In general, Black males on revenue-generating Division I football and basketball teams’ graduation rates fell more than 30-40% below their White male counterparts (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Regular scandals like the 2010 academic debacle at the University of North Carolina (UNC) reignite this stereotype. The scandal allegedly involves student-athletes taking “paper classes” (i.e., classes they did not attend but for which they still received a grade) in collusion with the African American Studies department, coaches, and academic advisors. The discussion resurrected the notion that some black male student-athletes are academic cheaters (Smith & Willingham, 2015). This ongoing investigation thus far has uncovered that the student-athletes were registered for independent study courses (Thomason, 2016). Unfortunately, according to the Wainstein Report (2014), attempts have been made to identify the work done but found no assigned faculty or record of the student’s research. The UNC case, and others, perpetuate the dumb jock stereotype by presuming student-athletes cannot meet the academic rigors of college. Sometimes, this is tolerated because the NCAA needs the most athletically gifted students to play regardless of their academic success, essentially exploiting them.
This presumption, and responses to challenge or address it, has had a long history, however. For example, in order to confront the accusation that the NCAA is exploiting academically underachieving Black males’ athleticism, the association introduced the academic reform movement that began with significant academic rule changes in the late 1980s (Sailes, 1998). These controversial rule changes (Propositions 48 and 16, which increased American College Testing (ACT) scores, core curriculum requirements, and grade point averages) were met with significant protests because of the disparate impact it had on Black male student-athletes and historically Black colleges and universities (Chubb, 1989; Francisco, 2001; Amato, Gandar, Tucker & Zuber, 2001). Essentially, the academic reform movement was created to combat an overall problem of diminished significance placed on academic performance as television and merchandising contracts changed the economic landscape of college athletics. However, the policies established exposed a significant gap in the academic preparation and performance of Black male student-athletes and their White male counterparts (Corbett, 2013; Rhoden, 2006; Sailes, 2010). Therefore, academic reform became the measure to address low graduation rates of Black male student-athletes because their overrepresentation on revenue-generating teams made them a target for exploitation, especially on championship teams (Hawkins, 2010).

A wealth of sport studies literature exists that examines the historical, racialized, academic, and commercialized experiences of Black male student-athletes (Brooks & Althouse et al., 1993, 1996, 2007, 2013; Sailes et al., 2013). However, Black male student-athlete identity is a relatively new source of inquiry in sport studies (Bimper, 2014; Harrison & Harrison, 2001). For instance, few qualitative studies exist which examine the reasons Black males pursue a professional athletic career despite the overwhelming odds that their goal will not be realized
(Harris, 2000). The goal of achieving a professional football or basketball career is particularly intriguing when considering that only approximately 1% of student-athletes are awarded contracts to play in the National Football League (NFL) or National Basketball Association (NBA). In fact, the NCAA has used quantitative studies that reveal professional career attainment probabilities to stress the importance of academic achievement beyond athletic success (Stark, 2015). Unfortunately, heightened awareness around the improbability of achieving a professional career has not yielded a significant increase in graduation rates (Lapchick, 2014). This is particularly true for Black male student-athletes who play for Division I revenue-generating programs, and the improbability of a professional athletic career is even more startling when considering teams that participate in football bowl games and basketball championships (Lapchick, 2015). The statistical realities of professional sport participation for Black male student-athletes have uncovered a need to examine why they are betting against the odds. This study takes a socio-cultural approach toward understanding the experiences of navigating and negotiating the intersectionality of being Black, male, athlete, and student.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study tells the story of Eric Christopher Garrett, a former student-athlete at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in order to explore whether there is a counter narrative to the overemphasis that has been placed on Black male student-athletes’ academic identities. Utilizing an instrumental case study approach, the goal of this study is to explore the multifaceted identities that shape the complexities of Black male student-athletes’ lived experiences by systematically examining one athlete’s experience and negotiation of these identities in thick-descriptive detail.
The student-athletic achievement of Black males is usually told through a historical lens (Hartmann, 2003). While historical studies have provided great insight into how Black male student-athletes endured segregation and integration, sport studies research has yet to examine more recent historical experiences. It is difficult to access Black male student-athlete voices who are still participating on NCAA Division I revenue-generating teams, because they fear retaliation (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010). This retaliation is usually meted out by reducing playing time or revoking a scholarship altogether. For example, when Maurice Clarrett expressed a desire to be paid while participating on the Ohio State football team, he was vilified for speaking out. Subsequently, he attempted to sue the NCAA and NFL to allow him to enter the draft early (Rittenburg, 2015). Unfortunately, Clarrett did not win the lawsuit, was removed from the team, and unfortunately traveled down a destructive road after leaving the Ohio State football team. Eric Christopher Garrett, who is only fifteen years removed from his intercollegiate athletic eligibility, was purposefully selected for his ability to offer a narrative account of his student-athletic experiences without the fear of retaliation.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of interpreting the narrative of a former Black male student-athlete who participated on a Division I revenue-generating football team is largely due to the absence of Black male student-athletes’ voices from sport studies research. This research values the Black male student-athlete’s voice post-intercollegiate participation because it allows him to freely reflect upon his experiences without fear of repercussion (Singer, 2005). The focus on post-intercollegiate participation is also significant because it offers insight into how athlete identities can be negotiated once intercollegiate athletic play concludes and which identities may be salient at different points in life.
Additionally, this study brings attention to the need for Black male student-athletes who have completed their intercollegiate athletic career to come out of the shadows (Wiggins, 2008). There is a great deal of shame that comes along with not achieving a professional athletic career. For instance, earning a college degree and/or achieving a professional career are the only two options when considering whether or not their intercollegiate athletic participation yielded a return on the amount of time they invested playing sports (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, the overemphasis on statistics surrounding those who do not graduate has made former Black male student-athletes who do graduate virtually invisible (Donnor, 2005; Lapchick, 2010, 2011). This study considers one former Black male student-athlete who was able to negotiate desiring a professional athletic career and simultaneously earning a college degree. In this research, Eric Christopher Garrett’s narrative is valuable because it will provide new insight into how former Black male student-athletes negotiate identities. As a former Black male student-athlete who earned a degree, he is positioned in a more comfortable space to advocate for others who did as well, and potentially those who did not.

This research contributes to the emerging literature that has begun to develop Black male student-athlete identity theory (Harrison, 2002). Bimper, Harrison and Clark’s (2012) study demonstrates that Black male student-athletes are changing their mindset about earning a college degree while simultaneously aspiring to achieve a professional athletic career. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to continue to conduct research with former Black male student-athletes who can offer insight into contemporary experiences and assess the salient identities aligned with the mindset that professional career and college degree aspirations are not mutually exclusive.
Introducing the Research Questions

The following research questions guide this individual instrumental case study. First, what identities impacted Black male student-athletes’ ability to earn a college degree while pursuing a professional football career? Second, how do former Black male student-athletes describe the salience of their multiple identities before, during, and after being a student-athlete? Finally, how did Black male student-athletes negotiate their multiple identities? This study focuses on the life experiences of former Division I football player Eric Christopher Garrett. Eric’s life is the case being studied to examine the research questions.

Preview of Conceptual Framework

There exists no systematic black male student-athlete identity theory and this present study does not seek to address this intellectual void. However, this study seeks to contribute to the eventual development of a black male student-athlete identity framework by highlighting the utility of existing frameworks such as stereotype threat, black masculinity paradigm, and identity negotiation. This conceptual framework, which guides my interpretation of Eric Christopher Garrett’s life experiences, offers the promise of creating a more permanent and systematic black male student-athlete identity theory.

Stereotype Threat

Pennington et. al. (2016) spanned over two decades of research related to the concept of stereotype threat and reveals the harmful effects stereotyping has on the experiences and outcomes of each population examined. Interestingly, very little research over the past two decades has been conducted on the impact stereotype threats play in the lives of student-athletes, particularly black male student-athletes. Some of the research available reinforces the constructed binary between academics and athletics and the tensions black male student-athletes
experience. For example, Harrison (2001) posits that the prevalence of negative and positive associations with the claim of Black male athletic superiority have specific implications on their conditions in academic settings. Other factors alongside stereotype threat (which will be discussed further in chapter 2), such as black masculinity and identity negotiation, impact the decisions and experiences of black male student-athletes and further illustrate the complexities of their identities.

**Black Masculinity Paradigm**

Staples (1982) represents a starting point for thinking about black masculinity. He argues black males have a unique experience resulting from how they are viewed, treated, and racialized in a particular way, thereby sharing their interaction with others and how they see themselves. As a result, these individuals adopt what Majors (1992) calls the “cool pose”; the disposition held by black men to validate their manhood. While important, this initial theoretical contribution does not take into account the structural and institutional influences dictating the way black male student-athletes endeavor to represent themselves. Indeed, there is a clear need to look beyond only the negative aspects of black males in terms of criminalization to a more complex, systematic view of these individuals including education, fatherhood, and other components central to their experiences. Jackson (2002) began this work by offering a more sophisticated framework suggesting certain factors affect black masculinity positionality: (1) struggle, (2) community, (3) achievement, (4) independence, and (5) recognition. This research project utilizes historical and contemporary views of black masculine to assess how Eric Christopher Garrett manifests his experiences, in particular that of a black male student-athlete.
Identity Negotiation

According to Ting-Toomey (1999) identity negotiation is the process that allows individuals to engage their understanding of themselves in relation to their environment. The relationship of identity negotiation and sport is the “student-athlete” classification. The debate over the student versus athletic identity has been central to sport studies research since the establishment of the “student-athlete” classification by Walter Byers in 1964 (Branch, 2011). As far as academic institutions are concerned, there is no choice for student-athletes; they must negotiate being a student first and athlete second in order to maintain their status at any NCAA member institution. Particularly in the case of Black male student-athletes, there is a critical conflict between academic achievement and athletic performance. Due to racial stereotyping, there is a distinct difference in expectation academically and athletically. How Black male student-athletes interact with educators versus coaches can help to explain how this conflict manifests.

All student-athletes must negotiate student and athletic identities, so what makes black male student-athletes unique in comparison to their White male counterparts? The difference is race. While White male student-athletes also struggle to balance sports and academics, the stereotypes associated with being Black, along with the low socio-economic backgrounds of most Black male student-athletes on Division I revenue-generating teams, and offer an additional set of circumstances. For this reason, a more in-depth study of the literature in Chapter 2 will guide the analysis of Eric Christopher Garrett’s narrative.
Brief Introduction of Case Study Participant

According to Stake (2000), “case researchers seek out both what is common and what is particular about the case” (p. 447). Though Stake also acknowledges that the results of a study generally present the less general insights, it is important to understand that knowing Eric’s background as each chapter progresses will help frame his life in context with the applicable theory and methodological approaches employed. Hence, I begin with some of the more “common” information about Mr. Eric Christopher Garrett.

Eric Garrett (hereafter, Eric or “EG”) was born on December 28, 1977. Until the age of four he lived in the Henry Horner Housing Projects, an impoverished public housing community on the west side of Chicago. Eric and his family moved to Bolingbrook, Illinois, a predominantly white middle-class community located forty-five minutes outside of the city of Chicago, after a shooting placed then four year-old Eric Christopher Garrett and his mother in the crossfire. EG did not begin playing organized sports until his freshman year of high school because he was locked out of youth sports due to being classified as overweight. He graduated from Bolingbrook High School in May of 1996, where he played basketball and football. His athletic play on the football field earned him a full athletic scholarship to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), a public research-intensive, land-grant university and member of the Big Ten Conference located in the micro-urban twin cities of Champaign and Urbana just under 150 miles south of Chicago. Eric graduated from UIUC with a Bachelor of Science in Speech Communication and a Master of Science in Advertising. Eric retired from sports after college. He is currently married with three children, employed as a medical supply distributor, and pursuing a Master of Business Administration.
Preview of Method

This study uses the case study approach to discover the salient identities and themes for a former Black male student-athlete (Denzin, 1989; Stake, 2005). Several interviews were conducted with the case participant in order to offer in-depth descriptions of experiences. Because one of the major assertions of this dissertation is that statistical data does not offer a full picture of the experiences of Black male student-athletes, a narrative analysis is conducted to capture the ways Eric self-constructs his identities and shares stories of how these identities were negotiated. Due to several anecdotal conversations the researcher had with Eric, which consisted of open and honest dialogue about race and sports, the researcher used a “storytelling” interview orientation to give Eric the space to shape his life story in his own way (Chase, 2011). According to Chase, the storytelling method gives the researcher the ability to interpret the narration as it constructs “meaningful selves, identities, and realities” through the narrator’s lens. The in-depth interviews produced transcripts that were analyzed for themes that were produced through the researcher and participant interactions, as well as how Eric made sense of his experiences before, during, and after high school and intercollegiate sport participation (Denzin, 2008).

Stake (1995) argues that using a single subject to study a phenomenon is appropriate when seeking an in-depth look at a problem. As discussed previously, in order to uncover how black male student-athletes negotiate multiple and conflicting identities, the researcher selected an individual whose life reflects experiences where patterns and themes can be drawn and considered along with other cases. Moreover, the interest is in the particular account of this former Black male student-athlete who participated on a Division I revenue-generating football team. However, I am primarily concerned with how Eric’s experiences offer insight toward
understanding black male student-athlete identity salience and the negotiation of other cases that have a similar background (Grandy, 2010).

**Overview of Chapters**

In chapter two, I conduct a literature review that explores identity development theories. In chapter three, I discuss my use of the instrumental case study approach. Further, I detail the methodological research procedures and processes for conducting and presenting the findings of this study. In chapter four, I present the case narrative of Eric Christopher Garrett’s life. In the chapter five, I revisit my research questions and reveal the insights gained from my in-depth interviews with Eric Christopher Garrett in order to contribute to the emerging Black male student-athlete identity theory. I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of implications.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined in chapter one, there is a problem regarding low graduation rates of Black male student-athletes. They have persisted since originally discovered in the late 1980s (American Institute for Research, 1989a & 1989b). In order to add new insight into this problem, this research project seeks to answer the following questions to the case study at hand: 1) What are the multiple identities that impact Eric’s ability to earn a college degree while desiring a professional football career; 2) How does Eric Christopher Garrett describe the salience of his multiple identities; and 3) How does Eric negotiate his multiple identities? This literature review establishes a conceptual framework for analyzing and informing the research questions discovering the dominant identities of the primary person, Eric Christopher Garrett, in this case narrative. The literature reviewed focuses on identity development theories, as well as a review of literature that currently frames black male student-athlete identities. Therefore, I first examines identity development theories as the foundational approach to discovering Black male student-athlete identities. Next, I consider current literature that suggests race, gender, academic, and athletic identities as critical roles throughout Black male student-athletes’ lives. Finally, I discuss the emerging literature on Black male student-athlete identity theoretical frameworks. This chapter seeks to understand identity development models to provide a rationale for analyzing the problem of Black male student-athletes academic achievement.

Identifying Related Literature

The difficulties of being a Black male student-athlete can be attributed to the challenges of negotiating multiple and conflicting identities (Harrison et al., 2009; Hawkins, 2010; Smith, 2009). For instance, prior sport studies research (Henry & Closson, 2012; Davis, 2008) has examined Black male student-athletes’ academic, racial, and athletic identities. Researchers
have discovered that one’s desire for a professional sports career is often in direct conflict with the process of earning a college degree (Benson, 2000). The conflict between sports and academics has persisted for over 30 years, particularly for Black male student-athletes who attend Division 1 predominantly white universities, as the benefits of sport participation, education, and career opportunities are not evidenced in graduation rates (Corbett, 2013; Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 1984, 1989, & 2005; Sailes, 1993, 2003, & 2010; Singer, 2008). Black male student-athletes’ participation in Division 1 football has increased in the past ten years from 50% to 58.7% and has remained steady in Division I basketball at 57.6% (Lapchick, 2014). However, the graduation rate for Black male student-athletes remains at 50% (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). In contrast, the graduation rate for male and female student-athletes overall is nearly 67% while it is 73% for undergraduate students overall (Hartman, 2000). Consequently, these data indicate that Black male student-athletes are overrepresented in Division 1 revenue-generating sports and underachieving in the classroom. Hence, this research considers if these statistics are indicators of how Black male student-athletes identities are competing on and off the field.

**Challenges in Identity Development**

This section reviews literature that explores identity development theories. There are three major areas of focus reviewed as they are relevant for the narrative analysis in chapter 4, including identity salience, identity negotiation, and identity frameworks.

A number of psychologists believe that identity is significant to everyday life (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 2007; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). In particular, identity is significant for three reasons. First, identity gives meaning to the spaces individuals occupy. Second, it helps individuals shape their actions. Third, identity affects how others understand societal/others
actions. Consequently, these three reasons are especially important when determining how identities develop in specific spaces. As a result, understanding the impact of meaningful spaces and individual actions will further our interpretation of the difficulties Black male student-athletes face negotiating multiple and conflicting identities.

Identity Salience

For many Black male student-athletes, attending college is a stepping-stone toward their ultimate goal of achieving a professional sport career. It is also opportunity for them to earn a college degree (Coakley, 2009). Still, meeting NCAA academic eligibility requirements take precedence over athletic participation and achievement. Therefore, despite their desire to achieve a professional sport career, Black male student-athletes, in general, learn early in life that they must seriously engage their academic identity along with their athletic identity.

The basic tenet of identity salience is self-identification (Yopky & Prentice, 2005). However, identity salience also underscores that self-identification is impacted by society. Thus, whatever role(s) a person plays in particular spaces will require them to adapt to the needs and responsibilities of that identity (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). Therefore, for Black male student-athletes, while their salient role might be athlete, in the classroom they must confront the reality that people expect them to make their academic identity a priority. According to Yopky and Prentice (2005), the low or high regard of a particular identity can impact its salience in practice and can dictate the successes and failures of the suppressed identity. In other words, Black male student-athletes, because society expects their academic identity to be salient, it can, in fact, negatively impact their academic ability.
Identity Negotiation

Ting-Toomey (1999) asserts that identity negotiation is making a conscious choice to adapt identities to specific roles. In her seminal book, *Communicating Across Cultures*, Toomey describes identity negotiation theory as a necessary process that the self must experience when confronted with cultural interactions. Because identity depends on social roles, negotiation requires an individual to first understand the roles that he/she is expected to play and then understand ways to play these roles in everyday life.

According to Ting-Toomey (1999), there are five core assumptions of the identity negotiation process: (1) identification of salient identities; (2) understanding that positive affirmations of dual identities can enhance social self-esteem; (3) manage anxieties or insecurities of dueling identities; (4) monitor the reaction of being a part of the in-group and outgroup; and (5) feeling understood, respected, and valued (Toomey, 1999; Toomey, Dorjee, & Ting-Toomey, 2013). These assumptions have further implications when combined with the racial, gendered, academic, and athletic identities that Black male student-athletes must negotiate when considering their roles in high school and college. Considering Ting-Toomey’s theory, the most important aspect of the identity negotiation process is to first and foremost identify which identity is salient in order to be able to facilitate what positive affirmations are necessary to manage the insecurities that might exist within conflicting identities. For example, if the Black male student-athlete’s athletic identity is his salient identity, it becomes necessary to affirm that a desire to achieve a professional athletic career is attainable if he possesses the capacity to manage the challenges with being a student as well.

Another way to consider identity negotiation for Black male student-athletes is code-switching. As described by Hill (2009), code-switching is generally a description of African-
Americans who change their language between Standard English to urban vernacular in different cultural settings. It can be applied here because Black male student-athletes are, in fact, switching between their athletic and academic identities because of the stereotypes associated with being a member of an athletic team. For Black male student-athletes who attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), this is particularly challenging to negotiate because it is difficult to blend when you are faced with multiple stereotypic assumptions based on race, gender, and athletic identities.

Critical to the discussion of identity negotiation is the process of behavioral confirmation and self-verification. Swann (2008) asserts that these two components of the identity negotiation process is rooted in the sociologically framed interaction approach. The emphasis on these aspects of the negotiation process are the ways in which environmental and situational factors influence behavior; one of which is stereotype threat. For example, when people have preconceived notions of how an individual should behave in particular settings, the individual might fulfill those behaviors not realizing they are enacting a stereotype. Additionally, Swann et. al (1981) were particularly interested in how individuals sustain their own identity in light of or despite the challenges they face with meeting the expectations of others. Behavioral confirmation and self-verification are applicable to the Black male student-athlete experience because they are key aspects of the identity negotiation process.

Racial Identity Theory

Cross’ (1991) theory of nigrescence considers the unique history of racial formation for Blacks in America. The nigrescence theory is particularly interested in the changes that Black Americans experience with identity development. The theory describes “stages” in which Black racial identity is developed—pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and
internalization-commitment—Cross acknowledges that Black Americans may not move through these stages at the same rate as whites and some get “stuck” depending on their socialization (Henry & Closson, 2012). Recently, identity development theorists Adler, Murray, Tompkins, and others have advocated for Cross’ nuanced approached to understanding identity development by studying lives (McLean & Syed, 2015).

A brief review of Cross’ theory of nigrescence is useful to understand, indicate that whiteness is dominant in American culture. Moreover, the theory of nigrescence acknowledges that Black American’s worldview is centered on Eurocentric beliefs (Cross, 1991). Thus, the pre-encounter stage situates Black identity development by adapting to anti-Black worldviews. However, in American culture where Whiteness is considered superior over Blackness, the second stage of encounter is inevitable where a Black person begins to question his/her own assimilation to whiteness. The third stage of immersion-emersion is the reaction to a Black person experiencing racism. When a Black person is in the immersion phase, an individual becomes anti-white and fully commits to Black culture (Cross, 1991). After immersion-emersion, internalization is the stage through which an individual begins to analyze their experiences as a Black person in America. Many people do not reach this stage, but the internalization phase allows Black individuals the space to feel secure in themselves and their circumstances. According to Cross’s (1991) original model of nigrescence, Black individuals who have fully enveloped themselves in their Blackness have developed a positive feeling about themselves.

Because Cross’s original model of nigrescence was untested, it has evolved over time. Several scholars found that testing Cross’ theory created several limitations (Bagley & Copeland, 1994; Carter & Helms, 1988; Hall et al., 1972; Helms, 1990; Parham & Helms, 1981). For
example, it was challenging to get a sample size large and diverse enough to determine the consistency of stage progression. Cross’s (1991) revised model acknowledges that the nigrescence theory is more useful when considering how Black individuals develop. This change is critical because it specifically considers that in order to experience the second stage, members of a specific group are more likely to encounter incidents of racism that will trigger the progression. In the final revision of the theory of nigrescence, Cross asserts that racial identity development is more likely to form in clusters rather than stages. He identities these clusters as pre-encounter assimilation, pre-encounter miseducation, and pre-encounter self-hatred (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

**Black Masculine Identities Paradigm**

Staples (1982) argued that Black males were “the least understood and studied of all sex-race groups in the United States” (p. 2). His work, arguably, led to a wave of new scholarship on Black masculinity. For instance, the *Journal of African American Men* was founded by Richard Majors in 2000, and seminal books like bell hooks’ (2004) *We Real Cool*, and Haki Madhubuti’s (1990) *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous* have all contributed to combating American society’s unconscious desire to ignore the crisis facing Black men in America. While the empirical investigation of Black men in America has exposed the statistically, psychologically, and socially, other problems still exist and are arguably getting worse (Hooks, 2004; Majors, 1999; Cuyjet, 2006; Edwards, 1973; Staples 1982).

Research on Black masculinity has evolved, offering a more nuanced and intersectional perspectives on the experiences of Black males (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mutua, 2006; Neal, 2015). Black masculinity studies began with the “cool pose” theoretical application which describes a variety of attitudes and actions that serve the Black man’s as mechanisms for
survival, defense, and social competence (p. 785). Cool pose has been adopted by many sport studies scholars as well (Franklin, 1994; White & Cones, 1999; Cuyjet, 2006; Hawkins, 2001; Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Langley, 1994, Coakley, 2004). Majors’ cool pose ideology asserts that this method of maintaining control in a culture that has provided few progressive avenues for Black men is the most constant in their ability to cope with institutional establishments. The internal idealization of what is “cool” has palpable implications on the methods Black men use in their interactions with their peers, families, employers, teachers, and any other person they encounter. In an attempt to promote the condition of the Black man in society, the fight to validate his manhood becomes the focal point of how “cool” is manifested to obtain respect and power (Majors, 1994). Cool pose then translates to money and power. hooks considers these principles as she addresses how “cool” becomes visible in a Black man’s pursuit to fulfill the notion of “patriarchal masculinity” as established by mainstream society. hooks emphasizes this point by definition: “patriarchal socialization says you are responsible if you get a job, bring your wages home, and provide for your family’s material well-being” (85). White and Cones (1999) articulate this method through which Black men’s “personality or social traits are adopted in three clusters: the traditional Euro-American, those related to the African-American heritage, and those from the renegade street culture” (132).

**Athletic Identity Theory**

The athletic identity for someone who desires to participate in sports must have the capacity to adapt to the cultural norms and expectations associated with physical and performance outcomes (Coakley, 2009). Athletic identity is generally considered a favorable role because it is considered to offer participants a chance to develop healthy lifestyles and adapt to social environments of which they may not normally associate with (Delaney & Madigan,
Because sports is considered to permeate every aspect of society, the athletic identity must first and foremost adhere to the regulations of athletic institutions. However, a person’s individual development is impacted by an ability to respond to the transitions that occur over the course of one’s athletic career (Lewis, 1993). This transition is particularly critical to an athlete’s quality of performance and how others view the athletic qualities he/she possesses.

The desire to explore Black male student-athlete identity may be driven by more than twenty years of sport studies research that has uncovered significant aspects of Black male student-athletes’ experiences. More specifically, Black males’ sports difficulties are mired within the history of slavery and segregation in America, discrimination, and exploitation (Brooks & Althouse, et al., 1993 & 2013). Consequently, this research project asserts that “the dumb jock”, along with criminalized, and commoditized stereotypes often dominate Black male student-athletes’ narratives and influence their identity formation. Hodges, Burden, Robinson, and Bennett (2008) argue that stereotyping of Black male student-athletes hinders their capacity for social mobility. Specifically, the ways in which Black male student-athletes are held accountable for their academic and athletic successes and failures are reflective of the stereotypic notions in academic and athletic spaces. Therefore, examining stereotypes and commodification can provide a framework for examining the experiences of Black male student-athletes.

“Dumb Jock” Stereotype

Focusing on stereotypes helps to understand the factors that might influence Black male student-athletes’ identity salience and negotiation. According to a study conducted by Harrison et al. (2009) on stereotype salience with academic performance of male and female college athletes, identities conflict when groups are stigmatized and can cause a salient identity to be suppressed if viewed negatively. Results from their study suggest that student-athletes can
perform poorly because of negative academic stereotypes associated with their academic abilities. In short, Harrison et al. found that stereotypes might cause college athletes to hide their athletic identity in the classroom because they believe it might cause people to doubt their academic ability. However, Harrison et al. acknowledge that a limitation of the study was that they did not examine racial or ethnic differences. This study focuses on those racial/ethnic difference in the multiple identities of Black male student-athletes.

Black male student-athletes are often labeled dumb jocks because of the significant gap in graduation rates from their White male counterparts. Arguably, the dumb jock stereotype began in the late 1980s when the Center for the Study of Athletics revealed, “26 of the 64 teams examined graduated fewer than 35 percent of their Black male players” (p. 15). Since the late 1980s, academic achievement has improved by 20% for Black male student-athletes (Lapchick, 2014). However, the dumb jock label continues to make Black male student-athletes susceptible to the perception that they are academically inferior (Feltz, Schneider, Hwang, & Skogsberg, 2013).

Drawing from the quantitative studies that focus on Black male student-athlete experiences, there is no shortage of references to the fact that Black males make up over half of Division-1 football and men’s basketball programs (Brooks & Althouse, et al., 2007; Coakley, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Lapchick et al., 2009; Leonard & King, 2011; Rhoden, 2006; Smith, 2009). Additionally, there is no shortage of statistical data to support the low academic achievement of Black male student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1989; Edwards, 2000; Harrison & Boyd, 2007; Hoberman, 1997; Lapchick, 1984; Messner, 2006; Powell, 2003; Sailes, 1993; Sperber, 2000). Sport studies researchers’ overemphasis on the academic identity has consciously or unconsciously made this stereotype exclusive and a central concern for the Black
males who participate in sports. Ultimately, the question persists: How they negotiate their athletic and academic identities to earn a college degree and a career in professional sports?

Critical to the dumb jock stereotype is the impact sport studies research has had on reinforcing the Black male student-athlete academic inferiority narrative. For instance, while sport studies research showed that race and racism had uniquely encroached upon Black males who participate in sports, reporting the unfavorable graduation rates may have inadvertently perpetuated the dumb jock image. More specifically, Richard Lapchick has dedicated his entire academic career toward exposing the disparate impact of the dumb jock narrative among Black male student-athletes, but overtime realized that the statistics alone were not telling the complete story of Black male student-athletes’ academic underachievement (Lapchick, 1989). Lapchick’s research discovered that the debate over pay for play, initial eligibility, and intercollegiate academic standards were also responsible for the dumb jock stereotype.

In this article, Lapchick asserts that Black male student-athletes’ academic underachievement begins in high school because of low academic standards, therefore offering additional factors that contribute to low academic achievement of Black males who participate in sports. Despite Lapchick’s understanding of the other factors that contribute to low academic achievement of Black male student-athletes, the dumb jock stereotype has persisted because of a lack of focus on multiple identity formation. Hence, statistics continue to dictate the expectations of teachers, professors, coaches, and even the players themselves (Feltz, Schneider, Hwang, & Skogsberg, 2013).

According to Harrison (2001), the cognitive adaptation of stereotypes creates behaviors that result in Black male student-athletes failing to meet their academic expectations. Because of the stereotypical expectation of academic failure among Black male student-athletes, when they
are academically successful it is perceived as the exception and not the rule. For example, Myron Rolle testified before the United States Congress and shared his experience as a former Black male student-athlete. In his introductory statement, he shared:

But I will say that my story is quite rare and unique, and some people might call it an anomaly. Because outside of Senator Cory Booker, the last major Division 1 football player to earn a Rhodes scholarship was a guy named Pat Hayden, and that was in the 1970s and he played at USC, and played for the Los Angeles Rams as well as a quarterback. There are very few student athletes who I have come in contact with, that have had the same infrastructure as I have had, the same family support, had the foresights, not come from a broken school system in high school, not come from a broken family, were able to engage in their college experience and maximize their time. Many more of my teammates and friends, and fellow student-athletes, struggled in the college environment. They struggled mightily. Struggled economically, because now with the scholarship stipend that they received they became, believe it or not, the main breadwinners for their families and would have to send some of their scholarship money home to take care of their immediate and extended family. They also struggled academically as well. A lot of them would go through this academic machinery in their colleges and be spit out at the end of that machine, left torn, worn, and asking questions, and really no direction or guidance of where they should go. No purpose, no idea of their trajectory and sometimes left with a degree in hand that didn’t behoove any of their future interests. (CSPAN, 2014)
The significance of Myron Rolle’s testimony to the United States Congress is that it provided further evidence that Black male student-athletes have distinct academic experiences, which has implications on their identity (Benson, 2000; Braddock, 1991; Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Harris, 1991; Hawkins, 1999; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010; Sailes, 1998; Siegel, 1994). Myron Rolle’s story challenges researchers interested in unpacking the dumb jock stereotype. The complexities he shares in his testimony are similar to many Black male student-athletes’ experiences. In particular, the purpose of Rolle’s testimony was to examine whether or not student-athletes should be paid to play. Which leads this discussion into the next layer of Black male student-athlete stereotyping that considers how being stereotyped and considered a commodity influences identities.

**Stereotype Threat**

While understudied, Black male student-athletes offer a unique opportunity to further interrogate the concept stereotype threat. As it relates to the black student-athlete, Hodge et. al. (2008) contends that academic underachievement and athletic overachievement position their self-identification differently. While the primary focus of the non-student athletes is related to academic achievement and earning a college degree, the Black male student-athlete focus is dually split between athletics and academic achievement. Black male student-athletes face a dual stereotype threat: one that assumes they will underperform in the classroom at the expense of over performing in their sport. The problem with this dual and stereotyped identity is the assumption of athletic success is a priority over academic achievement (Stone, Harrison, & Mottely, 2011). Questions researchers should answer in future research and what I have attempted to address in this dissertation are: What are the life outcomes of black male student-
athletes if they live up to these two stereotypes? What are their life outcomes if the inverse happens? What happens if they do better in school than in their respective sport?

**Commodification**

The Black male student-athlete stereotype as a commodity surfaced in literature at the height of the academic reform movement in the early 1990s (Sperber, 2000). The stereotype at play in the case of the commodified Black male student-athlete is the assumption that every Black male who participates in sports is valued equally. The debate over whether or not these athletes are exploited is ongoing. However, research has concentrated on those exploited through Division 1 revenue-generating sports (Sailes, 2010). Therefore, the generalization that all Black male student-athletes are not receiving a return on the amount of time they commit to sport participation is inherently false. However, the statistical reality that the majority of Division 1 revenue-generating student-athletes are Black males deserves further investigation. The overall problem and implication of this stereotype is that it could potentially influence a Black male student-athlete to put more emphasis on athletics over academics if he believes that he is considered a valuable asset to his college or university.

The notion that these athletes are assets was reinforced when Rhoden’s (2006) popular book *40 Million Dollar Slave* asserted that Black male professional athletes were not reaping the benefits of sport participation despite the high salaries. More to the point, they are valued for the money they produce for college and professional teams but are considered slaves in professional athletics because they are not receiving equal wages for their labor. The problem with Rhoden’s assertion is that it potentially creates a negative view of sport participation for Black males, which could cause unintentional suppression of Black male students’ athletic identity despite its importance in their lives (Steele & Aronson, 1995).
Prior to Rhoden’s book, the abysmal graduation rates of student-athletes and the simultaneous boom of television contracts caused scholars to begin questioning how the revenue-generating model would affect Black male student-athletes who were already struggling to balance academic and athletic expectations (Adler & Adler, 1989, 1991; Sperber, 2000). Coupled with an interrogation of the appropriation of Black culture, Black male student-athletes were considered a commodity in the sphere of college and professional sports. Thus, sport studies scholars and popular media believe that they are being exploited because this generalization leads Black male student-athletes to believe they all have equal talent and opportunities.

**NCAA Academic Arms Movement**

Before discussing the Black male athlete’s academic identity, it is important to paint a portrait of the academic statistics that have framed the debate around opportunity versus exploitation. There are three critical points to keep in mind over the course of this discussion concerning academic success for Black male student-athletes. First, the majority of issues surrounds Black male student-athletes who participate on Division 1 revenue-generating teams. Second, research does include all Division I, II, and III NCAA member institutions. However, the most startling statistical gaps emerge when considering Division 1 revenue-generating programs. Third, since the development of the Academic Progress Rating, historically Black colleges and universities have experienced the most disparate impact of sanctions imposed. Drawing out these three critical points focuses this discussion in broad context. Considering the vast amount of information available about all student-athletes and all divisions would be beyond the scope of this research project. Accordingly, this project address the case study of a Black male student-athlete who participated on a Division 1 revenue-generating team.
Understanding Black male student-athlete academic statistics is a bit more complex than general demographics. The source of student-athletic data has created controversy and debate around what is fact and what is fiction. In light of this controversy, the NCAA established a research arm of administration as well as the online data sharing system where anyone can access demographic information, graduation rates, and assessments. For the purpose of this research, I will use the NCAA online data sharing system to paint a picture of graduation rates, retention, majors, and career goals for Black male student-athletes as compared to their white male counterparts. However, to discuss the issues and controversies surrounding these numbers, I will primarily consider the work of Dr. Richard Lapchick, who has spent his entire academic career researching academic achievement and race in college athletics.

According to the NCAA.com data sharing website, there were 35,087 Black males participating on Division 1 teams during the 2013-2014 academic school year. Compared with their White male counterparts, who participated at five times (175,782) the rate of Black players, these numbers are consistent with White and Black male participation trends over the past 50 years. Participation numbers are important to begin with because it dispels the myth that Black males are overrepresented in sports (Hoberman, 1997). Across all divisions and conferences, white males exceed participation rates of all other racial groups. However, when these data are generated by division and sport, there are a few cases where Black males participate at a higher rate. The NCAA data sharing system indicates that Black male athletes double participation rates of their White male counterparts in Division 1 basketball, and Black males’ participation rates in Division 1 football was approximately 1,500 more than their White counterparts (NCAA, 2015). The problem with higher participation rates of Black males in Division 1 football and
basketball, which are considered revenue-generating sports, is that these same athletes are not earning college degrees.

The NCAA academic reform movement (ARM) has significantly influenced the discourse regarding Black males using sports as a vehicle to earn a college degree. However, the controversies surrounding the NCAA academic reform movement have contributed to the complexities associated with Black male student-athletes’ challenged with negotiating their athletic and academic achievement. Especially critical to this discussion are two NCAA rules that have disparate impacts on Black male student-athlete recruitment, retention, and professional career attainment. The first is the enactment of freshmen eligibility standards. The second is the implementation of the academic performance reporting requirement for all member institutions (Corbett, 2013; Gilde, Malec, & Sailes; 2013; Martin, Gragg, & Kramer, 2013). In addition to the rule changes, the significant increase in commercialized television contracts. As a result, Black male student-athletes’ academic identity has been impeded by the NCAA academic reform movement and the commercialization of college sports. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss how the freshmen eligibility regulations, commercialization of intercollegiate athletics, and academic performance influence Black athletes to have a better understanding of how Division 1 revenue sport participation correlates with low graduation rates.

**Initial Eligibility Regulations**

Based on the previously discussed statistical reality of Black male student-athlete graduation rates, the academic identity of Black male athletes is labeled primarily in a quantitative conceptualization. The quantitative data that has situated Black male student-athletes as under-achieving academically is abundant and accurate but does not tell the entire story (Lapchick, 2010; Hawkins, 2010). Acknowledging the statistical reality is the first step
toward uncovering the disparate impact of freshmen eligibility regulations on Black male student-athletes. Low graduation rates of Black male student-athletes have created a stereotype that has placed the majority of the responsibility on the athletes. However recently, qualitative research has revealed that exposing graduation rates was counterproductive in the fight for racial justice for Black male student-athletes. Several scholars have argued that a Black male’s ability to use sport as a vehicle to earn a college degree requires institutional responsibility (Brooks & Althouse et al., 2013). The results of qualitative research have revealed that the initial eligibility regulations had a disparate impact on Black male student-athletes and forced the NCAA to enact several rule changes before arriving at the current standards.

The Center for the Study of Athletics reports illuminated the overrepresentation in football and basketball and academic achievement of Black male student-athletes (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1989). A limitation of their report is that the Knight Commission and the Center for the Study of Athletics reports is that they only focused on the different experiences of Black football and basketball players at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) compared to those at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Consequently, the NCAA reaction to the data gathered by the Knight Commission and the Center for the Study of Athletics was to establish initial eligibility rules they believed would address the problem.

**Proposition 48 and 16**

According to Martin, Gragg, and Kramer (2013) the NCAA has acknowledged the challenges of balancing academics with athletics for all athletes since the late 1940s. The Sanity Code, established in 1947 banned scholarships to reduce recruiting violations, and the 1.6 Rule, established in 1965 established a minimum grade point average (GPA) requirement of 1.6 to achieve eligibility. These were the first rules established to address low graduation rates. The
1.6 Rule was successful and prompted the NCAA to increase the requirement to a complex weighted scale of a 2.0 GPA, high school class rank, and standardized test scores (Underwood, 1984). However, NCAA academic regulations were not in opposition until the enactment of Proposition 48 (Prop 48) in 1982 because of claims that those rules were intentionally set higher than minority students’ average high school GPA and standardized test scores (Brooks and Althouse, 1993). Under Prop 48, initial eligibility standards were no longer weighted but minimums were set at a 2.0 GPA, an SAT score of 700 or ACT score of 15, and eleven high school core courses (Dawkins, Braddock, & Celaya, 2008). The controversy prompted the NCAA to test the impact of the new rule and found that the claims of disparate impact on African-American athletes were true. Martin, Gragg, and Kramer (2013) shared the findings of the 1987 and 1989 NCAA report, which revealed “nearly 70% negatively affected by the rule were African-American” and “that applying Proposition 48 to the 16,000 Division 1 freshmen receiving scholarships between 1977 and 1982, 69% of American Americans who went on to graduate would have not received admission based on the NCAA criteria” (p. 160).

Proposition 16 (Prop 16) was designed to counter the negative effects of Prop 48. Prop 16 did not return to the weighed scale of the 2.0 Rule, but it did follow a sliding scale model designed to establish qualifying levels (Howard-Hamilton & Wyatt, 2001). The qualifiers, partial qualifiers, or non-qualifiers classifications allowed provisional admission to student-athletes based on their standardized test scores. The new rules were still detrimental to African American student-athlete enrollment. Consequently, the 1997 report by the NCAA, suggested “Division 1 Institution Request List submitted to the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse, 26.6% did not meet Proposition 16 standards in 1996 and 21% failed to qualify in 1997 – compared to 6.4% of white student-athletes in 1996 and 4.2% in 1997” (p. 161). Eric Garrett,
the primary subject of this study, would have been included as a non-qualifier if he had not found that one of his high school courses had been incorrectly submitted. Fortunately for Eric, the correction was made he was able to attend Illinois and receive his full scholarship. Despite the impact on Eric’s life, these rules set the stage for the “dumb jock” identity that Black male student-athletes were mostly forced to confront because of the based on negative statistics concerning graduation rates.

**Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)**

The academic identity has not always been an option for Blacks in America. The long-term effects of slavery, where Blacks were forbidden to educate themselves or be educated in formal school settings, followed by segregation, can no longer be ignored as a contributing factor to the lack of academic foundations in the Black family. Despite the legal integration of schools occurred in the late 1950s because of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Allen, 2005; Anderson, 1988), many Black students are still not receiving equal education as compared to White students. As a result, Black males are particularly interested in seeking athletic success as an alternative means of social mobility in America (Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002). A brief review of Black students at PWIs is useful in understanding how Black male student-athletes’ identities are impacted by the college experience.

Background information about Blacks at PWIs is necessary to this study because it offers context for the reasons academic identity may not yet have been realized as a salient identity for Black male student-athletes. This literature review would be remiss if it did not examine the external factors that impact identities for Black male student-athlete salience in order to better analyze Eric’s narrative in the later chapter. Specifically, Black student enrollment at PWIs has
increased, yet there is still a high percentage who need “financial, academic, and social support” to successfully navigate the new culture of higher education (Payne & Suddler, 2014, p. 385).

These challenges among the average Black student are exacerbated for Black male student-athletes because of the demands that come along with athletic participation and stereotype threat. The statistical realities of low graduation rates for Black male student-athletes who participate on Division 1 revenue-generating teams are evidence that there is something about the college experience that is hindering their ability to negotiate both athletics and academics. Additionally, the identity salience literature states, “the threat of confirming a negative stereotype has also been shown to influence performance in nonacademic settings” (Harrison, Strong, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009, p.80).

**Family Responsibilities**

As Myron Rolle shared in his testimony, many Black male student-athletes who participate on Division 1 revenue-generating teams come from low socio-economic backgrounds. For this reason, it is not uncommon to hear that these athletes make the choice to leave college or place more focus on developing a strong athletic career rather than earning a college degree with aspirations of collecting the high salaries in the professional leagues. The belief that Black male student-athletes feel they have to utilize their athletic prowess to get their families “out of the hood” can influence their choice to make their athletic identity salient over their academic identity.

**Emerging Black Male Student-Athlete Identity Theoretical Frameworks**

Bimper and Harrison’s work began the counter narrative of black male student-athletes by exploring identity. Using this existing literature, this research project fills the gaps that still exists around what we know about the identity development of Black male student-athletes.
Bimper (2014) considered the latest research findings on Black male student-athletes in his quantitative study designed to understand how athletic and racial identity influence academic performance. Specifically, Bimper (2014) studied Black male NCAA Division 1 football players who participated in the Football Bowl Championship Series. This sample population criterion was selected based on the high profile representation of Black male student-athlete participation. Bimper stated, “Existing athletic identity research has largely neglected a concern for the relevance of race and/or ethnicity of sampled participants beyond demographic information” (p.796). Thus, his primary goal was to utilize the nigrescence model. Developed by Cross (1995), nigrescence describes a psycho-socialization process to show how Black people critically examine the self-meaning of Blackness. For Black male student-athletes self-meaning is connected to the ways athletic and racial identity influenced academic performance. Based on a quantitative research methodological approach, Bimper’s statistical findings revealed that Black male student-athletes who participate in the Football Bowl Series had an elevated sense of athletic identity but found no correlation between athletic and racial identity with grade point averages.

Despite not finding any statistical correlation between athletic identity and grade point averages in his study, Bimper acknowledges several limitations of the study that was “the first of its kind” (p. 804). In addition to the timing of the study that could have impacted grade point averages (it was conducted “in-season”), he also found it difficult to access participants because of practice schedules, athletic commitments, and other commitments outside of football. More relevant to the focus of this study, Bimper understands that collegiate athletes come from diverse backgrounds and this statistical study did not contextualize environmental or economic factors into the experiences of the study participants.
This research project posits that intimate contact through instrumental case study research can offer a more in-depth understanding of how athletic and racial identity impact academic performance that was not considered in Bimper’s study. However, May’s book (2008) *Living Through the Hoop* and Singer’s article (2010) “A Career Trajectory” both used case narrative methodology to study the experiences of Black male student-athletes. As a part of a broader study, Singer used Cerico’s case because it was “generally representative of the conditions of other young men in the study” (p.305). In both cases, the use of case narratives provided the opportunity to engage complex experiences that contribute to the discussion regarding Black male student-athletes identity development. May and Singer both examined Black male basketball players, the current study examines the experience of a football player, however, understanding the factors that contribute to the experience was a key aspect of the studies. For example, Singer found that in Cerico’s case, social and structural forces significantly impacted the obstacles faced during his athletic career and ultimately influenced his identity development. These studies are useful for this research project because it supports the need to conduct additional narrative case studies to continue uncovering the experiences of Black male student-athletes.

Given the existing literature discussed in this review, the instrumental case study approach will offer a glimpse into the questions that still remain using the stories that are told and the positions in which Black male student-athletes when negotiating their identities. The results of this story will be key to developing future research in this area.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study and uses an instrumental case approach. Stake (1992) contends that instrumental case research can be used “if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is a secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized and its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps us pursue the external interest. The case may be seen as typical of other cases or not” (p. 445). The goal of the present study is to understand Black male student-athletes’ salient identities and how they negotiate these multiple intersecting roles. Cooper (2014) argues that qualitative studies that examine black male student-athletes allow a greater exploration of the complexities, including race, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. Open-ended questions offer this specific case to express himself in the context of “social relationships and interactions with his teammates, peers, coaches, faculty and other individuals” (p. 9). Therefore, to set the stage for this instrumental case study, the following are included: 1) research stance; 2) a description of the participant and recruitment; 3) research design and procedure; 4) data collection procedures; 5) consent process; and 6) data trustworthiness.

Why Instrumental Case Study

The instrumental case study methodology was the best fit for this research because it offers a more in-depth examination of a former Black male student-athlete’s academic and athletic aspirations. The focus on an individual case was particularly important because it allows for a life span exploration. Other methodologies were considered for this study, including conducting interviews with current Black male student-athletes that were randomly selected, focus groups that represent different sports in order to do a comparative analysis, and a survey design with Likert scaled and open-ended question design. These methods are all measureable
ways to gather data toward answering the research questions in this dissertation, but limited the researcher’s ability to identify the specific data needed. For this reason, choosing to study an individual case allows for exploratory focus of this study.

The instrumental case study approach is the strength of this research study. Using this methodology gathers in-depth rich descriptions that fills gaps not only in the literature, but in the life experiences of the participants. This technique is demonstrated well in John Edgar Wideman’s book, *Brothers and Keepers* (1984). Wideman uses the narrative technique from writing fiction to give voice and validity to his brother’s story. Instead of asking his brother specific questions of how he ended up in prison and became a person so different from everyone else in his family, Wideman allowed his brother to simply tell his story without any meaningful interjection or interruption. Wideman found that this approach allowed him to obtain an in-depth, detailed, rich narrative that he could corroborate with the other kinds of data available to him. He also found that this open-ended, uninterrupted conversational approach allowed his brother to tell his story better than Wideman could ever ask as an interviewer. I used a similar technique in data gathering and storytelling in this project. Instead of over analyzing Eric’s narrative by inserting questions during the interview or probing more deeply, I focused on the depth that the participant is willing to share and the way he develops his own story.

An interpretive reporting of these data was also employed alongside Eric’s rendering of his story. The qualitative nature of the study allows for these rich data gathered to be developed in this area that is still in its early exploratory stage (Bimper, 2014). Because so little is known about identity development of Black male student-athletes, the reason to use an exploratory methodology fits the need to fill this gap (Lucas, 1994, 2000). Additionally, the exploratory
nature of the research opens the door to considering how multiple identities function simultaneously, and how a person negotiates them.

Interpretive analysis is a key aspect of instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 2001), because it lends a source of validity to the narrative being gathered. The setting of the research being conducted was useful because it established a trust with the participant, by visiting him in his hometown. The assumption that the stories being told are truthful is aligned with the understanding that the very need to negotiate identities, for Black male student-athletes, will come into play during the interview process. In Eric’s case, our previous relationship established the initial understanding needed to enhance his comfort level. Discussed in the interview, Eric felt comfortable knowing that he was entrusting me with the retelling of his story in a way that would help develop a better understanding of his experiences.

**Design of the Study**

In alignment with the instrumental case study approach, the researcher established a chronology of the participant’s lived experiences. In essence, the participant in the research was asked to start at the beginning and retrace his life as a student-athlete up to the near present (Stake, 1989). During his years as a student-athlete, the participant in this research was not given the freedom to speak without control or fear of consequences. He was only allowed to speak to the media when arranged by the Sport Information department and was trained on what to say and how to say it. For this reason, I intentionally allowed him to speak “freely” about his life. As the researcher, I wanted him to be able to reflect on his life and demonstrate the ways that he gives meaning to his own experiences without my interference (Gagnon, 1979). I focused my questions by expanding on topics that he introduced or by asking or clarifying my questions in the hopes that it contributed to me obtaining more in-depth discussions and data.
My ultimate goal was to obtain the richest narrative in order to offer a more complete picture of his circumstances.

**Research Stance**

This research is aligned with Norman Denzin’s school of qualitative inquiry as exemplified his book, *Qualitative Manifesto* (2010). Embedded throughout the study is an examination of how race and racism impacted the experiences of Black male student-athletes. This research is also driven by social justice motives. Personal narratives are critical tools to uncover the experiences of oppressed groups and give them voice by allowing them to share their stories via open-ended frameworks (Denzin, 2010). Furthermore, I also incorporate cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s work that posits cultural constructionist perspectives. Hall’s approach emphasizes the power of institutional structures parallel to the narrative (Bicket, 2001). Accordingly, an overarching purpose of this research is to tell the story of this research’s case participant alongside the power structure of academic and athletic institutions that have rendered him silent until now.

While, to my knowledge, there are no works that specifically focus on Black male student-athlete identity, the seminal work that guides my narrative analysis is Brooks and Althouse’s *Diversity and Social Justice in College Sports* (2007). In this book, the compelling research of scholars such as David Wiggins (2007), Audwin Anderson and Donald South (2007), Billy Hawkins, Brianne Milan-Williams, and Akilah Carter (2007), C. Keith Harrison and Jean Boyd (2007), and Louis Harrison and Leonard Moore (2007), undoubtedly contributed to sport sociology including the reality of race and racism in a contemporary context. Wiggins (2007) reflects on the historical dynamics that rendered Black athletes academically and athletically isolated, requiring a conscious navigation of sports in America. Anderson and South (2007)
discuss the academic experiences of Black male student-athletes and the controversial policies that disparately impacted their access to higher education. Hawkins, Williams, and Carter (2007) offer a nuanced view of the process through which these athletes transition from athletics into retirement. Harrison and Boyd (2007) conducted a study that identified the social and institutional aspects of Black male student-athlete development and a “blueprint” for influencing success in this population of students. This study extends Harrison and Moore’s (2007) use of racial identity theory intersecting with athletic identity as a fundamental framework when examining the experiences of Black male student-athletes.

**Participation and Sampling**

I chose Eric Christopher Garrett as my case participant, in part, because he satisfied the basic participant criteria for this study: a black male student-athlete who did not achieve a professional athletic career but earned a college degree; Eric has earned three degrees. However, I also selected Eric because of a friendship that developed while we both attended college as undergraduate and graduate students. I view my connection to my participant, Eric, as a positive, given the vulnerability that surrounds sharing in-depth, personal experiences that may or may not be well received by public audiences. He entrusted me with retelling and analyzing his story within a sport studies research context of which he is unfamiliar. My connection to Eric is also viewed favorably because as a researcher, at times, it may be difficult to develop a positive rapport with your participants in a short period of time. Based on his desire to utilize his real name instead of a pseudonym, I felt Eric was extremely comfortable being the focus of this story. I view the intentional use of his real name as part of the process of establishing trustworthiness for this study. Over the years, Eric and I have discussed athletic participation, in
general, but this research project offered him an opportunity to focus in detail on his life as a former Black male student-athlete.

My initial discussion with Eric regarding participation in this research study was through phone communication. I shared with Eric the purpose of the study and why I selected him as my participant. Once he agreed to participate in the study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct in-depth interviews, which included a consent form signed by Eric and the open-ended interview questions (See Appendix A). I then met with Eric to complete consent forms and discuss the interview schedule and location with him.

**Research Procedure and Data Collection**

I conducted four, one-to-two-hour interviews at the public library where he now lives with his wife and children. I used a conversational format, where Eric was invited to share his lived experiences to the level that he was most comfortable. The structure of the interview progressed “naturally,” as each interview was ended when Eric and I both felt he had covered an important section of his life story. The significance of the progression of each interview is discussed further in Chapter 5, which unintentionally was framed before sports, during his high school and college athletic career, and after completing his collegiate athletic career to the present.

Eric gave permission during the consent process for me to use audio and video recording during each interview session. I made the choice to video record because I did not want to rely on my memory or miss notating visual expressions during the course of the interview. Observing Eric’s performance of his life story is a critical aspect of instrumental case study research, particularly when you are conducting a reflective project (Stake, 2005). My previous knowledge of Eric was that he is a very visually expressive person. I thought it would be
interesting to have the audio and video evidence that his feelings were not just speculation but could be perceived by his body language and tone when he responded to questions or told stories.

I allowed Eric to choose the interview location that was most convenient for him. He selected the public library, which is located approximately four miles from his home, because of his personal knowledge that the facility had private meeting areas that would allow for limited distractions with video or audio recording. Eric is a very active father, and at the time of the interviews, he worked from home. However, we could not conduct the interviews at his home because his children were present due to in-home daycare run by his mother, who is a licensed in-home daycare provider. Therefore, his preference was to schedule interviews during the day away from his home to ensure the interviews would be uninterrupted. The interviews were conducted over the course of one month in the summer, and I traveled to the location identified, for all three of the four interview sessions. The first session was conducted via Skype. Because Skype does not have video recording capability, I used a video camera to record the computer screen to capture the interview. For the interviews conducted at the public library, we utilized a private meeting room on the second floor of the library. The interviews were the primary source of data collected, which is later discussed in the limitations and future research section of this dissertation project. I videotaped and audiotaped all 4 interviews. Eric’s approval of the use of video and audio tape recording can be found in Appendix D., which was included with the IRB approval, Appendix A.

Data Analysis

According to Stake (1995), analysis of instrumental case study in qualitative research involves: 1) seeking to understand the issue present; 2) reflecting on my personal experiences in
relationship with Eric’s story; and 3) reconstructing the way the participant reflects on his lived experiences. The emphasis on instrumental case study data analysis is interpretation. With this in mind, my goal as the interviewer was not to have preconceived notions about Eric’s experiences as a Black male student-athlete. I did, however, use my knowledge of sport culture to ask probing questions as he shared his life story with me. I also used my knowledge of the time he and I were both students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign together in order to interpret the contextual framework surrounding his experiences as a Black male student-athlete (Stake, 2005).

I asked Eric to “start from the beginning.” This allowed the interview to follow an autobiographical format, which allowed the participant to focus on telling his lived experiences in a storytelling fashion (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because the first step of interpretation is understanding, I reviewed these data first and foremost to comprehend the information that Eric was sharing (Stake, 2010). Discovering the salient identities present in Eric’s narrative was my next step. And third, it was necessary for me to interpret how he negotiated these identities.

All four interviews were transcribed, using both the audio and video tapes for accuracy. The interviews produced 50 pages of single-spaced data to be utilized for the narrative analysis. According to Stake (1995), the constructed aspect of analysis is most critical because using this method of analysis would assist with determining which identity was salient for Eric in what specific spaces.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

This section discusses the use of qualitative methods to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the narrative collected for this study. The participant of this research project demonstrated initial trust by lending his story to the overall research being conducted in this
project. However, because the information was being gathered primarily from the participants, I used additional qualitative methods (Shenton, 2004) to strengthen the information provided by the participant. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and triangulation were all used to achieve a high level of trustworthiness for this research project. Lincoln and Guba (1989) stated that useful strategies for trustworthiness methods include:

- **Credibility**: Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking. **Transferability**: Thick description is essential for “someone interested” to transfer the original findings to another context, or individuals. **Dependability**: Attainable through credibility, the use of “overlapping methods” “stepwise replications”, and use of an “inquiry audit” or audit trail. **Confirmability**: Using strategies of triangulation and the audit trail. (p. 1213)

Based on the strategies presented by Lincoln and Guba, I will demonstrate how the methodologies used to collect data for this research project will be helpful toward analyzing the narrative gathered.

**Credibility**

Credibility was conducted to ensure that the narrative gathered revealed a high level of validity. The steps taken to establish credibility for this research project were applied using Morse (2015) suggested strategies for establishing credibility; prolonged engagement, persistent, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking, were used throughout the 4 – 1 hour interview sessions, documents and photos (Appendix B) provided by the participant, and research conducted at the Bolingbrook Library newspaper archive in Bolingbrook, Illinois. Due to the challenges with collecting personal narratives, I considered Widerman’s (1984) assertion for collecting and writing fiction. Widerman asserts that primary
sources should be considered the most credible source available. In the case of this research project, while the participant’s memory may not be completely accurate toward recounting the events, personal narratives should be considered credible basing value on how a person recalls the events of their own lives. For this reason, the findings of this research study are written primarily using quotes from the transcript. The 4 – 1 hour interviews produced 50 pages of transcripts that were used to report the case narrative in the next chapter.

Transferability

One of the strengths of this research project is the transferability of using this methodology to examine the experiences of other Black male student-athlete experiences (Shenton, 2004). Using the case study analysis and gathering narratives is aligned with qualitative methods that can be used to determine if the information and themes that developed in this research project can be used for other studies.

Triangulation

In addition to using a recording device to collect the narrative of the participant, I also used a video recorder in order to capture and later observe patterns and themes for triangulation. Triangulation of data sources is a primary method that can be used and supports the principle case study research that this phenomena being viewed in this study (Morse, 2015). While I did not interview other individuals for this case narrative, however my prior relationship with the participant as a college classmate of his allowed me to utilize my personal knowledge of his experiences, the institution, and athletics to corroborate the information the participant provided.

Member Checking

Once the data was collected from the participants, the researcher shared the transcripts and the case narrative with the participants. At this time, the participant reviewed the transcripts
and provided verification of what was recorded and transcripts that provided a written account of the participant’s recollection of his life experiences. In accordance with Lincoln and Guba (1985) contention with establishing credibility through member checking, sharing the transcripts and narrative which provided my interpretation of his story.

Themes Formation

The themes that frame the narrative in the next chapter occurred naturally through the interview process. When the researcher began to collect the participant’s life story, I asked him to begin at the beginning, and the natural progression of his life experiences exposed significant shifts before, during, and after his life experiences. Reflected in the case narrative, the participant shared that being a student-athlete was a significant aspect of his identity development, thus themes around time periods and salient identities emerged. Additionally, the participant’s lived experienced unfolded in alignment with the identity formations that are consistently prevalent for Black male student-athletes. Again, the themes that formed as the participant recollected his life experiences demonstrated the shift in identities and how they were impacted by before, during and after his student-athlete experiences. While I had prepared questions for the interviews, when the natural progression, participants willingness to be transparent, and very detail-oriented, the researcher decided that she would only ask clarifying questions rather than steer the direction that was naturally taking shape.

Limitations of the Study

The secondary source materials gathered were limited. I used newspaper articles, but most of these sources only reflect Eric’s athletic accomplishments. This popular media source offered no insight into his personal or academic experiences while in high school or college. In order to gain insight into Eric’s family influences, academic achievement, social or political ideologies,
this study was limited to the primary source accounts of the subject’s lived experiences. Moreover, I primarily utilized Eric’s narrative reflection to interpret his salient and negotiated identities. Focusing only on Eric’s life was another limitation of this research project. Eric hails from two cities—Chicago and Bolingbrook, Illinois. He played two sports in high school (football and basketball), one sport in college (football), and attended a predominantly White, NCAA Division I institution in the Midwest. Based on the typological analysis, this researcher acknowledges that black male student-athletes have varied lived experiences depending on their socio-economic background, sport, academic, and career interests. However, this choice was not designed to promote a generalization of all black male student-athlete experiences but to create a framework for future research. Chapter five offers suggestions for future research seeking to promote a more nuanced narrative approach and articulating the plight of the Black male student-athlete.
CHAPTER FOUR: ERIC CHRISTOPHER GARRETT’S CASE NARRATIVE

The extant literature on identity development was reviewed to determine frameworks applicable to Black male student-athletes’ experiences. While previous studies on Black male student-athlete identity development have generated more interest in understanding this phenomenon, many areas remain unanswered (Hall, 1997). The focus of this study is to fill the gap in the area of Black male student-athlete identity salience and negotiation. Considering themes from existing identity development models, this chapter presents the data gathered during in-depth interviews with the case participant. An instrumental case study methodology was utilized to discover and understand Eric’s identity development as a Black male student-athlete and the ways he negotiates these identities in different settings.

The focus of this chapter is to present and interpret the narrative gathered from an individual case, Eric Christopher Garrett. Data gathered from Eric Christopher Garrett’s life span can be divided in three time eras: 1) before student-athlete, 2) during student-athlete, and 3) after student-athlete. The findings are framed according to analytic themes reflected in the identity development literature: 1) racial identity; 2) athletic identity; and 3) academic identity. Also, congruent with how we make sense of others, the themes identified in the findings are discussed according to the five essential elements of narrative exploration: (1) context; (2) narrator; (3) characters; (4) sequencing; and (5) point of view (Hall, 2010).

Critical to this analysis are the challenges Eric faced as a Black male student-athlete who desired to achieve a professional athletic career and college degree. To begin the analysis and interpretation, what follows, is an introduction of Eric Christopher Garrett as the narrator of the story, the settings in which he perceives played major roles in his life transitions, and the characters who shaped his values toward academics and sports. In some instances, the complete
context surrounding a setting or character being introduced will not be fully realized. However, the sections following these introductory elements will engage more in-depth with a sequential story narrative and connections to Black male student-athlete identity.

**Narrator: Eric Christopher Garrett**

I consider the major contribution of my study as being the first (to my knowledge), where a former Black male-student athlete is lending his complete life story for interpretation. In particular, his willingness to reflect on his student-athlete experiences and reconstruct them makes him the narrator. In this case, the narrator must be the person from which the narrative is being drawn rather than the person who is reporting the findings. Otherwise the setting, characters, and point of view becomes insignificant to the study (Stake, 2005).

As biographer and interpreter of this case narrative, I wanted to ensure that I referred to my participant by his preferred name. Because of my prior knowledge that the participant associates with several names, I wanted to explore the significance of each name and uncover the one that he most identifies with. For instance, when I asked him to begin the interview with his basic information, name and background, he began with “Eric Garrett, actually Eric Christopher Garrett to get very detailed about it”. He further explained that while most people know him as Eric, his family calls him Chris. He then listed other nicknames: “Christopher, Chris, Russell, EG, Gutty G, and Ric”. This initial discourse that developed from my attempt to identify Eric’s preferred name was the first signal that identity negotiation, by associating with a variety of nicknames, gave me the impression that they are the cornerstone of Eric’s life experiences. Therefore, I probed further by asking him where all the names originated. Eric explained:

I would say that growing up being Eric Christopher Garrett, my mom would call me Chris. The family would call me Chris. My aunt would call me Russell,
because she wanted my mom to name me Russell, so she started to call me
Russell. My cousin would call me Ric, because it was short for Eric. And I used
to hang out with him a lot when I was growing up.

As I listened to Eric recall his various names, I watched his facial expressions and movement. All of the nicknames were described joyfully. The thick descriptions that Eric provided for each name variation signaled a cultural or social influence on his life. Consistent with instrumental case study, Eric’s nicknames offer insight into the research questions, because when he identifies each name with major turning points in his life, situations and contexts become intertwined in developing his identity (Stake, 1995).

For instance, when I delved more deeply into why his family called him Chris, he shared that he detected a racial motivation for why they preferred to call him Chris over Eric. He explained:

You know, to be honest with you, to really be honest with you [pauses and lowers his head]. You know, I hate to say this, but I think it was more black than saying Eric. That's my interpretation. Maybe it was from growing up on the West side of Chicago, in the projects. Usually that's how my family does it. When someone is given a name rarely do you see them called by their first name, usually they call them by their middle name or give them a nickname.

Eric went on to explain other nicknames that signaled identity cues associated with gender, academic, and athletic formations. Eric acknowledged that one of his nicknames was earned while in high school when his classmate was selling candy. Eric prefaced the incident. He informing me that, in his mind, he did not steal the candy. However, he acknowledged the
wrong in his actions. He describes how he earned the nickname “Candyman” for eating candy his classmate was selling without purchasing it.

I wasn't a troublemaker. But it was one of those things where…I took the candy and said let’s eat this candy. So, we started eating the candy and she was actually selling the candy. I guess she left it, so we started eating it. So, they called me down to the office and said you know that’s not your candy…I was like, yeah. They told me that I was going to get two days in school detention, in school suspension for stealing somebody’s candy. So, when I’m in school suspension…the teacher who’s monitoring the class, he was one of my coaches. He was a funny guy. So, he was like, ‘Alright kids, that’s Candyman’, what he called me in the detention. And all of the sudden, all my friends…and these are all my high school buddies that played football, they started calling me Candyman. This was because I end up actually eating the girl’s candy and it wasn’t mine. So, they said I stole it.

Even though Eric laughed this incident off, I perceived his disclaimer about not being a troublemaker to suggest that he valued positive imaging of himself and others. I also sensed that he was attempting to reject a possible notion that he was deviant, which is a common stereotype of Black males (Jackson, 2002). This is evidenced by the fact that he later used the nickname “Candyman” in a positive light, when he shares the story of his recruiting trip.

This positive story about his Candyman nickname offered insight into his cultural and athletic identity. He immediately transitioned from the story about the negative experience associated with his Candyman nickname, by reconstructing a positive memory of being recruited to play football. Eric explains:
So, I was being recruited… going on our recruiting visits. And so, I was really a big heavy person, I was really into dancing. You know, back then they had house music… and they had like a dance off. So I decided to put my name in the hat. Like yeah, I can do this dance off…and I was like yeah my name is Candyman. So when they announced me they said, we have Candyman. [We both laughed]

During the interview, Eric did not reveal if the need to include the positive nickname was conscious or unconscious. In fact, these two instances were the only time the name Candyman surfaced in the narrative. This could be evidence that the Candyman identity was not one that Eric associated with outside of these instances.

This introduction of Eric, as the narrator of this case study, is the first significant contribution to the extant literature on Black male student-athlete identity development. Eric beginning the interview with an in-depth discussion of the various names that he associates with, potentially challenges the notion that Black male student-athletes are unaware of the socio-cultural significance of the multiple roles they play on-and-off the field (Brooks & Althouse et al., 2013). For example, Eric provides further evidence of his multiple identities awareness as he continued sharing a naming ritual that occurs when players arrived at football camp. Eric shared that he gained weight the summer prior to his freshman year. He recalled that his teammates gave him the name “Gutty G” upon his arrival to camp. Gutty was in reference to his protruding stomach, and G for his last name. As he began talking about the name Gutty G, the excited energy he expressed, while talking about the transformation of his Candyman nickname, quickly changed to frustration. However, he did not stay in that somber state for long. His frustrated tone turned to pride, when he shared that each player had the opportunity to earn a more favorable name dependent upon their progress over the summer. Fortunately, Eric would earn a
more favorable name. Eric sat up in his chair, and a smile came over his face. It seemed that he felt accomplished for overcoming being identified as overweight in his role as student-athlete. He explained that after he lost the weight, his teammates would refer to him as “EG” for the remainder of his intercollegiate athletic career and beyond.

Eric’s explanation of the various names that he associates with would be a brief overview of his multiple identities that materialize over the course of this case narrative. Each story connects with at least one identity that becomes salient in his life. More importantly, his willingness to reveal the positive and negative circumstances that framed each name, offers another early indication of his capacity to negotiate identities. When asked what name he prefers, Eric stated with conviction, “all his names represent important things he has accomplished in his life”. This feeling about his various nicknames can be perceived as another indication that Eric also embraces his multiple identities. It seemed that these names not only represent multiple identities, but serve as a constant reminder of his need to negotiate roles in order to connect with others and accomplish his goals. Thus, I felt it was appropriate to refer to my participant as Eric, because this is the name that I have always called him and the one he shared that most people recognize.

The next section provides an introduction to potential settings and/or context through which Black male student-athletes identity occurs. Eric’s narrative offers insight into the settings that were particularly influence to his own life. The settings explained here provide a framework for Eric’s multiple identities that are explored throughout this chapter.

**Themes Analysis Structure**

Grounded in Eric’s reflections is his consistent desire to achieve a professional football career; even though he is speaking as a former student-athlete whose dream did not materialize.
Therefore, the themes that develop over the course of the interviews can also be considered his “after student-athlete” experiences. Although my interpretation of this observation will not be discussed until chapter five, I perceived that he reconstructs his life in context with what he believes then and now. As you read this narrative, consider that Eric is potentially grounding his life experiences in his professional athletic career aspirations (Shulman and Bowen, 2001).

**Context**

**Identity Development Setting #1: Henry Horner Housing Projects**

Eric’s life began in the Henry Horner Housing Projects on the Westside of Chicago, Illinois. Kotwolski (1991) described the conditions of the Henry Horner Homes vividly in his book *There Are No Children Here*. The Horner Homes opened in 1957 and was amongst the Chicago Housing Authorities (CHA) first high-rises built. There were twenty-one buildings located on the west-side of Chicago, 1 mile from downtown (Gerber and Dorfman, 1995).

Unfortunately, vacant apartments were the norm in the Horner Homes. Due to low-cost construction and severe under budgeting for maintenance, “swapping” became common practice. The swapping practice occurred when apartments required maintenance. Families would be relocated to a more suitable residence, instead of maintenance staff addressing the problem.

Repairs were rarely made, and therefore resulted in an abundance of vacant apartments. Because most families earned only $4,000 a year, generally acquired through government assistance programs, it inhibited their capacity to make repairs on their own (Cunningham, 2004). As a result, CHA implemented the “Plan for Transformation” (Cunningham, p.24). Rather than swapping residents from apartment to apartment, the city decided to demolish the buildings over time and relocate the residents to various areas in and around the city. When this process began, the initial results were unsuccessful. Many of the families who were moved to suburban areas...
complained about their new housing conditions. Several studies were conducted and found that many families wanted to return to the housing projects because the relocation conditions were worse than they left at Henry Horner (Burton, 2004; Cunningham, 2004; Cunningham, Popkin, and Burt, 2005; Venkatesh and Celimli, 2004).

At the height of the degradation of Henry Horner, writers exposed the conditions and challenges faced by those who resided in Chicago housing projects. For instance, *New York Times* author, Walkinsky (1987) expressed his outrage over the conditions the women and children were subjected to in Henry Horner. Walkinsky believed the destruction of Henry Horner was due to governmental corruption and the seemingly territorial ostracizing of impoverished African Americans. Walkinsky’s claim was supported by Kotlowitz (1991) who spent a summer reporting on the lived experiences of a young boy named Lafayette Walton, who resided in Henry Horner is his mother and younger brother Pharoah. Below is Kotlowitz description of the Henry Horner Housing Projects. During the summer he spent approximately five days a week visiting with the participants of his research. Kotlowitz describes the social conditions as follows:

> There were no banks, only currency exchanges, which charged customers up to $8.00 for every welfare check cashed. There were no public libraries, movie theaters, skating rinks, or bowling alleys to entertain the neighborhood’s children. For the infirm, there were two neighborhood clinics, the Mary Thompson Hospital and the Miles Square Health Center, both of which teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and would close by the end of 1989. Yet the death rate of newborn babies exceeded infant mortality rates in a number of Third World
countries, including Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Turkey. And there was no rehabilitation center, though drug abuse was rampant. (Kotlowitz, p. 24)

Kotlowitz continues with a thicker description of where Henry Horner is located within the city of Chicago:

According to a 1980 profile of the twenty-seventh ward—a political configuration drawn, ironically, in the shape of a gun and including both Henry Horner and Rockwell Gardens, a smaller but no less forbidding public housing complex—60,110 people lived here, 88 percent of them black, 46 percent of them below the poverty level. It was an area so impoverished that when Mother Teresa visited it in 1982, she assigned nuns from her Missionaries of Charity to work at Henry Horner. They had set up a soup kitchen, a shelter for women and children, and an after-school program. Where there used to be thirteen social service agencies there were now only three: the Missionaries of Charity, the Boys Club, and the Chicago Commons Association. (Kotlowitz, p. 25)

The descriptions shared by Walkinsky and Kotlowitz were consistent with Eric’s explanation of Henry Horner. From Eric’s point of view, a key force in his development was his constant reflection on the conditions of his home in Chicago (Stake, 2005). In this case, it was the difference between being born into an impoverished city community versus his transition to a suburban upbringing.

Consistent with Black masculinity identity theories, the Henry Horner Housing projects are described by Eric as the site of struggle that shaped his need for achievement, independence, recognition, and community (Jackson, 2010). When making sense of Eric’s life, community isolation informed his early understanding of the ways in which his own independence and
achievement was impacted by where he lived. Interestingly, this notion of community isolation was also evidenced in Kotlowitz’s study of another Black male’s experiences growing up in Henry Horner. Kotlowitz wrote:

Some neighbors wouldn’t allow their children to go outside to play. One mother moved aside her living room furniture to make an open and safe place where her children could frolic. If there was one constant at Henry Horner, it was the violence. (p. 20)

According to the CHA redevelopment studies, Eric’s family was likely among the first wave of low-income families that were relocated to the suburbs when the city began demolishing the Chicago housing projects. Popular opinion described the Chicago housing projects as the “eye sore” of the city (Venkatesh and Celimli, 2004). Popular media and scholarly research questioned whether people utilized this description for its physical structure, as soring towers that were taller than many downtown buildings, or the population of people who inhabited the buildings that were riddled with drugs and violence (Newsweek, 1996). Whichever the eye sore description was referencing, Congress appointed a commission in 1989 that created the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program. This program was developed to demolish the buildings and relocate the residents of the “86,000 public housing units over 10 years” (Venkatesh and Celimli, 2004). Although Eric and his family had already moved away from Henry Horner by the early 1980s, the voucher program that was utilized broadly 10 years later, was the same program his mother found that allowed her family to move to Bolingbrook in 1982.
Identity Development Setting #2: Bolingbrook, Illinois

In 1982, Bolingbrook, IL was a newly developed, majority white, suburban community, located approximately 30 miles outside of Chicago (Gerber, 1995). According to Bolingbrook.com, the town began as a subdivision on the outskirts of Westbury, Illinois and grew into what is known as Bolingbrook, Illinois today. In the early 1960s, young families were drawn to Bolingbrook because of a company that advertised British style homes at low-costs and was incorporated in 1965 (Horwig, 1990). The Bolingbrook Historical Preservation Commission reported that the population began with “5,300 people, living in 1,200 homes” at its incorporation date. Bolingbrook did not obtain its own zip code until the early 1990s. The Encyclopedia of Chicago reports that Bolingbrook is 26 miles SW of the Loop. Between 1990 and 2000, there was a rapid decline of white residences from 76% to 64% and increase of black residence from 15% to 20%, with a population growth of approximately 41,000 in 1990 and increasing to 56,000 in 2000 (Horwig, 2005). The shift in residence by race was due to the CHA utilizing Bolingbrook as one of the cities that families from the Chicago housing projects were given vouchers to relocate (Venkatesh and Celimli, 2004).

Identity Development Setting #3: Bridge Transition

The Bridge Transition Program emerged as the most prominent access initiative established to improve academic achievement of minority students at the University of Illinois. Established in 1989, the Transition program enrolled 100 students into the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP). Students were admitted based on their potential to be academically successful when provided with academic support services. The program was administered as a summer and academic year component. 50 of the 100 students were required to complete the six-week summer residential component prior to the freshman semester in order
to earn full enrollment status (Office of the Provost, 2005). Students enrolled in the “summer bridge” portion were required to complete coursework that prepared them to successfully complete placement tests and interviews before final judgment of enrollment was administered. The transition program participants who accomplish full admission at the end of the summer were assigned an academic counselor who was responsible for monitoring course registration and progress, career and personal counseling. Program participants were also encouraged to utilized free tutoring services and career programs offered by the Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA).

The Bridge Transition program was a segment of a broader campus initiative established by the Board of Trustees as a “special enrollment policy” that allocated 725 spaces reserved for “applicants of different qualifications”. This allocation included student-athletes (2005 CASA Report). The report states:

Five major developments have affected the admissions of student-athletes to this campus: 1) The enactment of NCAA Proposition 48; 2) the preliminary evaluation of academic credentials of most recruits prior to their signing a letter of intent; 3) the establishment of the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse; 4) the initiation of the Transition Program with its Bridge and Academic Year components; and 5) formation of the Committee on the Admission of Student-Athletes. (Office of the Provost, 2005)

The Committee on the Admission of Student-Athletes (CASA) has been responsible for monitoring admission of all student-athlete applications recommended for special admission since 1983. The Bridge Transition program has been utilized for 17% of the enrolled student-athletes and proven to be successful (2005 CASA Report).
Identity Development Setting #4: NCAA Eligibility Regulations

The Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse was established after public opinion criticized the NCAA after discovering that there were athletes who could not read or write after graduating from college. NCAA News (1999) reported that research done in 1991 verified that although graduation rates were 42.1 percent for men's basketball and football players, graduation rates were only 26.6 percent for Black players compared to 52.3 percent of white players. One of the major findings of the study indicated that black male basketball players had the lowest graduate rates at 23.4% (Lumas, 1997; Sellers and Chavous, 2003).

In order for a student athlete to be eligible for an athletic scholarship they must submit an application to the NCAA's Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse. As identified by the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (1998):

In 1996 there were 108,664 student athletes who submitted applications. Slightly more than 42,000 of these students were listed by one of the Division I schools as student they were considering for athletic scholarships. Fourteen percent of these potential student athletes were black. Next, the NCAA determines if these perspective student athletes meet the academic eligibility requirements set forth by member institutions. Those that do meet the academic requirements are then eligible to receive full athletic scholarships. In 1995, 16.3 percent of all black applicants were denied eligibility for athletic scholarships. In 1996, under the new academic standards, 26.9 percent of all black applicants were denied eligibility. (10)

The NCAA Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse mandates that a high school athlete entering college must have a 2.0 grade point average in 11 core courses and a minimum standardized
test score of at least a 700 on the SAT or a 15 on the ACT upon graduation. The eleven courses required for eligibility include: three courses in English, two in Mathematics, two in the Social Sciences, and two in the Natural or Physical Sciences with at least one laboratory class (Brown, 2002; Clark and Alford, 1986).

**NCAA Proposition 48**

The Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse (IEC) is very important to the NCAA, higher education, and student-athletes because of the claim that, "student-athletes get into school with poorer academic backgrounds than the average non-athlete student” (Maloney & McCormick, 1993, p.563). The IEC offers the NCAA perceived evidence that the association takes academic standards seriously and holds student-athletes accountable for being prepared to enter institutions of higher learning as members of the athletic teams. The NCAA also restricts eligibility to counter the perception that academics is not the priority of athletic institutions. The IEC guides whether or not a student-athlete would be declared Proposition 48, 42 or 16, which offers conditional enrollment in academic institutions and restricts athletic activity until a student-athlete meets the minimum academic standards set by the NCAA.

Proposition 48 was the first NCAA initiative intended to address the low academic achievement of college athletes. Established in 1986, Proposition 48 raised eligibility standards for entering freshman that would qualify them to participate in their particular sport during their freshman year of college. Proposition 48 provided the partial qualifier provision. The partial qualifier, according to the NCAA regulation, allows a student-athlete to maintain their athletic scholarship during their first year, by meeting the grade point average requirement of at least a 2.0 (Cross & Koball, 1991). Although a partial qualified student-athlete would not be able to participate in practices or in games, they would still be provided with financial
assistance to fund their education. Raising the standards for first-year eligibility appeared to be a progressive move toward encouraging athletes to place more emphasis on their education.

Unfortunately, the results of the implementation of the NCAA Proposition 48 rule had a disparate impact on Black male student-athletes. Sailes (1998) discusses in his article, "The Case Against NCAA Proposition 48," that the main objection to the rule was the inclusion of standardized test scores. The objection to using standardized test scores was based on the fact that Black students typically score low on standardized tests that have been termed "culturally biased" and also affected how historically black colleges and universities would be able to recruit and admit students. At the initial onset of Proposition 48, the academic and Black community questioned the motives and effectiveness of a new academic eligibility standard that seemed to be targeting Black athletes. The spring 1998 issue of Black Issues in Higher Education, Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Black Coaches Association declared that the use of standardized test scores was an unfair method in determining eligibility (83). The major complaint issued from these institutions was that Black students historically have not done well on standardized tests (137). Based on this knowledge of black student's performance on the ACT and SAT, the initial eligibility requirements were thus claimed to be targeting Black athletes. Clark and Alfrod (1986) conducted a study with Historically Black Colleges and Universities presidents and chancellors. Clark's article, "NCAA Rule 48: Racism or Reform?" reported that 80% of the respondents were not in favor of the rule change because they did not believe that the NCAA had a valid explanation for why they "chose the SAT 1700 and ACT/15 scores, there was no "black" representation to assist the NCAA in creating the rule, and the rule blames the victim not the public school systems lack of preparation for black athletes (164). David Meggysey (2000) stated, "not only did it [prop 48] negatively impact
black athletes as a group; it potentially eliminated superior black athletes who were coveted by the top athletic programs" (p. 27). An NCAA Research Report (1997) supported Meggysey’s claim:

The enrollment trends for student-athletes are notable for the decrease in the proportion of African American student-athletes in 1986 compared to 1983, 1984, and 1985. The proportion remained lower in 1987 and 1988, but increased in 1989; through not to pre-Proposition 48 levels. The actual number of African-American student-athletes was 3,589 in 1983, then dropped to 3,041 in 1986, before settling at 3,491 by 1989 (p.6).

Eventually, the NCAA agreed that Proposition 48 disproportionately impacted Black student-athletes ability to participate in intercollegiate athletics. However, the NCAA claimed that the number of Black student-athletes leveled out in 1989, once the rule became a standard expectation. At the same time, the NCAA Research Report noted, "previous studies indicated that imposing stricter standards would lead to increased graduation rates, but also would bring about negative impacts on minorities" (6).

**Characters**

The findings of Eric’s narrative offer the next critical contribution to understanding Black male student-athlete identity salience and negotiation by revealing potential characters who influence his development. What follows are the three major characters that Eric inserts into his life story as influences in the development of his multiple identities. These three characters include: 1) Parents; 2) Bridge Transition Directors; and 3) University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Teammates.
Parents

After Eric linked the settings of his life to his development, he inserted his parents into his life narrative. Eric was extremely respectful of his mother and father each time he described their role in his development. The respect for his parents was demonstrated by his ability to reconstruct the stories of his parents alongside reflections of how and why those decisions helped to shape his own values. Early in the interview process, he praised his parents for the decision they made to leave Chicago. He believes moving from the city to the suburbs was a major turning point and gave him an opportunity to pursue a better life. He acknowledged deviant life choices his parents made, which he felt contradicted their choice to leave the hardships Henry Horner. The change in his tone and look of sadness in his eyes demonstrated a feeling of discomfort when he spoke unfavorably about his parents after the family left Chicago.

After introducing his parents into the story, Eric signaled a need to negotiate how he would deal with the emotions he was feeling. The signaling occurred as a possible method of negotiation because Eric shifted back to the violence of Henry Horner, as he did often during the interview. Eric seemingly wanted his story to be understood through the lens of the violence he was introduced to at an early age and the fact that his parents removed him from that violence to the best of their ability. Thus, at this point in the interview he told the story of his uncle’s death. This shift is potentially another indicator of how and when identity salience and negotiation becomes prevalent for Black males. Even in adulthood, Eric’s thoughtful introduction of his parents and immediate shift away from the challenges his parents faced indicates an awareness that negotiating his role as a son and child was necessary. According to Swann (1987), Eric’s pause would be consistent with identity negotiation as social responsibility because our interactions and relationships with others is the cornerstone of the need to regulate our behavior.
As mentioned, Eric paused from introducing his parents as characters in his life story by recalling a painful memory of seeing his uncle’s blood on the floor of one of the Henry Horner apartments.

So my dad's brother was really heavy into gangs. He was shot and killed in the next building, next to ours. And I remember kind of going over there seeing the blood on the floor, like he had crawled from here to here [he points toward the floor]. So, I believe he had died from a gunshot wound; died from gun violence. I would say, all through my life there was nothing but gun violence that I encountered living in the projects. You living, just growing up, and just remembering those tragic events, like coming home and hearing the gunshots and my mom saying get down. Or not being able to go outside because she [his mother] knew about how much violence was in the streets. How just as a kid you just wanted to play, you wanted more, you wanted to just experience life and be a kid. But all I knew at that time, that’s the reason I can’t go outside because of the fear of being killed, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

While the fear of being killed was diminished by the move to the suburbs, Eric demonstrated that he understood the road to a successful life was going to require much more than simply relocating. For example, sharing the story about his uncle’s death seemingly gave him the reflection he needed. I perceived a comfort in telling the story as if to say to himself that things could have been worse. Therefore, he returned to describing the challenges his parents endured. Eric explained that while changing the family’s living conditions did not resolve their low socio-economic conditions.

Eric did not discuss the age of his parents. However, he did recall that his parents did
not work when the family was living in Henry Horner. When reflecting on his parents’ relationship, he remembered them arguing often and he associated the stress in their relationship with the challenges of being a low-income family. Eric perceived a correlation between his parents’ arguments and employment challenges when the family moved to the suburbs. When I asked him if he remembered some of the arguments, Eric remembered transportation to work being an issue.

I will just say, I remember most of the arguments would be about trying to make it.

We would have situations where they [his parents] would be trying to get to work.

How are we going to get there? How they gonna do that or how we going to do this?

Despite their conflicts, it appeared to me that Eric perceived his mother as the major decision maker in his family. Each time he talked about the family moving out of the housing projects, he credits his mother with making the “right decision” to move away to the suburbs.

Eric was especially sympathetic of the level of involvement his parents had on his academic development. He emphasized that neither of his parents graduated from high school, and given this fact, Eric stated that he did not hold them accountable for educating him. Each instance that Eric’s parents surfaced in his story, he connects their parenting style with the way he guides his children today. He classified his parent’s involvement in his education as “disciplinary”.

The balance in academics was, you better get it done. That was the balance. That was their [his parents] focus. That’s what they [his parents] said, ‘You need to get it done. I don’t care. You gonna do this homework. You gonna make sure you get good grades. You’re gonna sit down and practice for this ACT so you can get
a high enough score so you can go to college.’ That’s where the balance was, it was the disciplinary part of it. You are going to get it done. Which is fine. I understand that. It wasn’t more of, and I hate to put it in this terms, but this is my way of wording it. It wasn’t more like, let’s sit down together and do this. It was more like, no, you gonna get it done.

Eric again draws his mother to the forefront when he talks about his challenges with successfully passing the standardized test required for college admission. Eric reconstructed an argument with his mother that would cement his parents’ role in his academic development.

I took the ACT a couple of times, and had a couple arguments with my mom. I would want to go out and kick it. She [his mother] would say that you need to pass your ACT to get a certain score. So, I needed to take it like 1 more time to get like a 17, or 18, or 19. At that time I was on the verge of not passing because I needed to take it one more time to get the score. And so, we had a couple more arguments. I was like, I did study my ACT. I studied but I didn’t study that hard on it. I just did the bare minimum. I was ready to go out and hit the streets and I will be fine. So, she pretty much kicked me out. I think it was during the season. She was like, ‘You going to study this or you are not going to play football.’ I believe at that time, when she said that, I got so upset. I was like, you are not going to stop me from playing football. Deep down inside I knew why I said that, because I am like, this is my way out…you are not going to stop me from doing this. I didn’t care what else was going on, this is the way of me getting out. Deep down inside, I’m thinking about it. She put me out, and I just started walking.

My dad pulled up next to me. Like, ‘Boy, if you don’t get in this damn car, I’m
gonna smack you.’ He was like, ‘Nobody gets put out. I put somebody out. Nobody has a rule of putting people out.’ So, I came back home and he had calmed things down. He was like, ‘Nope, she don’t have no right to put nobody out.’ I didn’t really talk to her for a couple of days. But, that was her style…because deep down inside we had the same goal. We both thought the same thing. We just had a different way of going about it. She was the mother and I was the child, so my way was, oh I would get to it and I’m gonna do it my way. She [his mother] was like, ‘You need to focus a little more on this.’

This argument between Eric and his mother would prove to be a significant moment in his life. Later, he would recall his mother’s disciplinary style that pushed him through his academic adversities in high school, and use that same energy when he needed to push through academic challenges in college.

During the interview, Eric identified a significant life transition that demonstrated the relationship he had with his parents. He describes the family connection by sharing what it felt like when he left for college:

The whole emotion part of it…I’ve never been away from my mom. I mean, now it is time to go out on your own. This is it. You are not going to see mommy every day. You not going to see daddy every day. Not going to see your sister. You not going to see your so called girlfriend that you know. You not going to be at 202, whatever place that you live. You’re on your own. You’re by yourself. It’s something that we talked about earlier, if this is something that you did for so long and all the sudden this is your new life you are moving away. My family has always been a family kind of focus, we always,
always social gathers, always being together. Now, I no longer have a family that
is close to me. I think I got even more emotional when I made that trip down
there.

Finally, I asked Eric how involved his parents were when he played sports. He shared
that his parents had nothing to do with him playing sports. Eric acknowledged that his parents
only began attending his games when he started earning notoriety in high school. He shared that
his parents went back to Chicago on the weekends, but would discontinue those trips when
playing sports became a viable option for Eric to earn a college scholarship. Again, he supports
his parents in this moment, as he offered reasons for why they could not attend his games. He
explained that his parents had to work several odd jobs to “make ends meet”.

The role Eric’s parents played in his identity development will become more apparent
later in this chapter. The findings reveal the ways his early experiences manifested when he goes
away to college.

**Bridge Transition Directors**

The Bridge Transition Directors emerged in Eric’s narrative as the people who made a
significant impact on his academic identity development. Prior to arriving on the University of
Illinois campus, Eric had not identified anyone who challenged him to take his academics
seriously, other than his parents. The directors challenged Eric to face his academic
expectations and realize that college was going to be a new experience for him. He recalled
what they told the students when they arrived on campus.

They told us. I know that you were probably top notch in your school, I know
that you probably scored highest on your ACT, whatever athlete or whatever.

Well, let me back up on that one, because he didn’t really think about athletes.
He just said, now you are in the real world. These people will take you, eat you up, and spit you out. And then he says, you are not going to be able to do this…the world doesn’t care about you. You guys need to take this seriously, because this is not high school.

Eric recalls his view of the program directors:

They had a purpose. They had a plan. They knew what was important to them and they tried preaching the words to us. They didn’t look at you as athlete. You could have been an athlete. You could have been whatever. You could have been Latino from the poorest neighborhood, or you could have been a Black student from Barrington high school. They knew who you were, and they said this is what you have to do. They told the truth. They did not lie. They didn’t have any monetary reasons to have you to do anything. They were true from the heart.

Eric always spoke favorably of the Bridge Transition directors. When he described his experience in the program, Eric expressed confidently that the directors had the most influence on his academic development.

**Teammates**

Every person that Eric referred to as a friend were connected to his athletic experiences. Eric did not mention friends when living in Chicago, but he did talk about the close relationships he had with his older sister and his cousins. The friendships he developed began with his move to Bolingbrook, Illinois and ended with his college football teammates. He talked about his friendship with an endearing spirit and a perceived sense of loyalty. He talked about the most unlikely of these friendships went from being competitors in high school to later became his teammates on the University of Illinois football team. As one of the Top 100 athletes in the state
of Illinois, Eric had the opportunity to participate in several activities where he interacted with his future teammates. In addition to being his high school competitors and college teammates, some would participate in the Bridge Transition program with him, and others would be his college roommates. Eric expressed that a cornerstone of his relationships with his teammates was loyalty.

The first thing that Eric remembers about arriving at the University of Illinois was his roommate. All the football players were housed together, therefore his roommate was also his teammate. Eric would arrive to school late due to eligibility issues, and his roommate had made himself comfortable in their small dorm room. His new teammate had moved the two small beds together to make a full size bed, and the room was “junky” by Eric’s description. Eric’s roommate was another football player who had been required to participate in the Bridge Transition program. Since they had a previous relationship from the transition program, he did not perceive his roommate’s actions as unwelcoming, but more of an unexpected arrival. Eric said that he and his new roommate laughed off their initial encounter and began down the path of a life-long friendship.

He [his roommate] was like, ‘Aw man, I didn’t know you were coming bro.’ He ended up moving his stuff. Room was a hot mess. A complete mess. Need I remind you…I am walking into a room, me, my mother, dad, sister, and my niece, all taking me down. And they are looking in the room like, this room is so fucking messy. Like, he had his feet up…he was sitting in the chair with his feet up, on my bed was like…What’s up yo. So he gets up with his shoes on, and moves everything. I was like, man is this my side. He was like, ‘Yeah this your side.’ So I put my stuff there, packed myself up, and said goodbye to my mom
and the family. My family was like...you take care of yourself, call me and everything. [He becomes more excited. He acts out the excitement by gesturing and clapping his hands together] And I came back to the room, and was like, good to see you yo. What’s going on? This is it. I’m here. Time to go. You know, football, classes, and social life. I’m a student-athlete now. Time to step up to the plate. Time to go to class. Time to do the things that you need to do. So school started, football started, and classes started.

After describing the enthusiasm he felt when he arrived on campus, Eric shared that all his teammates were not his friends, and that being on the same team did not create an automatic bond. Eric expressed that he believes friendship groups were formed on the team based on the “recreational” [Eric made air quotes when he used this term], and personal attributes players shared. He considered himself a low-key person who liked to have a good time, but was not overwhelming influenced by the desire to be around women. He was private and shared his free time with players like himself.

**Before Student-Athlete Racial Identity Development**

Eric’s recollection of the Henry Horner was almost identical to the experiences described in Kotlowitz’s book. Most unsettling for Eric growing up in low-income housing projects was the violence. This was evidenced by his stern framing of the Henry Horner, along with sadness in his eyes when describing his inability to go outside and play. Eric recalled how strict his mother was and described the limits she placed on him moving about the housing complex without her. The racial composition, predominately Black, is presumed as significantly influences Eric’s development. He describes how significant this community isolation was to his early development by sharing how it helped to shape his appreciation for the freedom to play.
later in his life, along with his desire to “make it” (Erben, 1998). Due to the violence in the Horner Projects, Eric was forced to play indoors until the age of 5. The parallels of Eric’s reflection and Kotlowitz observation in 1991; reflected in his book over ten years after Eric’s family had moved away, demonstrates the level of violence that infested Henry Horner.

As important as it was for Eric to begin his story with the violence and isolation he experienced living in the Henry Horner, describing how his family would temporarily escaped appeared to be equally critical during the interview. This was evidenced by his change in tone and energy when he began to explain the trips away from home.

In order to have fun, we would leave the projects. We would go to my auntie’s house. She lived maybe three to four miles away from the projects. But she had a house; with her “common law” [he uses air quotes] husband because you been together so long they become husband and wife, that was around the corner attached to this manufacturing place. And they had like three floors. It was an old house. We would go over there and they would have little social gatherings and we would play in the park. It was far away from the projects so you could be outside late, but you could still hear the gunshots from the projects, and we would sometimes see people run through the parking lot. Sometimes our family would get into fights over the craziest things. So, that would kind of be our getting away from it.

Eric explained that the feeling of being a prisoner in their own home was the impetus for his family’s move to the suburbs when he was five years old. The new home would be Bolingbrook, Illinois. Eric expressed that Bolingbrook was “freedom”. Specifically, his sequential and thick descriptions of the contrasting environments in which he grew up offered insight into how he
viewed his own development. The struggle for him would not completely dissipate in the suburbs, but at least he felt free to explore new things.

The transition was different. I didn’t know what to expect. I was a kid. It seemed like the right thing. My mom and dad said that this is what we needed as a family; tired of living our life feeling like prisoners in our own house, in our community. So, making that transition to the suburbs was how I put it, it was joyful, amazing, scary, and unusual. It was interesting. Everything you can image it was [we both chuckle]. Because one side was like, no longer are we prisoners, but now, we don’t know what to expect.

This uncertainty around moving for Eric was followed with another thick description of his new home. As Eric talked about the new home in Bolingbrook. He not only recalled the address, but he also remembered having a backyard with a large apple tree. The fact that he could remember details about the new home caused him to pause, as he began to share this new phase of his life. He even took a moment to try and recall the address at Henry Horner, whispering under his breath, “I left Chicago when I was only five years of age”. From Eric’s point of view, it was significant that he could not recall any address before moving to Bolingbrook. He shared, “It’s crazy that I can’t remember my address in the projects, but I can remember my address and that we had a damn apple tree”. Consequently, even though he gives himself a reason for why he cannot remember the addresses; due to his age, with a lowered head and eyes fixed to the table, he appears visibly uncomfortable with the notion that his memories of living in Chicago were primarily negative. Even when he reflects about playing at his aunt’s, he recalls that the field next to her home was never landscaped. Eric also recalled hearing gun fire in the distance. Therefore, at that moment, it appears that Eric came to realize how impactful his home
environment was on his identity development. While he did not articulate the words identity or development, his focus on the environmental factors that shaped his view of struggle are consistent with Black masculinity models (Jackson, 2002).

During our first interviews where he shared his early life, Eric often linked his lived experiences in the city with living in the suburbs (Polkinghorne, 1997). Eric expressed that moving to Bolingbrook gave him the freedom that he wanted and deserved as a child. His most salient memory of his time living in the suburbs was that he could remember playing outside more in the first two months of living there than the first five years of his life in Chicago.

I cannot tell you what was outside of the projects, but I can tell you about a damn apple tree that I had in the back of that house. And I can tell you dodging bullets in a car. And the first thing that comes out of my mouth is an apple tree and a big ass Christmas tree that was in our front yard. I cannot tell you the address of the place that I lived on the Westside, but I can tell you the address of [gives the address].

As Eric reflected on the transition, he expressed that leaving behind his life in Chicago was really about disrupting a cycle of despair that he perceived was prevalent in his family. He shared this belief during the interview and again appeared to experience another moment of revelation about his own development being impacted by where he lived.

Acknowledging that some unconscious framing could have occurred prior to this point in the interview, the first conscious framing of Eric’s racial and gender identity was revealed when he began describing the move from Chicago to Bolingbrook. Again, Bolingbrook is approximately 30 miles outside of the city of Chicago, but Eric expressed that his family it was like moving to another world. Vivid in Eric’s memory was his grandmother’s reaction to the
family relocating. Eric reconstructed the moment his mother told his grandmother they were leaving Chicago.

So, need I remind you that no one in my family, from my father to my mother’s side, lived in the suburbs. Every single person [in his family] lived in Chicago. So, the suburb was like the country, to us. The suburbs were like a different place, like going outer space. I remember her [his mother] saying that we have a place...Bolingbrook. She was telling my grandmother about it and my grandmother was really emotional. She would say, oh I’m never going to see you guys.

Eric remembered great sadness from his grandmother when they moved away from Chicago. However, he acknowledged his great personal joy for the opportunities moving to the suburb would bring. From Eric’s point of view, these opportunities would not only give him a safer place to live but a safer environment would allow him to do the things that he could not living in Henry Horner. Hence, early in the interview Eric expressed great frustration with the lack of independence he had as a child. He became visibly upset each time he spoke about the environments that prevented him from playing outside. For example, when I asked him about schooling during his time living in Chicago, he struggled to recall an academic identity but could vividly recollect how living in Henry Horner greatly affected his happiness. As a result, the first major theme emerges as the catalyst for influencing negotiating the site of struggle, getting out of Henry Horner, would be a consistent memory that would push him toward his academic and athletic identity. The impact that living in Horner Housing had on Eric’s life was evidenced when he spent time during the interviews explaining how the family returned to Chicago, the site for Eric that bothered him the most about sharing his lived experiences.
Even though Eric’s family physically relocated to Bolingbrook the geographic distance did not sever ties his parents had with the family who still lived in Chicago. Eric’s mother promised his grandmother that they would come back to maintain their family ties to the city, and she kept her promise. But the visits back were not restricted to visiting family. Eric’s parents would not only visit family, they also maintained many of the activities that he believed negatively affected their lives. When Eric recalls going back to Chicago every weekend, he lowered his head and repeated, “I hated it, I hated it, I hated it, I hated it.” For Eric, the trips back to the city restricted his freedom. He expressed that he simply did not understand why his parents would make him return to a place that was riddled with violence. Eric did not like returning to the place that forced him indoors. Additionally, he shared that his parents’ partying, drug abuse, and gambling were others reasons he did not want to be in the city of Chicago. He did not discuss whether or not the deviant behavior stopped when they were in the suburbs. However, he shared how he certainly witnessed it for himself when they returned to the Horner Projects. He shared during the interview that he felt trapped between two worlds that would not allow him to be who he wanted to be before his adolescent years began.

Consistent with Black masculinity identity paradigms, Eric’s early life in the Henry Horner Housing Projects represents the first phase of his identity development (Jackson, 2010). The struggles he and his family experienced living in an environment riddled with violence shaped his view of success and failure. When his family moved to Bolingbrook, a paradigm shift occurred for Eric as the relocation transformed his perceptions of life circumstances in the schematic of identity development.

There were clear turning points in his life that race and racism were directly impactful.
As Eric thought about his new home, he remembered that all of his neighbors were white. More importantly, he recalled that moving to Bolingbrook was when he met his first white friend. Eric did not recall white residents and the students in his school were all black. The two different worlds that Eric referred to were not only in geographical distance but cultural distance as well. Eric lowered his head and dropped his tone to a soft whisper when he spoke about his first white friend. He shared:

One of my friends, we are still friends to this day…I hate to say it, he was my first white friend. Like, experiencing a whole different culture. Because the majority, 90% of the people that I saw were Black. My neighbors were white. My friends were white.

He attributes being introduced to “different kinds of sports” through his new best friend and describes these new found recreational activities as experiencing “a whole new culture”. Eric recalls how he and Robbie would play baseball and kickball before and after school. Eric remembers that his new found friendships with his white friends were all centered on engaging in recreational activities with them.

**Athletic Identity Development**

It can be assumed that Eric did not develop an athletic identity before moving to Bolingbrook. He expressed on numerous occasion that he was not allowed to play outside while living in the Henry Horner Housing Projects. When asked about playing sports, especially during his young life, Eric usually compared a feeling of freedom to play in the suburbs and restricted when living in Chicago. He mentioned how his close relationship with his older sister was largely a result of having to play indoors most of the time. Eric believes that sports become prominent in his life when he entered middle school. He did not recall much about playing
sports prior to middle school, so he focused his attention and gave thick descriptions of the way playing sports was an integral part of making friends in his neighborhood. Eric explained that his sport career did not start as a football player, but rather his favorite sport at that time was basketball. However, he would share that his first encounter with playing football would change the direction of his career in sports.

But going to school, I would experience basketball. I would play in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. I would play it [basketball] but I wasn’t as good. I was a chunky kid…then all of the sudden one day it was cold, and they would place football in our backyard. It was a hill, the fence would be a fence, so you run into the fence it would be the touchdown. So, I would play. Need I remind you, I was a big kid? We would play football. I don’t wanna say I would dominate, but I would dominate.

Eric’s ability to dominate his neighborhood friends was the athletic identity element he needed to solidify his transition from basketball to football. Unfortunately for Eric, another athletic identity element, that he did not possess prior to entering high school, would prevent him from joining the elite community football league.

Before talking about why he was not allowed to play for the community football team, Eric spent some time explaining his athletic development that sparked his desire to play for the Trojan Pop Warner league. First, he revealed how the environment was essential toward allowing him the exposure he needed to play sports freely. When Eric began talking about his new friends in Bolingbrook, he described how they would play in their backyards. He reconstructed his backyard in Bolingbrook, using his finger to outline it on the table. Eric described how the fences were all attached. He described how they would jump each other’s
fence and play all day long, until their parents made them come in the house. Eric reflected on what moving to Bolingbrook meant for him:

The opportunity to just kind of be a kid. [He chuckles] Which was huge. My experience of having a back yard, having a front yard, having a street, having a two-car garage, and all that. Wow, this is how it is to be a kid. It was great. It was great. It was just great having that experience. And having those moments.

I was really attached to being a kid and living in the suburbs because every weekend, we would, my mom and dad, would find their way back to Chicago.

Which I truly hated, because I didn’t have that opportunity to spend the weekend at home, and to play, and to go outside.

Throughout Eric’s life story, his environment would be central to positively and negatively influencing his multiple identities. His athletic career did not begin with the stereotypic Black male athlete physical prowess many are subjected to confront. Meaning, Eric was adamant when emphasizing how his weight, during his early adolescence, required him to earn his position on the high school football team. He explained how the early rejection of his competitive spirit to play football would require him to make sacrifices. In order to earn a position on the high school football team, Eric had to conform to the standard physical expectations to establish the athletic identity to participate in organized sports. Thus, he began to reconstruct the story of being denied registration to play for the Bolingbrook Trojan Football League.

Eric’s athletic identity was salient during this period of his life. This was evidenced during the interview by the amount of attention he paid to explaining how upset he was that he could not play Trojan Football. He mentioned that the rest of his neighborhood friends were playing for Trojan, and how this fueled his efforts to meet the physical expectations of high
school coaches. He expressed how critical it was for him to earn a spot on the Bolingbrook High School football team. The league had a strict weight and age requirements that resulted in Eric being told he was “too big” to play on the team. Eric could not recall exactly how much overweight he was, however he remembered that he did not meet the requirement in the 6th, 7th or 8th grade. According to the 2016 Trojan bylaws, in order to play as a 6th, 7th, or 8th grader, a participant’s weight must be between 50 to 100lbs.

Eric explained that all of his friends were planning to participate on the Trojan Football team, so he found out what was required for registration. When talking about the coach telling him, “You weigh too much…you can't play…you’re too big”, I perceived him to be irritated and frustrated with the memory of his desire to establish an athletic identity being rejected.

I would play football so much, this is 6th grade going into 7th grade. I told my mom I wanted to play…I actually called them [Trojan League Office]. I actually did the work to figure out how to play football. I remember that, I remember going online, going and trying to figure out…how much and what the requirements were. It was called Trojan. There was a weight requirement. I remember talking to the coach. The coach told me that I weighed too much, and that I couldn’t play. I was too big. They would go to like Kansas City. I was so mad. I was so mad. You just don’t understand how mad I was. Excuse my language, I was like this is some bullshit. I didn’t say it at the time, but I was like this is some fucking bullshit.

His frustrated and irritated tone changed to confidence when he began explaining that he continued playing football with the neighborhood kids, despite being rejected by the Trojan league. He recalls how the kids from the different schools would compete against each other, on
their own time. Eric talked about how he used the unorganized sporting environment, playing in fields with other kids in Bolingbrook, as his opportunity to show that he could play with the best.

As time went on, when I got in 8th grade, I knew of these people…and they would say your school sucks. They were still playing Trojan. I wasn’t, and I was mad. But when we would have organized football, they knew who I was because when I played they would be like, what you got? They knew…we would call “the wood”. I would bring the wood. They would play that Trojan game, but we would play our little unorganized football games. We would have like big football games, their school verses our school, in the fields. There was this one little field, and it would be game time. So, they knew what my capabilities were at the time. I would probably literally take my frustration out on them. Because of the fact that once again, I have this program that wouldn’t allow me because I was too big. So, it was kind of something like being in that concept I told you, that process, or that me being in my life when I was living in Chicago. I was trapped, like being a juvenile, but I didn’t do anything wrong.

Even though he felt he had done nothing wrong, Eric was clear that he had to do something that would give him an opportunity to play football. At this point in the interview, again, he returned to his life in Chicago as a comparative tool for how the development of his athletic identity became a necessity to prevent him from ever having to return to the conditions of the Henry Horner Housing Projects.

**Academic Identity Development**

Considering that Eric left Chicago when he was in the 1st grade, it seems reasonable that it would be difficult for him to recall his academic experience during that period of his life.
I can’t remember anything about my teachers. I don’t remember anything about reading, books or learning about Martin Luther King, or you know playing outside, or you know whatever. I remember gun violence, not being able to go outside, my cousins, my uncle being shot and killed, umm the hallways, the projects, coming in and out. That’s the only thing I remember being that age.

As a kid, you’re experiencing this. I don’t remember going to school.

Pedro Noguera, author of The Trouble with Black Boys (2008) asserts that schools do not provide young Black males safe havens from violent communities, because in many ways they felt threatened in the classroom. Noguera argues that black boys are perceived to be “too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and too focused on sports” and therefore are rejected (xxi). I could hear the hostility toward his academic experiences as a child when Eric completed dismissed having any memory of his early childhood education. Consequently, recalling his educational experience as a child was absent from his memory, but his discontent for the American education system was clear. Eric ultimately perceived that he was not held accountable for his academic success and classified high school as a “joke”. I perceived a strong sense of bitterness in his voice as he explained how his view of his primary and secondary educational experience:

Let’s be honest. How hard is high school? High school is a joke…I can remember to this day they would give you problems and you would just need to work on them and get it back to the teacher. That was it. If you did the simplest things you got a B+. So, I remember that, take this home and get it back to me tomorrow. Test. You could fail the test and make it up the next day. But high school was a joke, I don’t wanna say a joke, but the teachers are there to keep
their jobs. If they are not passing the students, they are not going to be around.

Several times during the interview, Eric expressed his opinion about academic expectations of teachers and parents when I asked him about schooling.

**High School Student-Athlete**

**Academic Identity Development**

Revealing what Eric shared about his efforts and philosophy toward his education can easily be perceived as this research project perpetuating stereotypic notions of the dumb jock narrative. In this section of findings, I assert that viewing Eric’s educational philosophy through an identity development lens offers a counter-narrative to traditional notions of Black male student-athletes role in their academic success. Meaning, Eric’s story begins with a complete focus on his athletic identity development, however overtime, the salience of his athletic identity wanes as the salience of his academic identity moves toward the forefront of his life goals. On the whole, his narrative challenged me as the researcher to tell his story authentically without fearing that his educational philosophy will be interpreted in a vacuum of his early academic efforts and challenges. But rather, this researcher considers Eric’s academic identity development as a process that is negotiated as the experience of athletics and academic conflict with his ability to accomplish earning an athletic scholarship, professional athletic career, and college degree. For example, when I asked him if sport or education was more important to him when he entered high school, Eric’s answer did not surprise me based on what sport studies scholars have revealed about Black male student-athletes emphasis on sports. However, what Eric’s narrative does offer beyond the stereotypic notions of athletic salience for Black male student-athletes is their own perspective of what influenced the early development of his academic identity.
Me thinking back…it would probably be 95 to 5 percent. Because it was my way of letting it go. My way, of saying this is my ticket. Yeah, ok, yeah ok, I will do your homework, and I’ll come to class. It wasn’t something that I thought of at the time as like, oh I need this. Because I would be like, no football, this is going to make it happen for me. This is what I saw on TV. This is what I see the other athletes doing. This is, where the money, this is where I’m going to make the bookoo dollars, and be able to make it. I saw on the television…this guy, he is famous.

Eric discussed often that the message he received was “sports first and academic second”. The messages that he received would be the source of his need to negotiate his athletic and academic identities. When Eric realized that the he would be the only person punished for poor academic performance, his salient identities shift. This will be evidenced later in Eric’s narrative when he did not meet the NCAA initial eligibility requirement to earn his Illinois football scholarship.

In the meantime, “the bare minimum” is how Eric classified his academic efforts in high school. Consistent with most Black male student-athletes who come from a low socio-economic background, Eric explained that this minimal effort in academics was due to his mindset that sports would be “his way out”. By Eric’s account, no one required him to give more attention to his academic performance until it was necessary. He recalls that as a child he was distracted by the violence that surrounded him in the Henry Horner Housing Projects, but when sports entered his life as a viable option school warranted more attention. Upon entering high school, the balance between personal responsibility and institutional expectations was highly contested. However it is clear that Eric felt institutional
accountability was severely negligent. The aspect of his educational experience that was most disappointing to him was what he termed “football homeroom”. Eric explained that students who participated in sports did not attend homeroom where you had an opportunity to complete assignments and get assistance if needed.

I am trying to tell you that I was one of the top athletes in my school, in my area, so at the time we had football homeroom; most people had homeroom and you just go to homeroom and you know do something. We had football homeroom. So, in our football homeroom we would go over game tape, because our school was a big football school.

Eric expressed that he understood that he needed to get a high school diploma in order to attend college, and shared with me that he even knew what the minimum requirements were to earn a college scholarship. However, he also acknowledged that he still struggled to translate even these minimal expectations into effort in the classroom and completing homework. Eric admitted that his academic effort remained at 5% until he attended college. He could not recall any place in his life that he saw an example of academics being his “way out”. This need to have an alternative option to ensure his future success appeared to be absent from Eric’s lived experiences and critical to his athletic identity becoming salient over his academic identity.

For instance, as a young man, Eric focused on achieving a successful football career. He explained that he believed that playing professional football would lead him to the financial stability he needed to help his family. He explained his resistance to equally pursue his education and athletic goals.

Cause academics wasn’t my way out. Nobody showed me that. Nobody said I’m
gonna get a full scholarship for academics… and if I did get a full scholarship, I’m not gonna get recognized for it. Nobody’s gonna tell me that you are gonna make millions of dollars in education. No. I mean but football, everyone knew me…I could have passed up 20 people who had straight A’s, and I still don’t know who they were. But 20 people could pass me up and say hey Eric, ‘I know exactly what you do. You are one of the top football players in here.’ To this day, if you go back to my high school, and you picked out 40 people. 20 people had straight A’s and were top of their class. 10 of them had straight Fs and dropped out. Another 9 of them were like Cs, and then me… out of that 40 group the majority of them would be like ‘I know Eric, he was a football player. I couldn’t tell you which one of these people were straight A students, who went to freaking Stanford or Harvard. Couldn’t tell you, but I know Eric is going to University of Illinois on a full scholarship.’ Because that’s, that’s what it was. It wasn’t a guarantee that a straight A student was going to get a $60,000 or $100,000 scholarship. But it was a guarantee that Eric is gonna get a $100,000 scholarship.

The irony in Eric’s philosophy toward the development of his academic identity, would come back to haunt him his senior year in high school. Thus, rather than considering his rational for lacking in his academic responsibilities, in the context of identity development, this can be a possible process toward realizing his academic self.

**Athletic Identity Development: Family**

Eric began the development of his student-athlete identity when he earned a position on the Bolingbrook High School football team. He explained that he overcame being overweight, keeping him from playing Trojan football, over the summer. He shared that
Bolingbrook High School had a summer weight lifting program that he utilized to earn a spot on the team.

So, going in that summer, was another part of that significant part of sport, that was like, that solidified my place in football. I’m like Bolingbrook has a weight lifting program, man I’m on it. I’m there this summer right now. So, and then also with the weightlifting program, he had this program that was called 7 on 7. And I was in it and I was like an incoming freshman. They knew, damn this kid is big, he is kind of big. But they didn’t know, I didn't play Trojan...So, playing basketball, lifting weights, and you could see the significance of the weight loss, because of lifting weights and running in hot weather. It was a total change.

From me eating a whole bunch of stuff, to me shifting to like being active and being involved…just a total weight change. And you could see it. I would be in the gym every day. I would run there every day, like yeah this is me.

The weight loss in the summer weight lifting program was not just impactful in his athletic life but he recalled it initially separating him from his family also. Meaning, it would give Eric a structured activity that he could use to convince his parents that he needed to stay in Bolingbrook instead of going to Chicago for the weekend. His parents’ reason for requiring him to return to Chicago was due to lack of supervision in Bolingbrook. Eric explained that the development of his athletic identity and his ability to lose weight demonstrated that he was responsible enough to remain in Bolingbrook alone, which his parents traveled to Chicago on the weekends.

At that point when I hit high school…I was old enough to watch myself. I wouldn’t go to Chicago. So, that goes back to my point, going back, my mom and them would go back, and I would be like, no I’m not going I’m staying here. And
I would stay at home. I would have folks, cousins, they would say, remember they called me Chris, ‘Where is Chris?’ Home. I wouldn’t see them that much, because I would stay at home. I would be with my friends. I would hang out.

Although Eric’s initial involvement with sports would separate him from his family, he recalls his family involvement in football would begin later in his high school career. When his family began to realize that his success might offer them a different life, his mother and father would become involved in his new athletic identity rather standing on the periphery. The family commutes back and forth to Chicago, on the weekends, would be the greatest change the family would make as a result of Eric’s sport participation. As Eric shared this significant change in his family, his facial expression turned to joyful and his tone was excited. Eric’s point of view was that his athletic success helped his entire family make a transition from the negative things they engaged when they returned to the city.

They put me at linebacker. I will tell you, when they put me at linebacker people started to figure out…this kid Eric is good. I got, I think I got freshman player of the year on defense. I got freshman player of the year. My family started to come to the games. It’s a cycle that is being broken, right now. [Eric speaks as if his parents are staying] ‘This is going a new route for my son.’ I think at the time my sister was going to graduate from high school…and my mom figured out that she was pregnant, which would change her life. You know, because they were like, ‘You [his sister] are going to graduate from high school, I don’t care if you are pregnant. You’re going to go to college.’ That’s when my sister had my niece…I wouldn’t go to Chicago anymore. Because I would be leaving my freshman year, you know my freshman year, I would be into football. Football
would be my life. Would be something that, you know, as a family were seeing something totally different. Like, this kid is involved, he has to go to these games, and he has to have certain stuff. I would have certain friends. In school, people would know me. They would start to say, ‘Hey that’s Eric, what’s going on.’ So, going into my sophomore year, my family, my mom and dad, would start to come to the games, and my sister would come to the games, and my sister’s boyfriend. He would be involved.

When talking about his athletic identity, Eric rarely spoke about the awards that he won or reconstructed games or stories about being an athlete. He overwhelming recalls the connections to his family and increasing his notoriety amongst his peers when asked to talk about his high school football career. For example, Eric shared very proudly his perception that his success in sport helped to distract his parents from returning to Chicago.

So, finishing up my high school career, going to games, my whole family would be there. Everyone would be there. Because I would be one of the captains. I would be one of the people, I would come out, and they would say, ‘Ok, this guy, he’s the top linebacker. I would be in the newspaper weekly. So, this was an experience not for myself, but an experience for my family that they had never seen before. And, they were all taking it in. The weekends in Chicago, no, there was no weekends in Chicago anymore. So, sports took over my life, took over my mom and dad’s life, and my family’s life. I believe in their mind, [Speaking as if his parents are talking] ‘Sports, this football thing is going to make it happen for my son and my family.’ And I thought the same thing. Because at the time, all we saw, I didn't have any other role models. You know, why my mom and dad
were my role models, because they showed me how to work hard, do the right thing, and make the right choices. That’s what my mom and dad was, but as far as role models on picking the right schools, making sure this is the right path for me academic wise, what are you doing academic wise that’s going, outside of football. They were giving me great skills as far as being an adult, and growing up and doing the most responsible thing and then taking a little bit of the education side, saying ‘hey you’re going to get good grades.’

In Eric’s mind returning to Chicago was an opportunity to return to the cycle that he believes his parents began to change when they moved away from Chicago.

**Athletic Identity Development: Celebrity**

Like most athletes, the prominence of the black male athlete success was central in Eric’s mind. Eric recalls the images of black male celebrity athletes on television and in his community as being those revered and given the opportunity to be financially successful in sports. He was unaware of black student who had earned college scholarships because of good grades, but he was aware of those earning an athletic scholarship. Bolingbrook was particularly influential in his life decisions because it was clear to him that being a member of the community required that he participate in sports. When the team went to the state championship, Eric believes the notoriety gained solidified his chances of going to college.

So, as my sophomore year ended, junior and senior year would be the year. The two years that would determine if I would go to college, another significant part of me moving into the next step of my life. As a sophomore we went to state. They moved me up during the playoffs to play for junior varsity. So, I started playing with them in the playoffs as a sophomore. So I remember going
downstate. I remember going experiencing those different things. And then I remember when that year was over with, going into my junior year. I remember going to the gym and this was the time when I was bulking up. I was hitting 225 so many times and becoming one of the leader on the team. I started at linebacker my junior year and from there, my junior year, we were playing, and during my junior year I would win MVP. I would be All-Area. I was the only one that was All-Area. So, everyone in the conference knew of me.

**Athletic Identity Development: Scholarship**

After Eric develop the celebrity aspect of his athletic identity, it propelled him toward the major reason his focus was on athletic performance rather than academic achievement. He explained that the recruiting process began for him when he was named one of the top 100 high school football players in the state of Illinois. The beginning of Eric’s senior year brought a whirlwind of opportunities to showcase his talent as a football representative from Bolingbrook High School. He was featured in several local magazines and newspapers, as well as participated in Top 100 Illinois athlete activities and events. At this period of his life, Eric explains that his high school coach would begin playing a major role in elevating his ability to realize his full ride football scholarship potential. Eric’s energy level rises as he describes enthusiastically the coach who was leading the efforts to help him earn a college scholarship.

So, my coach was a business teacher. So he was coach, but at the end of the day he was a business teacher. So, he did a very good job of recruiting. Recruiting, like, he would go to this college, ‘I have this many players, this is what they do, and this is the size they are.’ So, he was very significant in me moving onto school and to college. I’m like scholarships, what are you talking about, college,
what are you talking about. I am going to play ball, my mom and dad didn’t know this. He [High School head football coach] was like, ‘You are going to get that scholarship, that like a $16,000 check, and you can go to school’. So, I am like oh ok…I’m lifting weights whatever, (motions lifting weights). My coach he did a very good job, because I told him, going into my senior, I wanna go to Michigan. I wanted to go to Michigan. I didn’t know anything about getting into Michigan, but he was like ‘ok we will see what I can do.’

Athletic Identity Development: Recruiting

Eric acknowledged that race was a defining factor in his college choice. He explained that he still regrets not giving Wisconsin more consideration. Eric admitted that he limited his college choices because he underemphasized academic options when deciding where he wanted to play football.

Totally different place. I mean not to say that, all my life I have lived around Caucasians and different other nationalities you know races. My mom and dad didn’t go. They actually flew me up to Wisconsin. So, and I went up there. I just didn’t have that feeling that I needed to go there, because the majority of the people that I saw, I hate to put it this, weren’t black. I saw mostly Caucasians that I wasn’t familiar with. I didn’t feel like I wanted to take that leap. So, after that, I didn’t decide to take any other visits, I decided I was going to go Illinois.

After reflecting on the influence of race on his college choice, Eric explained that the next step in the recruiting process was for coaches to begin visiting your home. The goal of home visits was for the college coaches to demonstrate the desire to have an intimate relationship with an athlete and their parents. The act of visiting a player’s home was intended to send a
message to a potential player, that the intimate relationship they established during the home visit, would be carried to the college campus they chose. This method of recruiting not only worked for Eric, but it fueled his perspective that professional sports career was a viable option. He shares how it felt to have Big Ten coaches visiting his home:

But I will tell you kind of going back into my school year, I think another reason why believed that football was the way. I don’t know if you are familiar with em’, I had coaches, head coaches come to my house sitting in my living room. Need I remind you, I want football back in the day? So, you see these guys saying that I’m gonna come to your house and sit in your living. I mean, that’s big time. You can’t, I mean, who ever said that you can have these famous coaches, and I know this is Midwest, but those are big time coaches at the time coming in to your living room talking and talking to you and your parents, ‘Hey your son is great’. It was amazing.

Eric received several letters of interest from colleges and universities all across the country but was recruited vigorously by Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. Within the world of recruiting, serious schools visit player’s homes, games, and invite them to visit their universities.

They take you, and they pay for everything. You get a stipend. These are things whether you live in suburbs or in the city. Let me step back a little bit. Being a kid, and I believe that being a kid who has nothing, somewhat you know little to nothing, and a kid who has a lot is totally two different worlds. Being in that situation and being kind of put on a pedestal. I was going to these big meetings with these college coaches and university. They were treating you to these
dinners. I remember going to these recruiting dinners. I mean every night was like going to Weber Grill. Like, you were literally, every day, getting served the top notch food in that area, top notch service, top notch. You are getting, it’s like going on a high executive job interview and they already want you and they want to convince you to come on in. Being a kid and experiencing that, it’s the most amazing thing ever. Going on the field with 30,000 folks, it’s the most amazing thing you can ever experience, recruiting wise. Imagine my parents, we would come back from the dinners thinking, ‘That was like amazing. I never heard of that. They treat you like they know your name. They would say hello Mr. and Mrs. Garrett, come on over.’

When Eric was being recruited by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the national attention the school was receiving at the time played into his desire to be famous, and helped Illinois win his desire to attend over the other two schools. He was being recruited to play linebacker and it was important to him that he attend a school that would help him gain national recognition for his talents. He shares that Illinois was a good place to accomplish this goal.

And as I look at it today it was even bigger, because my senior year I was being recruited as a linebacker to Illinois. Which at the time, Illinois was considered ‘Linebacker U’. You had Dana Howard, Dick Butkus. You had Simone Rice and Kevin Hardy who had just came out the draft selected 1 and 2. So I was just like, I’m here! So but at the time, coming from Bolingbrook, Bolingbrook was ranked one of the top 5 schools in the state as far as football because of the recruiting. My senior year, the individuals who played on defense when I was graduating, we
had 11 starters on defense. Out of the 11 starters on defense, 9 of them went to Division 1.

As Eric explained the recruiting process, I perceived his thick descriptions of his interactions with coaches and visits to college campus as another indicator of negotiating his athletic and academic identity. When Eric explained his recruiting visits, the subject of academics did not blended into his reconstruction of the recruiting process. While Eric did not link the two when sharing his recruiting experience, the absence of academic discussion during his recruiting process and his risk of ineligibility prior to entering college would be a critical omission later.

Although he mentioned that there was an academic component to the recruiting process, he explained that the bond with the other players was his primary reason for choosing Illinois. He explained that he was allowed to have several unofficial visits to football games but his official visit to campus was a completely different experience.

But on my recruiting visit, I just remember saying I’m going to Illinois. Because I had the most, probably one of the best times I ever had in my life. We went out, we kicked it, ya know. I think that visit, you had your two phases of it. You had the part, the academic part of it, and the institution part of it that it looked good to mom and dad, and at night it looked good to the players. The players took you out, you experienced some good stuff as far as going out and kickin it and being able to experience the college life outside the classroom. And I told the guys, and I will be honest with you, you did drink, you did drink, and you did stuff that you probably wouldn’t wanna tell your parents about. So, um, but probably the best time of my life, and I actually committed to going there during
that visit.

Unlike most college students, these visits to Illinois would introduce Eric to deviant behaviors that he did not share during high school. While it is possible that he engaged in deviant behaviors prior to attending college, Eric did not reflect on those instances during the interview. In fact, it is more likely that he did not engage these behaviors prior to high school based on his disdain for the activities his parents participated in when they traveled back to Chicago. It was clear that Eric’s college choices were the culmination of selecting a school that would again offer him the freedom over his own future that he desperately pursued. Unfortunately, partying would only allow him the freedom to release many of the stresses that he would endure as a college student-athlete.

After the recruiting visits and selecting a university to attending, Eric culminated his high school student-athlete experiences by signing the letter of intent. Just as the recruiting process perpetuated the influence of celebrity into Eric’s athletic identity, he described the letter of intent signing ceremony as a “surprising” experience. Eric was unfamiliar with Bolingbrook High School conducting signing ceremonies prior to his senior year. He was especially surprised that the event warranted statewide attention, which included newspaper media being present and Eric and his family picture appearing in the local paper the following day. He perceived the letter of intent signing ceremony to be newly developed as a result of the amount of players on his team that were selected to attend major colleges and universities.

When they called me, my coaches were like, ‘When you commit we are going to have you guys come down and sign your letters of intent.’ I’m like ok, whatever, sure man. It wasn’t on TV, but they did take a picture. My mom, they was like, ‘Your mom and dad need to come’. I said ok, they will come. Um, and then you
Once Eric officially signed to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, whether he was focused on it or not, his academic identity would be challenged and thrust into the forefront. He described to me how the summer before his freshman year at Illinois would force him to think differently about his education. He admitted that his athletic identity was his only focus prior to being signed to play football at Illinois, and how ignoring the importance of his education would put his athletic future at risk twice. First, Eric needed to meet the NCAA initial eligibility ACT standard scores. Discussed previously, Eric achieved the score he needed with the help of his mother pushing him to study. His NCAA eligibility would put him in the position to receive his football scholarship, but Eric explained that he still had to participate in the UIUC Summer Bridge Program to earn full admission into the university. Second, after participating in the UIUC Summer Bridge Program, he would have to face the potential of not earning his college scholarship due to an error made on reporting a final high school course grade that placed him ineligible according to NCAA regulations. Eric talked about the summer prior to his freshman year in college as a pivotal experience, which I perceived were two instances that taught him that negotiating his athletic and academic identity would be a necessity as a college student-athlete.

Eric explained that he was told only two weeks prior to leaving for Champaign that he needed to attend the Bridge Transition program. He shared that being forward to focus on academics over athletics placed many doubts in his mind that he would be able to handle the move. Although Eric did not recall being told about the possibility of having to enroll in the program during his recruiting visit, he remembered that his high school teammate was told he would be required to participate. Eric explains how he perceived his teammates denial to
participate in the program the reason why he was not offered a scholarship to attend Illinois with him.

He went to a meeting where if you were academically borderline accepted to the university, you would go into this program called Bridge. And all people know, if you know the University of Illinois, and you graduated in the 90s or the early 2000s, you would know Bridge. You would know the directors. As an athlete, if you were accepted and you agreed to go to Illinois, you were kind of like on the borderline. You would go into this program called Bridge. Meaning that you would have to come in the summer, your summers were gone…I think its 6 weeks. I can’t remember. It’s like an academic boot camp. And so, [his teammate] he actually went downstairs and they told him about that. He actually got like upset. He opened his mouth, ‘So you telling me, that if I come here I have to…my whole summer is gone?’ Need I remind you, the whole coaching staff and everyone is there. His mother was there. I remember my mom telling the story to us, like, ‘[his teammate’s mom] was so embarrassed.’ She was so embarrassed because he kind of like spoke out and said something. I believe it cost him his scholarship.

I perceived that Eric inserted this story about his teammate losing the opportunity to play football at Illinois, as the reason that he decided to fight through his fears. Eric explained that he and his parents discussed him leaving for Champaign early. He described the conversation as an acceptance that participation was not option and he would have to find his academic identity in order to have a chance at his academic aspirations.
Academic Identity Development: Bridge Transition Program

The most critical academic intervention in Eric’s life was being required to attend the Summer Bridge Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Eric explained the seriousness of the program and his impression of the academic environment and expectations.

The program was very intense. The experience and the emotion around it was something that I would never experience in my life. The different people that I would meet. But it was like an educational boot camp that had kind of like a mom and dad as the directors. Like they were your mom and dad and they were putting you through this boot camp to get you prepared for the university. From the perspective of social, from the education wise of being on your own, and financial. Everything. They were preparing you for everything.

Eric also discussed a perceived connection between race, academics and athletics. He recalled two instances that established a distinction between Black and White football players. First, he recalled that all but one athlete in the Bridge Transition program were Black. Second, he recalled getting a visit on the first day of the program by current players. All the players who came to encourage and support them upon arriving to campus that summer were all Black. Eric did not explain why the racial background of the players in the program and those who visited them on the first day impacted his view on where to place value on his education.

I think I changed as a person, because I once thought that sports was it. Like, that’s your gateway to whatever. But you know, over the summer in the Bridge Transition Program and having people that would influence your life like [Bridge Transition Directors]…trying to engage you. They would tell us, ‘The world doesn’t care about you. You guys [football players] need to take this seriously,
because this is not high school.’ Like, going back to that same concept like, each one of you think that you are number one. They told us, ‘Guess what? Each one of you are number one in something, and this university will eat you up and spit you out. [short pause] And you will be gone.’

Despite the challenges Eric faced in the Bridge Transition Program, he overcame them and successfully completed the program. Unfortunately, he was not allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony because the program directors informed him that there was an issue with his NCAA eligibility status. Eric explained that the Illinois athletic department disappeared after finding out that he was in jeopardy of being classified a Proposition 48 student-athlete. I perceived that Eric viewed the athletic department’s rejection as prioritizing his athletic over academic identity when he shared who supported him while addressing the eligibility issues. Eric expressed how the people who supported him influenced his value of education.

And to this day, I don’t remember athletics doing anything for me. I don’t remember my [Illinois Head Coach] coach doing anything. I don’t remember them helping me out. Like, finding a way to find money for me, like saying to me, ‘Stay here we will pay for this.’ I don’t remember none of that. I just remember going back home and doing it myself. I remember my high school coaches helping me out. But college coaches, no. University, no. I remember [Bridge Transition Directors], I remember them being involved. Like hey, ‘This is not football Eric.’ But I remember them being there. But as far as NCAA athletic program, nope, don’t remember them in that process. I just remember having conversations with [Bridge Transition Directors] saying, ‘You will get through this. It’ll get fixed for you.’ I don’t remember the NCAA, the Illini
football team. I don’t, I can’t remember them doing anything that was influence that you know, made a difference. So, I took that month trying to take care of it. I finally did get it fixed, through paperwork. And I missed freshman camp. So, I will tell you from that experience that I made a commitment to say this won’t happen to me again. No way, academics is my number one thing. I am gonna do it, no way, this is all me. Time to go. I think I prayed to God. I owed to God the opportunity to take it all from the program, [Bridge Transition Directors], athletics, the Illini Football team. I put it all together, and was like, I see what’s important.

After the initial shock of being removed from the graduation ceremony, Eric explained his despair when he had to return home to Bolingbrook, instead of going to camp with the other freshman football players.

**College Student-Athlete**

**Academic and Athletic Identity Negotiation**

When Eric finally arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he recalls taking a moment to reflect on everything he experienced over the summer. He explained how the athletic department rejection and risk of losing his scholarship changed his perspective on what identity needed to be salient in order to ensure success.

Coming into my room was a surreal experience, because I had never been to college. I never been to a place where, you know, you are going to be on your own. This where you got to make a difference. This was like my calling to do the right thing. I was finally legit, and I would take full advantage of the opportunity that was ahead of me. But you know, I think as a person I had changed. Like,
far as my focus. I think at the time, sports was very important to me, but I had a sense of urgency that education, getting a degree, doing well in school, should be the top priority. I realized that I would need to balance both worlds, without slacking on either one. Because by slacking on either one I would ruin my opportunity to play, and I would also ruin my opportunity to actually stay in school.

Eric explained further the academic adjustment he had to make upon arriving at Illinois.

So, my initial, what I can tell you about the first two years, it was mostly kind of me getting adjusted to the program, football, education, social life, personal life, and just kind of dealing with all that. I was still gung ho about football, but I also believed that I have academics over here, and I can’t survive if I don’t do right. So, I would find myself first year just really working hard at everything, determined not to be a failure.

Student-athletes are eligible to receive football scholarships for a total of five years. Thus, Eric explains that athletes speak from two perspectives, football years and academic years. Year 1 in football was considered his first academic year, and his sophomore year was considered his first athletic year. Explained that he was classified under the NCAA regulation Proposition 48, which was also referred to as “red-shirt freshman”. The red-shirt was a play on football where the quarterbacks all wear red-shirts as indicator that you could not hit them on the field and the focal point of the offense. As explained previously, the NCAA red-shirt year is theoretically designed to help student-athletes who demonstrate a need for academic adjustments prior to taking on the pressure of athletic responsibilities. Eric explained that he did not feel that he particularly benefited from this adjustment period because the only aspect of the schedule that was restricted
were weekends when the team was away. Eric perceived his sophomore academic year and freshman football year was the period where he began to locate his college athletic identity.

**Athletic Identity Salience**

Although Eric’s experience over the summer would impact a shift in his academic focus, his athletic aspirations would maintain salient over his academic identity. Even though Eric expressed a clear understanding that his education was key to his success, the notoriety of achieving a professional sport career seemed to maintain his athletics as priority.

You do the bare minimum because your focus is so much on football, because you are like this is it man. I am a starter. I am in the limelight. I am on ABC. They are calling your name out. If you don’t know being on ABC, a national station prime time and someone calling your name and talking about you, that’s big time. To me that like was like WOW. You have this mindset like, man I am going to go to practice, I am going practice early, and I am going to do the basic because that’s my gateway.

Eric explained that he got his first opportunity to see what being on ABC would feel like when he got his first chance to play on national television. This would be another moment that would deter him from focusing on the balance that was required between athletics and academics. Eric described his first appearance on ABC.

So I ended up playing fullback, and I ended up starting that year quite a few games. It was me and [another player on the team]. And I started the first game. It was Louisville. I was on ABC at fullback. I stated and I missed a pass. I could have scored, and it would have been my first touchdown. Um, but I will tell you that the next day, after that game, I would get several phone calls from people.
Like, ‘Dude I saw you on TV. My people from Bolingbrook and my boys they were calling me. Like, ‘Yeah, I saw you.’ And I believe that stardom, that treatment like I was getting in high school, had like started again. I was like yeah, I wanna be big time. I wanna do this.

Eric found himself right back in the mix of attention that national recognition affords to him athletic identity. Being a player on the team was no longer good enough, Eric wanted to be “big time” and that would require him to place more attention on football over academics.

Eric acknowledged that early in his football career he desired celebrity over money. He expressed that celebrity and money came hand in hand, and explained that he placed priority in the area that he believed would help him achieve the financial stability he and his family needed. Even though Eric was not one of the top players on the football team, he shared how he was still afforded many of the “perks” that being a member of the Illinois football team afforded him. Even on a college campus, Eric explained how athletes were celebrated over academic achievement. For example, He explained that the football stadium was a prime demonstration of “athletics over academics” campus perceptions because he described the academic center as being “tucked away” in the corner of the stadium. He talked about an academic achievement bulletin board in the academic center that had photos of the players who had a made the dean’s list. He then describes how football awards, trophies, and team photos aligning the halls throughout the administrative offices, weight room, player’s lounge, and locker room. Eric perceived the message he was getting from the football team’s display of achievement was your athletic achievements would always be more visible than academic achievement.
Eric explained that his shift toward developing his academic identity was due to the change in his relationship with his college position coach. Eric shared his perspective about the significant impact coaching changes had on his athletic career. He expressed that recruits need to be aware of coaches’ employment status during the recruiting process.

That’s why, if I ever get a son or daughter playing sports, and the coach is on the verge of getting fired, I will tell them no where you are going to that university. Because, he cannot guarantee that he is going to be there. You are going to get a new coach in, and new things are going to happen. Just like any job. Any new boss that comes in, and you don’t know them. They are going to change it up, and tell you something different that you have to do. I don’t care who you are. If they didn’t hire you, that’s what it is. Not only does it happen in the real world, it happens in sports too.

In addition to new challenge he faced with his new position coach, Eric explained that many of the players he was in competition with across the state of Illinois were now on his team. He expressed how he quickly realized that starting on a level playing field with his college teammates forced him to place more attention on improving his athletic skills. Playing high school football had afforded him a great deal of celebrity in the Bolingbrook community but the University of Illinois was going to be a different experience.

I’m like damn, there are other athletes too. They were saying, ‘Yeah, I was all district too. I was all conference too. I was All-State too. I was All-American too. I was in this book too. Yeah, I remember seeing your name in there too.’

Eric explained how this realization compounded his frustration with his new position coach denying him playing time. Eric admitted that his confidence in his athletic identity was
significantly hindered when he arrived on campus. He explained that he did not play much during his freshman year, and did not travel with the team to away games.

Despite the lack of on the field notoriety, Eric explained that the social atmosphere gave him the recognition he needed to continue fighting toward developing his collegiate athletic identity. Most importantly, he shared how his social life was dictated significantly by the head coach, based on the team winning and/or losing record. Ironically, he explained that players were more likely to party when they were losing or getting trouble rather than when the team was winning. He shared that the head coach was frustrated with the team for partying when they lost, and was stricter when they were winning. Eric explained that when the team was winning the coaches were stricter because of the national attention on the team.

When we play hard, I mean, when we win, we don’t kick it at all. Ain’t shit going down. When we won the Big Ten title and went to the MicronPC Bowl in Florida, we didn’t kick it at all that year. Because it was strict. [Head Coach] was like, ‘I don’t know how you guys, can fucking kick it, when you get your fucking ass whooped on the field. I don’t know how you guys can go out to a party when you get your ass whooped.’ And we sat there like, yeah that is true. You know, because when we lost we would fucking kick it. When he came in he heard about the ‘Football House’. He [Head Football Coach] was like, ‘You can’t have a fucking football house. There is no such thing as a football house.’ He [Head Football Coach] wasn’t saying that you couldn’t have a house. He [Head Football Coach] was saying that you can’t call it the football house, because we would have fights, parties, shootings, and whatever. Because that’s where [a player] got shot, or stabbed. When he [Head Football Coach] came in calling it
the football house was gone. No more of that shit. He kind of laid down the law.
I didn’t have a problem with it because I was on offense. I was kicking it. I had a
good coach, he was coaching me up. I was playing. He actually took time with
me and showed me the plays. So, I didn’t know much about the defense, they
sucked. At the time they fucking sucked.
Eric explained that the football house was a big part of his college experience. Similar to
fraternity houses, each year several football players would rent a house close to campus and host
parties. As Eric explained, the house was frowned upon by the coaches but players were not
restricted from renting houses. I perceived the significance that Eric placed on the football house
as something he identified with the comradery he felt with his teammates.
Unfortunately, having a new position coach would not be Eric’s only adjustment required
during his athletic career. Eric explained that during his second year on the team, the entire
coaching staff that recruited Eric was fired, and he was forced to build a new relationship with
the new head coach.

I’m not trying to be like I am great. But we would sit there in film, and I would sit
there like, he is playing over me. I went to [Head Coach]. I was like I don’t
understand why this guy is playing over me. His [Head Coach] thing was, ‘Well,
we are just trying to get him some playing time.’ I think he [Head Coach] said to
me, ‘Well, coach says you are not working hard enough’. That’s why I wanted to
transfer. I cut off. Like, University of Illinois football, fuck you, like, fuck you.
You going to pay me this money and I am going to fucking rob you. I’m going to
come to my meetings last minute. I am going to do my work, because I traveled
every time. I was on special teams.
Eric explained that his desire to transfer schools was because he felt like his athletic identity was being stripped away from him. He shared that he had a friend who was a member of the Western Illinois University football team that encouraged him to come there. Eric explained why he considered transferring during a period that he struggled rebuild confidence in his ability with the coaches. He acknowledged that he was struggling through an injury that he believed the coaches were holding against him.

I could have transferred. I could have easily transferred, and I told my mom I’m thinking about transferring. I could have easily went to Western Illinois, started and played, without a doubt. Instead of dealing with the shit that I was going through. I’m telling you, the problem was when he recruited me. He [Illinois position coach] played him. I remember it was a Michigan game, and we beat Michigan…He pulled me out because I made one mistake. He played [another player] and got his [the other player] ass drove from here to all the way there [he used his finger to draw a line to demonstrate the distance], and it was on tape.

And I am just sitting there like, I’m just sitting there like…and this dude could not lift 225. He was weak.

Eric explained that his decision to stay at Illinois was the feeling that he would get a better education. In the end, Eric expressed that his decision was based on his willingness to sacrifice his athletic career to get a good education.

I checked out. I didn’t check out. I checked out on being a team player. On being your guinea pig or whatever you wanna call it. I checked out like, hey listen, this is just a job now to me. I’m going to do what’s more important for my education. I don’t give a fuck, I am going to go to class. I gonna do this…you know.
Education. I’m gonna get a…because I believe I was the only one in my class that graduated in 4 years. I actually finished my degree, and that’s one of the reasons I decided to get a master’s, because I had university of Illinois pay for it, paid for my 1st year of my master’s program. So, I cut off. So when I went back over to defense I cut off, because I couldn’t understand this person…I couldn’t understand what was going on and why this guys was playing ahead of me. It wasn’t something that…it wasn’t just me being crazy. Why is this guy playing him? Dude, what did I do? You would want the best ballers on the field. I am not saying I’m like the best best. I’m giving my all. I am busting my ass or whatever. That time frustrated the hell out of me.

Eric believed that his decision to remain at Illinois would be a defining moment on his journey to achieving a professional athletic career. Eric explained that his injury significantly hindered his position coach’s confidence in his skills and immediately began to feel as though he was being treated “differently”.

Despite being treated differently on the field, Eric explained that the football program would confuse his perceptions of support by helping him obtain summer employment. Eric explained that summer employment did not consist of meaningless jobs. He gave the example of someone having a paper route, earning minimum wage. Eric recalls being “hooked up” with construction work and later internships that would be well paid jobs that he imagined for his parents. He described that summer work as the norm for players on the team.

I can remember getting a job in the summer time my sophomore year in Chicago. A coach would set up these internships and these jobs for the players to have when they went back home. I was a construction worker making like 20 dollars an hour.
Some people now don’t make 20 dollars an hour. I would work like 8 hours a day and come home with like $1000 checks every week. I was like what’s going on.

**Athletic and Racial Identity Negotiation**

When asked about his experiences with race in college, Eric’s response was resistant. I asked him during the interview, if he played with the head coach that made players of different races room together. He lowered his eyes toward the table. His eye brows were furled and he was short in his responses. He did not recall having that experience as a player. This was a sharp emotional tone from the excited tone he just had discussing his relationship with his teammates. Although, Eric explained that beyond the football field, players were socially segregated. When he thought about the people he “hung out” with he stated, “The white boys hung around the white boys and the Black boys hung around the Black boys.” He did acknowledge that there were a few outliers. However, it was far and few between that the white players would spend their social time with the Black players and engage in activities that occurred in the Black student campus community.

But sometimes you get the white boys that would hang with the black boys. He hung with us all the time. He came to the Union with us every fucking time. He was the only white boy, and he used to kick it. Yeah, he was a quarterback. They switched him to like DN [Defense], and he fucking left [Illinois Football Team]. Cause they switched him out, because he was recruited, once again, they switched him out. He went from quarterback to DN [Defense]. He was like, ‘I’m outta here.’ He went to another D3.

Each time he demonstrated some awareness of racial factors in sport, his tone and enthusiasm would change. The most obvious indicator of his resistance to discussing race and athletes was
when he apologized during our second interview, after realizing that he was reconstructing situations based on race when he recalled his neighborhood friends or why his family called him Chris instead of Eric. Despite these reservations to discuss race in his life experiences, the above conversation and a few other instances evidenced his awareness of the socio-cultural factors that played a role in his athletic and academic identity.

**Academic and Athletic Identity Negotiation #2**

I perceived that the prospects of celebrity would always weigh on Eric’s academic focus. Even when his dreams of playing professional football would clearly be unfulfilled by the end of his junior year, his insatiable desire to achieve a professional football career would not change. Eric explained the challenge with balancing his academic responsibilities with athletic expectations. Eric shared what his daily scheduled entailed as a student-athlete.

Most people don’t understand what you have to do to balance both worlds. Get up in the morning 8, I mean before 8. Go to class around 8 or 9 depending on the time, and get done before 2. At 2, you had to haul your butt, really it was like 1:30ish, you gotta haul your behind over to the athletic complex, to get ready to practice. Be ready to suit up, so that you can get on the field about 3 or 3:15. Oh no, go to the meeting room from 2:45 to like 3:30, and from 3:30 to about 4:15. Then you were on the practice field from 4:15 to about 5. When you were done practicing then you would have dinner. When you are done with dinner you would be like what do I do now? I better go to study hall so I can do some studying. If you don’t wanna do no studying, then you go home. This is what your regimen was. Monday, well Sunday through Thursday. Friday, you would have a game, away game or home game. If you are traveling you would travel. You would try
and do your work on the plane while you play sports at the same time. My first year I didn’t travel but just trying to get adjusted to the schedule and college, it was difficult.

Eric’s first year traveling to away games would present a challenge for him particularly because he was more concerned about the challenges he was facing in his athletic career. When I asked him how did other players on the team handle balancing athletics and academics, Eric shared with me the advice he received from one of the senior players on this team. The message that he received from his teammates was that his main responsibility was to “show up”.

But I remember a couple things, it was a couple older players, he was like, ‘I will be real honest with you. You know, if you go to class you will automatically probably get a C, if you go to class.’ I said naw, that’s not true. He said, ‘Go to class. That’s all you gotta do. The one thing if you go to class you will automatically probably get a C. Now if you apply yourself that is a different story. But if you don’t go to class you’re not gonna get it.’ And I remember him saying that. I’m like, that’s interesting. So my thing was, I did go to class. I would say, from what I can remember, that my take on life, football and education…it was like a light that was turned on. I was understanding it. Like, how things are working, and how life is.

Eric decided that he wanted to make an honest effort toward his education and not just “showing up”. If he was to take his education seriously Eric quickly realized that he needed to be enrolled in the degree program that was more interesting to him. Eric explained that was admitted to the department of Liberal Arts and Sciences, mostly because this is the department through which the Bridge Transition Program functions and welcomes students who have
academic challenges. Eric expressed his feeling of discouragement when the reality of making a
decision late to fully engage in his academic identity development.

That education that you have over there, it has to be important. It has to above
where you are now as far as football. It has to be your number one priority. And
that’s where I started to get it, and that’s where it started to be a little tough.
Because now, this is where I think athletes are really truly in a bind. Because you
come in, you do the bare minimum education wise, and you’re barely making it.
You’re a good athlete, but now you’re not as good because there are several
athletes. On the educational part, you got all these basics programs that they put
you in because you are trying to make it. As you are starting to understand that the
organization and the events that happened, it’s different. You are treated
differently, and you need to refocus on your education. But you have done so
much basic stuff, and it’s like what are you good at? I’m an athlete. Yeah, but
what are you good at. It’s kind of like, what can you do?

Eric explained that he wanted to be enrolled in the College of Communication, because he
desired to pursue a degree in Advertising. He expressed that his dreams were deflated when he
realized what would be required of him to transfer to the College of Communications his
dreams of earning a bachelor’s degree.

Speech Communication, yeah. Because I came in, and by this transition program,
by your second year, you are at the University of Illinois. It’s not too many really
departments, you can’t go to finance. Most of those folks in finance, they came
out of high school with a 30 on the ACT. Cause you know our University of
Illinois finance department is the top in the country, top 5. [I told him it was
Number 2] Number 2, thank you. So if you graduate with a finance degree from there you are riding high. OK, so, you have the finance program, ok, top, are they really going to take a LAS, I’m sorry Liberal Arts and Science transfer over, if they are you are going to have to have straight As, you are going to have the curriculum, you going to have to have letters of recommendation to transfer over there. You’re going to have to be on your Ps and Qs to transfer, because they have standards just like the football program. They want the top athletes. They have standards, and they gotta keep up with the best. You gotta be good on paper now. This ain’t about what your appearance is. You gotta look good on paper. So I can’t transfer to finance.

Eric would not let this deter his desire to achieve a degree that would lead to a viable career that met his interests. Eric explained that he used his scholarship to take summer courses in order to improve his academic standing. This allowed him to capitalize on the time of the year that football was not a complete distraction. Eric expressed that taking these summer courses would not only assist him in earning his bachelor’s degree in Speech Communication, but he utilized his final year of eligibility and applied for enrollment in Department of Communications.

As Eric rounded out our in-depth interviews with the end of his journey that did not realize achieving a professional athletic career, he shared that there was not much academic influence from the athletic department. He did acknowledge some of the few “good people” that encouraged his academic success and expressed some sympathy for the challenges he perceived many athletic administrators must confront.

The program, and football, you had some good folks down there. The Director of Football Operations was a good guy, but he had to do what he had to do. You
know he had, he really looked out for us. But at the end of the day, he had people he had to report to. Head coach...he did as much as he wanted but he had to keep people qualified. You had to make sure that people were eligible to play.

Eric appeared to excuse the athletic department for their lack of influence on his academic expectations. He seemed to feel as though they had an excuse for why their major concern needed to be that their players remain eligible in order to secure their own career. Similar to his feelings toward his parents, Eric believes that the athletic department met their responsibilities.

**After Student-Athlete**

Eric was able to earn enrollment into the College of Communication after completing his bachelor’s degree in Speech Communication. He earned a master’s degree in Advertising. Eric met his wife at Illinois. While earning his master’s degree, his wife was earning her juris doctorate from the College of Law. They married soon after completing their degrees and returned to Chicago to pursue their careers. They have 3 children; twin boy and girl, and daughter. Eric has also completed a master’s degree in Business Administration. He currently a medical supplies retail agent, and pursuing his own start-up business of financial management and consulting.

While narrating his story, often times Eric stated, “Thinking back on it”. I perceived this to be a significant impact of this project because they were moments that he reflected on his life in the now. The “after student-athlete” aspects of Eric’s life was being shared alongside his narrative before and during his student-athlete career. I chose to end this chapter without going in-depth with his after student-athlete experiences because it offers more toward the findings of the study.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

I checked out. I didn’t check out. I checked out of being a team player. On being your guinea pig or whatever you wanna call it. I checked out like…hey listen, this is just a job now to me. I’m gonna do, what’s more important is my education. I don’t give a fuck, I am going to go to class. I’m gonna do this…you –

Eric Garrett (Interview #4)

The above quote is an example of the rich data collected during this instrumental case study. At the conclusion of four in-depth interviews, Eric shared his feelings when he realized that a professional football career would not be a viable option for him post-intercollegiate athletic eligibility. Inclusive of the above quote, Eric’s narrative answered the research questions and revealed themes that can be useful to parents, sport and educational institutions toward better engaging Black male student-athletes’ athletic and academic aspirations. With this goal in mind, this narrative inquiry of an individual case was designed to expand knowledge regarding the role identity development plays in Black male student-athletes’ ability to accomplish a college degree while pursuing a professional athletic career. The theoretical framework discussed in chapter two, methodological approach outlined in chapter three, and Eric’s case narrative interpreted in chapter four, produced more insight toward this phenomena. This chapter is a summary of the major findings, conclusions of narrative analysis, and implications for future research.

Summary of Research Findings

Eric’s narrative revealed six major findings that answered the research questions and as interpreted in chapter four:

1) The multiple identities that impacted Eric’s desire to achieve a professional athletic career were race, gender, academic, and athletic.
2) Eric’s athletic identity was his most salient identity before and during his student-athlete career, and his academic identity became more dominate after concluding his high school and intercollegiate athletic career.

3) Eric’s academic and athletic identities shifted in salience when he was as risk of not meeting the NCAA initial eligibility standards.

4) Eric’s academic identity was significantly influenced by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Bridge Transition Program; an academic intervention program for provisional admits.

5) When Eric understood and accepted that a professional career was not a viable option, he demonstrated his capacity to negotiate his athletic and academic identity by straddling the expectations of sports and educational obligations.

6) Eric’s ability to negotiate his athletic and academic identity supplied him with the social, financial, human, and cultural capital necessary to earn a college degree, when a professional career was not attained.

According to these major findings, themes were discovered when Eric reconstructed his experiences as a former Black male student-athlete (Grandy, 2010). While much of Eric’s experiences are consistent with existing literature, his life story also provides new insights into the specific area of identity development, which is the focus of this research project. As discussed in the previous chapter, considering the overarching research questions and theoretical framing, analyzing the life experiences of Eric was based on connections derived from his narrative and my reflections as the interpreter of the story. This discussion offers a counternarrative which describes Eric’s ability to navigate the changes in athletic and academic
environments by shifting identities at the appropriate time and places necessary to accomplish his sport and educational aspirations.

Research Question 1: What are former Black University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign football player Eric Christopher Garrett’s multiple identities that impact his pursuit of a professional football career and college degree?

Results support previous research (Brooks & Althouse et.al, 1993, 2013; Bimper & Harrison, 2011; Bimper, 2014; Coakley, 2014) that recognizes race, gender, academic, and athletic as dominate identities for Black male student-athletes. This researcher acknowledges that additional identities play a role in Black male student-athletes’ experiences, however, this examination of racial, gendered, academic, and athletic identities further uncovered if and/or when these roles enhance or hindered Eric’s capacity to engage effectively the responsibilities and expectations when interacting in academic and athletic spaces simultaneously. Eric’s life narrative revealed that his desire to earn a professional football career was defined by the racial, gender, academic, and athletic discrimination he experienced before, during, and after his student-athlete career. This section summarizes the specific occurrences that racial, gender, athletic, and academic identity was potentially developed in Eric’s life on his pursuit to achieve a professional athletic career.

Finding #1: Eric’s Racial Identity Development

Many Black male student-athletes must confront race and racism, which can shape their racial identity development (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Agyemang, 2011; Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Cross, 1991, 1995; Bimper, 2015). Based on the history of racial discrimination in sports, this researcher anticipated that race and racism would be a significant issue for Eric throughout his narrative. Because contemporary racism more often manifests covertly, it is
understandable that Eric did not express feelings of racial discrimination as a factor in his student-athlete development (Harrison & Harrison, 2001; Perry, 2009). However, there were 2 critical instances where race was a factor in his life that is not often discussed in sport studies research. First, Eric shared that when his family moved to Bolingbrook, Illinois he was able to connect with his first white friends through sports. Second, he decided to attend the University of Illinois over Wisconsin because of the racial diversity of the team and campus. Of particular interest to this study was how these instances shaped Eric’s ability to achieve a professional football career and college degree.

According to Swann et. al (2009), racial identity development in childhood focuses around establishing awareness. It is critical to understand that Black children develop their racial preferences developmentally and culturally, given the historical significance of slavery, segregation, and integration in America. In order for children to be able to engage their attitudes about race, they must be consciously or unconsciously situated in spaces that exposes them to a variety of cultures to assist them in understanding how people from different backgrounds support their own self-development (Swann, Cunningham, Youngblood, & Spencer, 2009). Since the violence in Henry Horner restricted Eric’s ability to interact with other races, due to the majority of residence being Black, it is understandable that his racial identity was first exclusively framed around what he perceived to be Black culture. For Eric and many other Black male student-athletes who come from impoverished communities, the perception is that they are socialized to value their Black selves because of the connection with struggle that also impact masculinity for Black boys. In particular, Eric spoke in-depth about the relationship that he developed with his family because he was unable to pursue other friendships outside the home, with the exception of his aunt’s house a few miles away from Henry Horner. This early
racial identity development proved to be critical because it potentially impacted his inability to completely connect with others from different racial backgrounds. At one point in the interview, when Eric spoke about the white friends that he made when he moved to Bolingbrook; a mostly white community at that time, he shared that the only significant part of their interaction was that they played sports together. As he reconstructed the development of those friendships, he concluded that they were not in fact friends but rather associates because he did not recall ever being allowed to go over to their homes or their parents directly associating with one another. His experiences with white athletes persisted in college, explained that most players at Illinois during his time there were racially segregated. Although he was able to name a few who interacted socially outside of football, the overwhelming relationship between black and white teammates was predominately connected with football practices and games. Eric’s feeling about his early friendships with white children and college teammates is significant because it supports that race and racism in sport is not colorblind, in that, those who participate in sports have the capacity to utilize the talents and skills of others from difference races, but still chose not to engage socially or culturally beyond the acceptance of Black bodies on the field of play (Bimper, 2015; Singer, 2005, 2008).

The other life experience where Eric’s racial identity played a role was in his college selection. Eric shared that race was instrumental in his decision to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His desire to fit in with his fellow Black male-student athletes in college was crucial during the college recruitment process. This finding is intriguing considering that statistically Black male football players comprise of approximately 50% of all Division 1 programs (Comeaux, 2005; Gandar, Tucker, & Zuber, 2001; Harrison & Bimper, 2015). However, Eric expressed that the social environment and community of Madison, Wisconsin did
not feel “welcoming”. His thick description of the differences between Illinois and Wisconsin signal that his racial identity development in his early life was triggered when he visited both campuses. In particular, Eric wanted to be in an environment that he felt mostly connected with members of a team and people in a community that most resembled his own background. Meaning, he made the decision to attend a school that had players who came from low income backgrounds and/or suburban communities that were inclusive of a more diverse population of socio-economic challenges similar to the west side of Chicago or Bolingbrook, Illinois. During the interview, Eric gave me the impression that the football players, black or white, who attended Wisconsin at the time did not give him the impression that they could relate to his upbringing. The lack of racial and socio-economic connection influenced him as he made an unconscious decision to continue developing his racial identity at the University of Illinois.

Therefore, Eric’s experience extends sport studies research to consider how racial identity development for Black male student-athletes should not be taken for granted based only on racial demographics of Division 1 athletic programs. This study supports recent studies that revealed Black male student-athlete racial awareness extends beyond the field of play but is also significant to them in their social and academic environment as well (Henry & Closson, 2012). According to Eric, the white friends he made when he moved to Bolingbrook and his college selection impacted his awareness of cultural differences and caused him to further connect with his blackness throughout his intercollegiate athletic career. While Eric did not explicitly state that he chose athletics over academics, it appears that this was the case as he expressed the feeling that his limited racial and academic identity development at the time probably limited his choices in the college he would attend to play football. He eventually expressed that he believes that his lack of interest in developing his academic identity probably limited his college choices.
While Eric struggled to recognize racism impacting his athletic and academic aspirations, he shared that he believed that his racial identity potentially negatively impacted his academic and career aspirations. Despite Eric’s lack of emphasis on his racial identity development, as interpreter of his life story, I recognized several examples of racialized experiences that reflect upon previous research and offer implications for future research. For example, his early life living in Henry Horner, which was primarily low income Black residents, potentially shaped his feeling that as a Black person he needed to strive to achieve more than his environment provide others of his race. While much of his story could be perceived as fulfilling stereotypes, his adolescent development suggests otherwise. For instance, Eric grew up in a two parent home, and studies conducted on Henry Horner demonstrated that more than 84% of the children living in the housing projects came from a single-parent household. Coupled with the move to Bolingbrook, a predominately white community, Eric’s framing of racial inequality was potentially impacted as the nigrescence theory discusses that encounter racial injustice or inequality serves as the catalyst to bring people to their blackness (Cross, 2001).

One of the most interesting findings of this dissertation project was Eric feeling discriminated against because of his weight. While this topic could also be discussed under racial discrimination, I am choosing to discuss his weight discrimination in the next section because a Black male being discriminated against because of his weight has a two-fold identity implication.

**Finding #2: Eric’s Gender Identity Development**

Black masculinity theoretical frameworks were used to interpret the findings of Eric’s life story (Cunningham, 1996; Hodges et. al, 2008; Jackson, 2002; Majors & Billson, 1992). In this case, masculinity is considered in relationship with racial identity because of the ways race
and gender interact within society. Reflected in Eric’s narrative was a socio-cultural positioning that being raised in the predominately Black housing projects on the west side of Chicago, and moving to a predominately white middle class suburban community, placed on his identity development. Therefore, Black masculinity encompassed the interpretation of Eric’s gender identity development to be more inclusive. Thus, according to the Jackson’s (2002) Black masculine identity model, the significant characteristics that enact behaviors and representation in Black maleness were identified early in Eric’s life. While community, achievement, independence, and recognition played critical roles in Eric’s gender identity development, struggle appeared to be the most impactful factor that would later influence his athletic identity to become more dominate than his racial and gender identity. For example, Eric only spent the first 5 years of his life living in the Henry Horner Housing Projects. However, the consequences of the struggles his family faced economically would remain with Eric throughout his life.

For Eric, his gender identity was demonstrated in his efforts toward achieving a professional football career. The most striking expression of Eric’s gender identity was his resistance to returning to Chicago after moving away to the suburbs. He shared that he argued with his parents often during his early adolescent years because he wanted them to allow him to begin developing his independence by remaining in Bolingbrook over the weekends when his mother, father, and sister would return to Chicago. Eric credited sport participation as the reason his parents would have to permit him to stay in Bolingbrook because he would have to practice or play in games. His ability to earn his independence through sport participation would also contribute to the areas of recognition and achievement characteristics because his parents would consider these factors of his life warranted reasons for becoming more involved in his sports by not returning to Chicago as frequently. Eric expressed that when he began to gain notoriety in
high school as a star player on the football team, this was also further development of his gender identity because it created a viable option for him to assist his family economically in order to remove the significant level of struggle they experienced (Jackson, 2002).

**Finding #3: Eric’s Academic Identity Development**

Despite Eric earning a bachelors and master’s degree, the least salient, before and during his student-athlete experiences, was his academic identity. While Eric reconstructed his life story, the academic identity seemed to be the area that experienced the most transitions which required a significant amount of negotiation. Interpreting this area of Eric’s life was the most challenging for me because I feared reinforcing stereotypes that Black male student-athletes do not care about their education. While sport studies research has devoted a significant amount of focus upon debunking this myth, the fact remain that Black male student-athletes academic achievement and graduation rates remain well behind their White male counterparts (Lapchick, 2014). The amount of emphasis that Eric placed on his academic development would lead us to believe that this stereotype is common, therefore, my interpretation of this reality is to look further into how Eric’s negative athletic experiences and academic interventions facilitated his need to develop his academic identity. More specifically, Eric spoke a great deal about the lack of accountability he felt toward his academic achievement. I perceived a level of bitterness that he felt toward other people feeling he should be personally responsible for his own academic achievement but felt free to punish him for not being successful when they played no role in facilitating his success. Of particular note, Eric seemed to be extremely grateful to his parents, who despite possessing the ability to assist him with his assignments, he felt strongly that they were at least willing to hold him accountable for dedicating time toward his academics in order to achieve his goals. Therefore, the findings of this research suggest that academic identity of
Black male student-athletes is inextricably linked to their athletic identity and should thus be actively engaged in order to facilitate more successful academic outcomes.

**Finding #4: Eric’s Athletic Identity Development**

Most salient of the four identities studied during this research project was Eric’s athletic identity. Evidenced in Eric’s narrative was the impact of the media on his athletic development. Eric placed a great deal of emphasis on the significance of celebrity and discussed how the attention students who participated in sports received over students with high academic achievement molded his personal aspirations. Meaning, he relied on what he could see rather than what he was told. The visual perception of Black males succeeding in the media also had racial implications, but primarily played upon his efforts toward athletics over academics. I considered the academic identity development last in this section, in spite of its importance in Eric’s life, because of its link to saliences. In understanding that Eric possesses multiple identities, the one that is salient is in fact the identity that most impacts his development. For Eric, his athletic identity became the most critical aspect of his existence and nothing else was more important than his development in the area of sports. His narrative offers insights into how to engage the other identities because when the development of his academic identity was threatened or challenged it opened the door to the possibility for him to begin considering focusing more attention on other aspects of himself. This is what sport studies research argues is a benefit of sport participation, but we do not discuss enough how to facilitate the use of influences that athletic identities to ensure the negative aspects of athletic development do not suppress success (Coakley, 2014).

Consistent with recent studies of identity foreclosure of Black male student-athletes (Benson, 2000; Devin, 2015), the findings of this study revealed that Eric’s desire to meet the
standard physical expectations of Black males who desired to participate in sports was elevated due to frequent denial of opportunity to play. Eric explained that he was not naturally built to play sports. There were several occasions throughout the study where Eric expressed a deep commitment to gaining access to athletics. First, he was denied enrollment in the local pop Warner football league. Second, he was unable to earn a starting role on the Illinois football team his freshman due to inactivity over the summer when he returned home to deal with initial eligibility issues. Finally, he suffered an injury early in his career that required him to not only rehabilitate physically because of inactivity as a result of the injury. At these moments in Eric’s life, he was developing an athletic identity that not only required a competitive spirit, but also came with expectations that strength training and development produce results that would allow him to perform at the highest level on the football field. Eric was very clear that his desire to meet these expectations was his top priority. During the interview, when he spoke about being overweight, his energy would change to excitement and enthusiasm as he described the ways he overcome this obstacle and was able to develop his athletic self. According to Walker (2015), Eric’s isolation from his academic responsibilities and other aspects of his life during these periods were consistent with identity foreclosure. It was clear throughout the interview that Eric had not realized how impactful his focus on developing his athletic identity interfered with his ability or desire to explore his other identities.

Another example of Eric’s identity foreclosure was when he earned his scholarship to play football at Illinois. Identity foreclosure frameworks suggest that Black male student-athletes are particularly susceptible to focusing their attention on their athletic identity because of the need to use athletics to become successful (Adler & Adler, 1991). Within the cultural norms of a Big Ten Division I football program, in particular the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign, Eric expressed a resurgence of national notoriety when he first appeared on television. Because Eric had to re-adjust from high school celebrity to being virtually unknown on a college campus, he was able to see the result of labor when he worked during that down period to regain his perceived athletic identity expectations. Meaning, at this period of time, his primary focus upon entering college was to regain the physical shape that allowed him the opportunity to earn a college scholarship. Unfortunately for Eric, this meant that his identity had become completed foreclosed around his athletic identity. This foreclosure did not allow Eric to fully engage with college life or other identities.

**Research Question 2: What are Eric Christopher Garrett’s salient identities before, during, and after becoming a student-athlete?**

**Finding #5: Salience of Athletic Identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Before Student-Athlete</th>
<th>During Student-Athlete</th>
<th>After Student-Athlete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity 1</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity 2</td>
<td>Racial</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity 3</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity 4</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Racial</td>
<td>Racial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above chart illustrates the salient identity patterns that Eric expressed as he reconstructed his life experiences. Using only my prompt to start from the beginning of his life, Eric began to narrate his story from the vantage point of being unable to play outside. Being forced to create games restricted by indoor play during the first 5 years of his life, Eric further
contextualized his development around a new found freedom to play when his family moved to Bolingbrook, Illinois. Prior to joining an organized sport program, which was not until he made the high school football team, Eric revealed that his primary focus was to develop his athletic skills to earn the opportunities that athletic participation would afford him later in life. Thus, the impact of adolescent (age 13-19) and early adult (19-22) athletic identity development was centered on his desire to achieve a professional football career.

According to Hogg (2006) identity salience is associated with people’s desire to function within uncertainty. Meaning, it is common to define oneself with the identity that reduces uncertain interactions in order to facilitate successful relationships. Hogg’s identity salience theory considers a person’s need to “feel included and their need to be distinctive”, which correlates with the salience of Eric’s athletic identity being prominent over his academic, racial, and gender identity. In Eric’s case, his recollection of moving to Bolingbrook, Illinois offers insight into how his athletic identity became salient and how high school perpetuated its continued development. The new friends Eric acquired when he moved from the city to the suburbs satisfied his need to be included. He described his friends as the people who introduced him to sports, in particular to, football. Because Eric’s early life did not include play due to the violence in Henry Horner, the move to the suburbs created social interactions that placed him in an environment where playing sports was the way kids made friends. More importantly, Eric expressed that his superior skills in sports elevated his desire to play because it gave him the distinction he needed to overcome other obstacles he faced in his life. Thus, meeting the need of inclusion and distinction simultaneously allowed his athletic identity to become a critical part of Eric’s life after moving to the suburbs.
Another critical finding of the study was when Eric’s identity salience shifted when academics prevented or hindered his capacity to reap the benefits of his athletic achievements. Black male student-athletes are expected to meet their academic responsibilities and expectations due to the limits that college and professional athletic participation place on their social mobility (Bimper, 2014). Meaning, it is common practice for parents and teachers to express to student-athletes that they need to have a back-up plan when desiring a career in professional sports (Branch, 2011; Bimper, Harrison, & Clark; 2012; Brew, Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Eric’s story informs existing research by offering a counter-narrative that athletic salience does not prevent academic achievement, rather represents which identity Eric focuses his attention toward developing. Consequently, each time his athletic career was threatened by his lack of attention on his academic identity, Eric developed the capacity to refocus his energy toward meeting his academic expectations while simultaneously continuing toward his athletic aspirations. This could be perceived as a negative if identities could only be developed during specific periods of our lives (Jackson & Hogg, 2010). However, what we know about identities is that early development of identities can have positive and negative impacts on our lives, just as our ability to negotiate our multiple identities can serve to support us through life transitions. Toward considering a Black male student-athlete identity theory, Eric’s narrative suggests that essential to the development of academic identity is a process of experiencing loss of the athletic identity. While the athletic identity does not completely dissipate, Eric was able to demonstrate the capacity to refocus his attention on his academic identity when he earned a bachelor’s degree, and later a master’s in advertising and master’s in Business Administration.

As a result of Eric’s experiences, the development of his athletic identity over a considerable amount of his life span did not significantly decrease in dominance after his
student-athlete career. When Eric understood and accepted that a professional career was not a viable option, he was able to utilize much of the skills including, dedication, perseverance, hard work, and dealing with loss, to enhance his academic achievement (Coakley, 2014). This is the reason this finding contributes to the literature by offering a counter-narrative because it leads researchers to return to analyzing Black male student-athletes capacity to negotiate identities according to what has been determined as positive characteristics gained through athletic identity development. Considering this counter-narrative, Eric’s case narrative offered further insight into the factors that contributed to his capacity to shift his multiple identities in order to become the productive member of society that he is today.

Research Question 3: How did Eric Christopher Garrett negotiate his multiple identities if or when representing himself was in conflict with his environment?

The areas of the identity development process of particular interest to this study were the following: 1) Making sense of the multiple roles that Eric played in society when we interact with other; 2) Determining which of the multiple identities will help the self-define and demonstrate the characteristics necessary to meet Eric’s needs and desires; and 3) Considering how Eric facilitated the ways those identities interacted with each other when they conflict (Jackson and Hogg, 2010). This section discusses the final area of identity development that focuses on negotiation. As discussed in chapter two, Eric is the target of those who perceive his identities as valid (Swann, 2005). Especially critical in Eric’s life was his capacity to engage the interaction because of the ways his academic and athletic identities appeared to be in direct conflict with one another. This was exampled at three major stages of his life. First, when he needed to retake the ACT because his first score did not meet NCAA or the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign minimum academic standards. Second, when he needed to adjust to
meeting the minimum expectations in college to remain eligible to play for the Illinois football team. Third, when he realized that he was not going to have an opportunity to achieve his professional football career. According to Swann (1997) the goal of identity negotiation is to “bring others to see them as they see themselves” (p. 1048). In this section the summary of findings will outline how Eric’s case narrative exposed his strategies that impacted his ability to negotiate his race, gender, academic, and athletic identity.

**Finding #6: Eric’s Racial Identity Negotiation**

The representation of Black male student-athletes in quantitative studies is the conflict that places Eric’s racial identity in a position requiring negotiation (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). The pervasiveness of Black male student-athlete graduation rates is generally not a surprise to scholars who study race in sports, however sport studies research continues to focus on Black male who do not earn a college degree rather than those who earn bachelors and master’s during their intercollegiate participation. Even though Eric would eventually end up on the positive side of graduation rates, he still found himself confronted with the racial stereotype along the way. When Eric was a participant in the Bridge Transition Program, the directors were the first time he was challenged to consider that academic institutions were only interested in Black male student-athletes for their athletic prowess. He recalled the program directors telling him and the other athletes (all of them black) that regardless of what their reputation was in high school they were on a new playing field that only saw them as athletes. Eric was very clear that choosing between academics and athletics was the choice that he had to make. Interestingly, Eric met the expectations of the Transition directors in order to gain enrollment at Illinois so he could play football, however he would still focus the majority of his attention on his athletic identity regardless of his new awareness of the racialized implications that would be drawn if he
did not complete his degree. In the end, the representation of Black male student-athletes would cause Eric to meet his academics expectations by negotiating his academic identity with his athletic identity until he fully realized that he wouldn’t play professional football.

**Finding #7: Eric’s Black Masculinity/Academic/Athletic Identity Negotiation**

According to the extant literature and the insights gained from Eric’s life narrative, the criminalization of Black males, in this particular case student-athletes, is the conflict that must be negotiated when interacting with others (Leonard & King, 2011). Based on the stereotypic notions of Black male student-athletes in academic spaces, Eric’s racial and gender identities were both in conflict with his academic and athletic identities. Eric demonstrated awareness of this conflict when he reconstructed the origin of his Candyman nickname, as early as high school. He expressed that stealing the candy was not because he was a troublemaker. This desire to clarify that stealing the candy from his classmate offers some insight into his early identity framework and why he may have felt the need to negotiate these identities later.

Equally important to understanding the way Eric’s experiences as a Black male participating in sports caused him to establish variations in his identity is recovering the moments that self-verification became a necessity (Swann, 1987). Similar to candy incident in high school, when Eric described the advice he received from former players when he arrived at Illinois, the most significant part of the advice was for him to attend classes. According to Swann (2005), the perceiver is a critical aspect of the targets ability to demonstrate self-verification. In this case, Eric was sent the message that in order to negotiate his athletic identity with his academic identity, it was necessary for him to be present in class even if he did not put forth the maximum amount of effort because it was necessary for teachers and classmates to see him at least present. This negotiation was obviously problematic toward his ability to excel.
academically, however Eric would express later that simply being present in class was not enough for him. It appeared that negotiating his racial and gender identity may have begun as negotiation but he would later see his capacity to fully engage in both his academic and athletic identity once he realized that it was not necessary to focus on his racial and gender identity.

The conflict of interest that exists with academic and athletic institutions is a hot topic in sport student research and popular media. When athletes are told that athletics comes first and academics comes second, it is understandable that this directive, usually from coaches, is confirmation that sport participation does not align with academic expectations. For Eric, there were several instances during and after his student-athlete career that he

One of the most intriguing findings of this study was when Eric recalled the moment that he had to negotiate this athletic identity. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is that exact reflection where Eric realized that his athletic participation was not going to afford him an opportunity to play professional football, so he decided to use the resources he gained from playing at Illinois to earn not one but two college degrees.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

When I was a graduate assistant with the athletic academic services department, my responsibility was to monitor and report on the academic expectations of at-risk student-athletes. Originally, I was only responsible for football players, however after being acknowledged for my ability to impact successful results with my student-athletes, I was also assigned several men’s basketball players. These athletes were both black and white, however had different expectations of how I should demonstrate my support toward their success. In particular, the first Black male student-athlete I was assigned taught me that I had two roles in his life. First, he believed that I was responsibility for challenging him academically, despite his resistance to my demands. Second, I must attend his games and celebrate him athletically. I learned this because at the beginning of each meeting he would start each session asking me, “Did you see the game”. I recall the first few times he asked me this question, I had not attended the games or watched on television. After the third time, telling him I did not watch or attend, I recall his response as if it were yesterday. He turned to me and said, “Sports is what I am good at. Even when things don’t go my way, at least I know I tried my hardest and that I can get better. School is where I am not good. If you want me to be willing to show you where I am weak, I need to know that you see me when I am strong.” This significant moment in my life was impactful because it invited me to reconsider my role in both his academic and athletic development. As a researcher, this moment has consistently resurfaced during the support that I gave to Black male student-athletes as a professional, but also academically as I thought about the ways I can expand the way sport and society views Black male student-athletes potential for academic and athletic success. Similar to my own experience working with Black male student-athletes that is illustrated here,
the unique contributions discussed in this section reflect similar moments of clarity about aspects of the student-athlete experience that I had not previously considered.

**Significance of Student-Athlete Classification**

Through Eric’s narrative, the findings of this study revealed that the student-athlete classification is substantial in the identity development for Black males who participate in sports. The results of this study informed what potentially instigates Black male student-athletes’ identity negotiation; becoming a student-athlete. Eric’s narrative suggests four ways that being identified as a student-athlete are impactful include: 1) Entrance; 2) Performance; 3) Benefits, and 4) Achievement. According to Eric’s narrative, until he officially became a student-athlete when he joined the high school football team, his academic identity was relatively non-existent in his memory. As discussed in the literature review, Jackson and Dangerfield’s (2002) Black masculine identity positionality closely correlates with Eric’s experiences as a black male student-athlete community, ie. Entrance/Performance, ie. Achievement/Benefits, ie. Independence/Achievement, ie. Recognition. Accordingly, the contributions of this research is to consider that Black males are more impacted by the student-athlete classification because of the close correlations to behavioral affirmations that may or may not conflict with one another. If Eric’s narrative informs the experiences of Black male student-athletes, then it is arguable that coupled with Black masculinity identity model, the salience and negotiation of the athletic identity is the result of (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2002).

This is another significant finding because of the extant literature that discusses the ways in which Black male student-athletes are exploited. The entrance, achievement, independence, and recognition that Black males receive from the title of student-athlete is demonstrated throughout Eric’s narrative. The entrance that Eric sought was a need to connect with other
children in his community that were participating in sports as their primary mode of interaction. Entrance was particularly necessary for Eric’s desire to earn a college degree. He believed that his athletic identity would offer him the opportunity to earn a professional career in sports, and for football players, college is the only option. So, even though his academic identity was not a salient identity, Eric expressed that academics was a necessary aspect of his journey toward becoming a professional athlete.

**Importance of Identity Negotiation for Black Male Student-Athletes**

The current method of encouraging Black male student-athletes to focus on their academic identity is to inform them of the statistical likelihood of achieving a professional sport career. Despite these statistical data, this method does not appear to be influencing their desire to pursue this career path. Thus, considering the insights gained from Eric’s narrative, it is possible that the desire to develop an academic identity is not absent but rather secondary. Throughout the interviews, he demonstrates that he understood all along the importance of his education. Eric expressed that confusion arose when he attempted to figure out how to accomplish a successful athletic career and high academic achievement. In this area Eric felt truly alone. At no point during the interviews with him did he mention one person who gave him practical tools or even discussed with him a desire to achieve both academic and athletic success. He was very clear that the message that he received from most people was that he had to make a choice, rather than negotiate his academic and athletic desires. Even if at some point someone did have this conversation, Eric’s reconstruction of his life lacked the impact that engrained in his memory as meaningful and impactful. Every aspect of his life was separate, athletics, academics, family, and his ability to translate these aspects of his life as support mechanism that could work
collectively instead of separately.

Academic Intervention Programs

Eric’s experience in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Bridge Transition Program had a major effect on the development of his academic identity. His reconstruction of the summer he spent focusing on his college preparation was perceived to be the critical moment of his life that helped him to understand how his academic identity impacted his athletic self. This is consistent with Bimper, Harrison, & Clark (2012) who have studied achievement of Black male student-athletes and found that academic intervention is the cornerstone for their developing an understanding of their role institutionally. Meaning, Black male student-athlete who are able to negotiate their academic and athletic self to successfully earn a college degree realize at some point in their college career that sports and education culture conflicts. Therefore, the Bridge Transition program facilitated an awareness for Eric that presented his academic identity as a necessary tool when he could no longer fulfil his athletic career aspirations.

It is not uncommon for Black male student-athletes to focus on their athletic career over academic achievement. Many believe it will offer them a more viable avenue for financially supporting their families. By considering the feeling of family responsibility in the context of Black masculinity identity development, Eric’s narrative extends our understanding of the ways in which male potentially perceive their role in families from low socio-economic backgrounds. The influence of Eric’s family was consistent throughout his life, and at no point did he recall them pushing him toward his athletic identity. Eric had positive reflections of his mother and father who intervene on his academic responsibilities, while unable to assist him academically themselves, they held him accountable to meet expectations. This is a fact that has already been
revealed in sport studies research, however, sport studies research does not discuss what parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators need to do with this knowledge. In Eric’s case, when he did not meet the NCAA initial eligibility requirements, he expressed that his mother detected that his greatest weight was feeling that he had failed his family. While he spent time home over the summer, he recalled his parents making it clear to him that his only responsibility was his own happiness and not his job to “save the family”. It can be asserted, based on this research findings, that parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators must be conscious of the influence of gender roles on Black male student-athletes feelings of financial responsibility to their families.

Because instrumental case study research is designed to create generalization about a major issue, the findings of this research offers key tools for future research toward developing a Black male student-athlete identity theory.

**Accountability: Implications for Athletic Administrators**

Despite the persistent myth, although dispelled in sport studies research by Harris (1999), that Black parents push their boys toward sport, Eric recalls his parents and the directors of the Bridge Transition Program being his greatest influence. As he reconstructed his academic experiences, Eric believes that accountability was a key issue in his ability to focus on his academic achievement. He believes that his academic aspirations were influences by the lack of expectations that were placed on him until he failed to meet the minimum requirements to play sports.

Another important factor in Eric’s feelings regarding the need for accountability were the media images that gave him the perception that only athletic success mattered. This was evidenced when he continued to return to his recollection of who was celebrated in high school and college according to their achievements. Because his athletic identity was shaped by his
ability to achieve celebrity status, when his classmates who achieved good grades were not recognized in the media but his fellow student-athletes were in the news, it singled to him that his athletic identity should take precedence over academic aspirations.

**Black Male Student-Athlete Identity Theory**

Previous research studies on Black male student-athlete identity development primarily focus on each identity separately. This significant contribution of this project is that all four salient are considered to be functioning simultaneously.

Eric’s narrative revealed several occasions when his athletic identity was rejected. On each of these occasions, his response to this rejection was to press harder toward his professional athletic career goals. This researcher suggests a new path toward examining the Black male student-athlete experiences. If the Black male student athletic identity is salient and persistent until all opportunities to play professional sports has been exhausted, future research studies need to conduct narrative inquiries on those who do achieve a professional career in sports. The implications of these studies could potentially yield developmental models for parents, teachers, and athletic administrators toward practical tools to assist Black male student-athletes in fostering their athletic identity not as a professional athlete, but other careers in sports.

The goal of this research project was to advocate a need for future research designed to further develop a Black male student-athlete identity theory. The results of this instrumental case study definitely yielded additional areas of Black male student-athletes experiences that need to be explored. It is the recommendation of this researcher that more instrumental case studies be conducted to further expand the questions that need to be answered. More individual case studies are needed because Black male student-athletes come from diverse backgrounds. Still focusing on identity development, additional stories will explore the areas not covered in
Eric’s life story. This study sets the stage for examining Black male student-athletes who have played at Division 1, predominately White institutions, however, those who attended Historically Black Colleges and University, Division 2 or 3 institutions, Ivy League institutions, or even those who grew up in single family homes are all potential subjects for examination. The additional areas this research project did not explore: Academic enrichment programs required for college admission that enroll Black male student-athletes, Black male student-athletes who enroll(ed) in college under the NCAA provisional admission of Proposition 48, Black male student-athletes who attended elementary and high school while living in public housing, and Black male student-athletes who achieved a college degree and professional athletic career.

Unfortunately, despite the positive academic impact that the University of Illinois Summer Bridge Program had on Eric’s development, the program has been discontinued. The program currently exists and the one of the two long-time program director has retired. I am personally familiar with many former Black male student-athletes who participated and successfully completed the Bridge Transition program. My perception of their experience in the program was overwhelming favorable toward academic identity development, responsibility, and accountability. Eric’s story warrants further examination of the transition program’s impact on Black male student-athletes feelings toward academic expectations before, during, and after the program’s inception and conclusion.

While this research project argues on behalf of Black male student-athletes who did not achieve a professional athletic career, more studies are necessary on those who do achieve a professional athletic career. Many elite former professional athletes write autobiographies or have biographies written about them. However, there remain many Black male athlete who
achieve a professional career but their stories remain untold. More specifically, it is rare that scholarly research is conducted and produced on these athletes.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitation of individual case study research that focuses on narrative inquiry is asserting the significance and value about an issue that is analyzed considering a person’s life story. The limitations considering in this research study include: 1) Primary and Secondary Evidence, 2) Research Participant, 3) Methodological Impact on Findings Generalization, and 4) Researcher.

**Primary and Secondary Evidence**

While I am confident that Eric reconstructed the events of his life to the best of his ability, research is clear that recalling stories is never an exact science (Atkinson, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007). The findings of this research project was limited to Eric’s narrative and minimal newspaper articles that reported on his athletic success. While some of the articles, magazines, and the athletics media guide offered a few personal aspects of Eric’s life, his parents’ names and hometown, the primary focus was his athletic abilities and accomplishments. Therefore, this researcher’s analysis was limited by the participant’s best recollection of his lived experiences, but believes the wealth of rich descriptions that Eric offered during the in-depth interviews provided this study with the information necessary to answer the research questions. Additionally, Eric shared several photographs with me during the interview process. Appendix C is a pictorial timeline of Eric’s life. The interviews did not consist of in-depth discussion of each photograph. However, the photos offer an additional source of validation for Eric’s narrative and help corroborate his timeline and recollections. In addition to the photos are newspaper clippings of his high school recruitment and rankings, magazine write-ups of his high
school recruiting profile, high school graduation, university athletics media guides, and
documents related to his college injury. While these source considerations were not used in great
detail in this study, they are excellent data for future research.

**Research Participant**

The findings, contributions, implications, and recommendations focus only on Eric
Christopher Garrett. His experiences before, during and after his student-athlete career are
limited to the following demographics: 1) Chicago and Bolingbrook, IL, 2) played two sports in
high school: football and basketball, one sport in college; football, and 3) attended a
predominately White, NCAA Division 1 institution in the Midwest of United States of America.
Based on the theoretical framing of this analysis, this researcher acknowledges that Black male
student-athletes have varied lived experiences depending on their socio-economic background,
sport, academic, and career interests. Although this study is limited to these demographic
characteristics, it should be noted that several aspects of Eric’s life are heavily representative of
many Black male student-athletes who play football at Division 1 revenue-generating programs
(Lapchick, 2014).

**Methodological Impact on Findings**

Individual instrumental case study research studies do not allow for generalizations
(Stake, 1995). The limitation of not being able to draw from Eric’s life story to make general
assumptions about Black male student-athlete experiences is the assumption that studying
individuals does not produce enough evidence to answer questions about society. Recognizing
that an individual case does limit the findings to a singular experience that was not the focus of
this research project. While 15 years after his student-athlete experience might seem like a long
time, Eric’s vivid memories of his early life in the Henry Horner Housing Projects, not being
allowed to play for the Trojan pop warner football team, and playing football at Illinois offered the evidence necessary to answer the request questions. The research questions being limited to identifying only Eric’s multiple, salient, and negotiated identities was intentional in order to uncover themes undiscovered in sport studies research previously about the plight of Black male student-athletes.

**Researcher**

Throughout their career, student-athletes are socialized to mistrust the media and researchers for fear of misrepresentation (Singer, 2008). Thus, it is difficult to encourage them to participate in research that might expose aspects of their athletic experiences that others may disagree with. For example, Eric’s perspective on how much focus he should put on his education is at great risk of being criticized as a result of this research study. While the racial background and personal friendship that he and I have with one another was the reason Eric felt comfortable sharing his story with me, I acknowledge that these factors can also be considered a limitation. It is reasonable to consider the potential bias present in the analysis of a story that at times may represent a Black male and friend in a negative light. However, these connections should also be views as the reason Eric allows our field of study access to the experiences he shared through lending his story to enhance knowledge about his life before, during, and after being a student-athlete. With this in mind, this study was carefully designed to ensure that the findings in chapter 4 was not an analysis but an interpretation of the 4 in-depth interviews that was primarily supported by direct quotes from Eric.

**Recommendation for Future Research**

As a young girl, I recall being advised ‘not to become a statistic’. The drop-out rates from teen pregnancy, violence in many urban and rural communities, and drug abuse was a
startling reality for many black families during my early life, and my family was no exception. The advice not to become a static fueled my desire to stay the course when academic struggles and personal challenges could have rendered my own life story on the negative side of these statics instead of the positive, where I am today. As an underrepresented and 1st generation college student, my chances of earning a college degree was only 54% as I am sure many people doubted my ability to accomplish earning a bachelor’s and master’s degree. More importantly, my desire not to succumb to the statistical unlikelihood that I would earn a doctorate gave me the fuel I needed to ensure completion of this project toward earning my degree. For this reason, as I examined Eric’s experiences as a Black male student-athlete who desired to achieve a professional football career and earn a college degree, I could personally connect with the impact of positive and negative stereotypes on his identity development along his journey.

For this reason, stereotype threat is an area that has been introduced in sport studies research, but deserves further examination. In particular, the question should be asked to assess the potential positive impact that stereotype threat can have on Black male student-athletes who desire a professional athletic career and college degree.

**Conclusion**

As a result of conducting this study of Eric Christopher Garrett’s life, I have gained a new perspective about the way forward with the potential to enhance the experiences of Black male student-athletes. The salience and persistence of Eric’s athletic identity suggests that imploring him to develop a backup plan would be immediately rejected and possibly push him away from considering alternative careers that are more long-term and increase in statistical viability. Alternatively, this research suggests that sport management curriculum be expanded to include a professional athlete degree. Similar to coaching, contrary to popular belief the
professional athlete requires knowledge in the area of business, management, communication, finance, accounting, marketing, promotions, and much more to successfully brand an athletic career. Additionally, the assumption that talent is God given discounts the training and development that can also be inclusive of a professional athlete degree. More importantly, all of the areas of study mentioned above are transferrable if a professional career is not realized.

Currently, sport management degree programs do not emphasis the student-athlete’s ability to transition their desire to become a professional athlete into a career in professional sports. The term may appear to be semantics but the distinction is critical to a new way of considering viable career paths for student-athletes whose athletic identity is their most salient identity. This research suggests that sport management academic programs need to consider expanding their view of what it means to pursue a career in athletics. In my view, earning a position as a professional athlete should be considered entry level in the organizational chart of professional athletics. Currently, professional athlete is not widely discussed and possibly does not exist on organizational charts of professional sport teams. Additionally, I hold a bachelors and master’s degree in sport management, however I do not recall being encouraged to reach what I consider the highest level of the professional athletic career and become the owner of a professional sport team.

What does a professional athlete degree course curriculum entail? In addition to the previously mentioned courses, a focus on sport culture, history, and psychology are also critical aspects of professional sports that can equip athletes with the tools needed to successful manage athletic careers. Often, attorneys and professional sport teams take advantage of the lack of preparation athletes receive. Many are taken advantage of and frequently file bankruptcy. First
and foremost, student-athletes should be able to receive internship or co-op credit for in-season activities, such as games, travel, practice, tape review, etc.

The obvious argument against a professional athlete major would be the potential enrollment in these programs. However, considering the potential for career attainment of other careers there is no difference. Once I heard former MSNBC host Dr. Melissa Harris Perry compare a child’s desire to become a professional athlete with the possibility of becoming the president of the United States. The greatest conclusion that this researcher can offer to Black male student-athletes as a former academic advisor, and to my friends, is be unapologetically YOU. The desire to be a professional athlete is not a problem for society. This research informs us that the problem is much more. Hopefully this study encourages more Black male student-athletes who desired a professional athletic career and earned a college degree to share their stores, what I know for sure, until then…it’s all good!
REFERENCES


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Henry, W., & Closson, R. (2012). The racial identity development of student-athletes when blacks are the majority and whites are the minority. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 49*(1), 17-32.


APPENDICES
Appendix A
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Department of Kinesiology and Community Health
Dissertation Research Project
Nameka R. Bates, Researcher
Informed Consent Form

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with “Stereotypes of a Black Male (Student-Athlete) Misunderstood…And It’s Still All Good: The Life of Eric Christopher Garrett”. You are being asked to participate because you are the primary source of information that is necessary to obtain this life history. You will be asked about your sport participation before, during, and after your collegiate athletic experience. I seek to understand the holistic experience of black male athletes through engaging with their “lived” experiences.

2. The interview will be audiotaped and videotaped, transcribed, and made available for public and scholarly use at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Applied Health Sciences Library and in the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health. Any member of the general public will have access to this interview and your words may be quoted in scholarly and popular publications.

3. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes over the course of 4 schedule interviews. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice prior to the execution and delivery of a deed of gift. You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions in the deed of gift. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any tape made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

4. Subject to the provisions of paragraph five below, upon completion of the interview, the tape and content of the interview belong to Nameka R. Bates, and the information in the interview can be used by Nameka R. Bates in any manner it will determine, including, but not limited to, future use by researchers in presentations and publications.

5. The researcher (Nameka R. Bates) agrees that:
   A. It will not use or exercise any of its rights to the information in the interview prior to the signing of the deed of gift.
   B. The deed of gift will be submitted to you for your signature before the interview.
   C. Restrictions on the use of the interview can be placed in the deed of gift by you and will be accepted as amending Nameka Bates’ rights to the content of the interview.

6. Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be handled by editing those portions out of the final copy of the transcript. The video and recording is only for the use of transcription and will not be specifically used for presentation purposes.

7. Upon signing the deed of gift, the tape, and one copy of the transcript will be kept in the Department of Kinesiology and a copy of the transcript will be kept at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Nameka R. Bates, the researcher, will also retain a copy of all materials at 1904B East Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802.
8. If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact Nameka R. Bates at 1904B East Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802. You can phone to 217-637-0877 or email at nbates1@illinois.edu.

9. This form gives specific consent to utilize your name, ____________________________ (Eric Christopher Garrett) in the tapings and written publication produced from this research project. You agree that your name will not remain anonymous and fully agree to disclosure of information in all avenues of research. You agree that utilizing your name in this research project will not restrict your disclosure of information.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research, you can contact the Human Protections Administrator, Central Washington University, Ellensburg WA 98926-7401, phone number 509-963-3115, website www.cwu.edu/~hsre/.

Interviewer signature ____________________________________________

I agree to participate in this interview.

Interviewee Printed Name __________________________________________

Interviewee signature ____________________________________________

Address ______________________________________________________

Phone number ____________________________________________

Date ___/___/____
Appendix B:

Interview Questions

How would you define student athlete?

What role has/does sports play in your life?

Interview Questions set one (Early Childhood)

What are your earliest memories of watching sports?

What are your earliest memories of you participating in sports?

How did you start playing sports?

How did your family play a role in your sport participation?

Who were your role models? How did seeing them influence you?

How did you feel about playing sports when you were young?

What environment(s) did you play sports during your early years?

What is your happiest memory concerning sport as a child?

What was your greatest challenge participating in sport as a child?

Who was most influential in your sport participation as a child?

Please talk about your experiences growing up on the West Side of Chicago, IL.

Interview questions set two (Adolescence)

What sport(s) were most important to you as an adolescent?

Why were these sport(s) important to you?

Did your sport influences change in your adolescence?

Was there a defining moment in your adolescence that impacted your decision to continue in your sport(s)?

Who were the athletes you admired at this point in your life? Why?

Please talk about your experiences growing up in Bolingbrook, Illinois.
Please talk about your experiences being a high school football recruit.

Interview questions set two (Early and Present Football Career and Life)

What made you sign with the University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign?

Why did you choose football?

What appealed to you the most about playing football? The least?

Did being African American influence your football experience? Being male? How?

How did participating in football in college impact your academic achievement?

How did you see yourself as a student athlete?

Name the people who influenced you during your college career?

What affects, good and bad, did being an athlete have on your life?

Where does the Black male athlete (football player) fit in academic spaces?

What are currents issues exists for Blacks male in college and/or professional sports?

What has your greatest accomplishment been a college football player?

How important is race in sport?

What impact will being college football players have on the values you teach your son or daughters?

Did you achieve the goals you set for yourself in your sport career?

How did/has not moving onto the professional level impact your life after your eligibility was complete?
Appendix C:

Pictorial Timeline of Eric Christopher Garrett’s Life
WHERE THEY'RE GOING

Where the Chicago Area's top 30 players, according to staff writer Mark Bel, are going:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Pos.</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dwayne Goodrich</td>
<td>Hoboken HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mike Borden</td>
<td>Paulsboro HS</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>Ohio State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scott Kellough</td>
<td>Naperville North</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chris Pohlitz</td>
<td>Schaumburg HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Troy Goodspeed</td>
<td>Oswego HS</td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Notre Dame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mark Salomon</td>
<td>Evanston HS</td>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tim Jones</td>
<td>Richards HS</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Notre Dame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tim Loehrman</td>
<td>Naperville HS</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lee Lafayette</td>
<td>Bishop McNamara HS</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Notre Dame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Marion Smith</td>
<td>Bolingbrook HS</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Miami, Ohio</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Eric Garnett</td>
<td>Bolingbrook HS</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Marcus Hood</td>
<td>Kankakee HS</td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Darrell Finks</td>
<td>De La Salle HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
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<td>Kevin Thomas</td>
<td>Kankakee HS</td>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>Scott Meyers</td>
<td>F. T. South HS</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
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<td>Royal Taylor</td>
<td>Evanston HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Junior college</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Harold Blocker</td>
<td>Leo HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Jack Arami</td>
<td>Hoffman Estates HS</td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Curtis Reddix</td>
<td>Thornwood HS</td>
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<td>Roy Sircar</td>
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<td>Seth Tressell</td>
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<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>Larry Mekula</td>
<td>Wheaton South HS</td>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Stephens Young</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Jack Hrusky</td>
<td>Mount Carmel HS</td>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ted Cary</td>
<td>St. Patrick HS</td>
<td>OL</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Preston Letts</td>
<td>Mundelein Central HS</td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Ryan Kochman</td>
<td>Berwyn HS</td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Brian Stovall</td>
<td>Thornridge HS</td>
<td>DR</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Buie Singletar</td>
<td>St. Rita HS</td>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Paul Douglass</td>
<td>Lake Forest HS</td>
<td>DB</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
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SUN Publications

ATHLETES
OF THE WEEK

NAME: Lindsey Davis
SCHOOL: Wheaton
Warrenville South
AGE AND YEAR IN SCHOOL: 17, senior
HOMETOWN: Wheaton
SPORT: Volleyball
ACHIEVEMENT: Lindsey, an outside hitter, led the Tigers to the championship of last weekend’s DuPage Area Invitational with eight kills and seven service points in a 15-6, 15-8 title defeat of Wheaton Academy. She helped the Tigers breeze to the crown as they did not lose a game in five tournament matches.
MY GREATEST MOMENT IN SPORTS: Going to the sectional finals my sophomore year.
HOBBIES: Skiing, reading, writing poetry, going to Phish concerts, relaxing at my cabin and going out with my close friends.

NAME: Eric Garrett
SCHOOL: Bolingbrook
AGE AND YEAR IN SCHOOL: 17, senior
HOMETOWN: Bolingbrook
SPORT: Football
ACHIEVEMENT: Garrett, a starting tight end and linebacker, was on at least one preseason list of top high school players in the nation. He has more than exceeded preseason expectations as his play has helped the RH’s defense allow just seven points in its first four games. In a 28-0 victory over Stagg last Friday, Garrett made eight solo tackles, two of which were for losses, and assisted on six others. He added two sacks and knocked down two passes. He caused one Stagg fumble and caught a 25-yard TD pass on offense.
MY GREATEST MOMENT IN SPORTS: Returning an interception 58 yards for a touchdown last year against Oak Lawn.
HOBBIES: Running, playing basketball and looking at tapes of past games with the team.

Look out for Bolingbrook

Smith’s ‘Tailback High’ next great

Raider Facts

Congratulations

169
Eric Guenther

LB, 6-2, 235, Sr. (1/1)
Thousand Oaks, Calif. (Westlake)

Guenther Fact: Missed last eight games late season after injuring his knee in Louisville game, still making 19 tackles against West Virginia. He came in 13-12 win against Arkansas as a true freshman in 1990.

At Illinois

1990: Senior outside linebacker will battle to include starting job after missing last eight games in 1990.

1990 Highlight: Made 10 tackles in 25-13 win over North Carolina to remain in the conference. Made four tackles in second half, including one tackle for a loss. Started three games with 30 tackles in his four games. Missed a tackle in each game. Missed six games.

1991: Missed all 11 games, starting two cents at middle linebacker. Made 15 tackles, including 15 tackles for loss and forced two fumbles. Played in 12 games, including eight where he started. Provided line calls and helped the team against Miami. Continues to improve his skills.

1992: Made 11 tackles in the 44-10 win over Iowa. Made 33 tackles in his four games, including 13 in the 23-20 win over Penn State. Provided line calls and helped the team improve its defense. Continued to improve his skills.

1993: Lettered after seeing action in nine games as a true freshman, ranking a total of 15 tackles, nine in the 31-20 win over Michigan State. Missed two games due to injury. Made 17 tackles in his eight games, including 13 in the 10-0 win over Penn State. Provided line calls and helped the team improve its defense. Continued to improve his skills.

High School: Marquett Conference Player of the Year, Versailles.

Career Highlights:

- 1989: 9 tackles, 2 sacks, 1 interception, 1 blocked kick, 1 fumble recovery
- 1990: 19 tackles, 14 sacks, 2 interceptions, 1 blocked kick, 1 fumble recovery
- 1991: 37 tackles, 22 sacks, 3 interceptions, 1 blocked kick, 1 fumble recovery
- 1992: 40 tackles, 34 sacks, 4 interceptions, 1 blocked kick, 1 fumble recovery
- 1993: 10 tackles, 8 sacks, 2 interceptions, 1 blocked kick, 1 fumble recovery

Career Totals: 107 tackles, 94 sacks, 14 interceptions, 4 blocked kicks, 2 fumble recoveries

Guernter Fact: Outstanding prep linebacker moved to fullback during fall drills last fall and into starting lineup vs. Washington State.

1990: Held down No. 1 fullback spot through spring drills, expected to battle for starting job during the fall.

1994: Outside linebacker moved to fullback during second week of fall practice and was in the starting lineup three weeks later.

Made four starts at fullback, playing in nine games and making eight catches for 19 yards.

Primary blocking back ahead of Robert Holsombo, helping "field" yards for 1,353 yards.

Caught two passes in starting debut vs. Washington State.

Gathered two passes for nine yards vs. Michigan State.

1995: Redshirt season.

High School: One of the Midwest's top

linebacker prospects, made 185 tackles with 15 sacks for loss and seven sacks as a senior, also playing tight end on offense.

Made 110 tackles as a junior with six sacks and two interceptions.

Named All-Midwest selection by Super Prep. An all-state selection by Chicago Tribune and Champ

psage-Orange News-Gazette. High School coach was Phil Acker.

Personal: Born December 28, 1977

Helped lead Bolingbrook to IHSA state quarterfinals. Son of Ron and Frances Guenther.

Enrolled in College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Receptions: 2 vs. Washington State, 9/20/97 & Michigan State, 11/22/97

Yards: 9 vs. Michigan State, 11/22/97

Long play: 10 vs. Michigan State, 11/22/97