

2019

## Environmental Factors Influencing College Student Athletes Quality of Life

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2019.OT.12>

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### Recommended Citation

Ono, Carly; Sassano, Anthony; Villanueva, Janine Rebekah; and Wolffe, Ashton,  
"Environmental Factors Influencing College Student Athletes Quality of Life" (2019).  
*Occupational Therapy | Graduate Capstone Projects*. 12.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2019.OT.12>

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Occupational Therapy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy.

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# **Environmental Factors Influencing College Student Athletes Quality of Life**

by

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A culminating capstone project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational  
Therapy

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2019



## **Abstract**

College students face a number of obstacles to achieving success in their desired areas of occupation. However, fulfilling all the responsibilities of their other roles as well may present a risk for occupational imbalances. This is typically the case when examining the lifestyles of collegiate athletes. In this qualitative study, researchers interviewed 15 Dominican University of California (DUoC) college student athletes, playing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level to assess what environmental factors influence their quality of life (QoL). QoL was determined as the best measure seeing as how it encompasses all components of what deems an individual's life satisfying. This research was needed seeing as how most of the existing literature studies topics like rates of drug addiction, dropouts or eating disorders amongst this population. Few studies support athletes in determining what factors enhance or deter occupational performance.

Researchers acquired participants through snowball and convenience sampling. Participants of any age, race and gender were accepted fitting the following criteria: DUoC undergraduate student status, full-time student (12 units or more) and completion of at least one full season in a NCAA Division II sport. One-on-one interviews were completed using questions influenced by the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model. Researchers transcribed interviews individually and coded the transcriptions collectively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Through these interviews, four major themes were identified to impact the participants' QoL. Common themes included the sports physical, social and emotional impacts, in-season responsibilities and sacrifices, support systems, and motivations to play.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to acknowledge Dr. Karen McCarthy and the Dominican University Athletics Department for their support in this study.

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## **Introduction**

College provides pivotal experiences that significantly impact the individual long after they graduate. It is an American societal stereotype that college students participate in night time social outings, only then to attend their morning lectures on minimal sleep and rest. Consequently, the stereotype of sleep-deprived, penniless and hungry college students exists. However, it is important to note that all college students are unique and experience their own responsibilities and challenges outside of their roles as students.

This research study focused on the lifestyle balance of college student-athletes and how environmental factors impact their QoL. A student-athlete is defined as an individual who participates in a competitive sport organized by the institution that the person is academically enrolled in (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). A student-athlete will further be defined as an individual who participates in a sport governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for the purposes of this study. The terms student-athletes, college athletes, and college student athletes will be used interchangeably to describe the population discussed.

As assumed, this population is under constant pressure to meet the needs of their demanding roles in between meeting the requirements for their athletics and academics. The roles of a college athlete go far beyond a college student playing a sport. College athletes are friends, family members, employees, caregivers, etc. Considering such demands, it can be assumed that their QoL and occupational balance may be negatively affected. Though QoL is quite subjective and difficult to define, the researchers have identified various universal contributing factors from different studies (Camus, 2016; Chuange, Wei, Weng, & Pan, 2017; Meyer & Rosenblum, 2016; Ryff, 1989). As a result, this study will define QoL as having

acceptable physical and mental health, hope, safety, meaningful social relationships, purposeful activities, values, and spirituality. The researchers chose to measure QoL as a method of taking a holistic approach and addressing the impact that certain factors can have on an individual such as a college athlete. Improved QoL is also a desired outcome of OT intervention as it generally reflects a successful intervention. Moreover, researchers seek to gain knowledge of the extent of the external factorial influences on college athletes to determine if their well-being is more dependent upon intrinsic factors.

## **Background**

College student-athletes experience immense pressures to perform in both the classroom and on the field. Involvement, engagement, and integration in the classroom are crucial to the success of someone who identifies as a college student (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Identifying as an athlete requires extended hours of physical training, traveling, engaging in community service and competing. With such physical intensity and time commitments, there are significant additional stresses that are associated with being a collegiate student-athlete (Trabano, 2013). Considering the large percentage of college students who partake in NCAA sports, the quality-of-life (QoL) of these individuals and the existing environmental factors that influence them needed to be evaluated. It can be hypothesized that the environment heavily influences occupational engagement and the level of satisfaction in occupational performance. However, limited research has been conducted on identifying specific environmental factors that either support or inhibit occupational engagement and performance. Furthermore, based on efforts in finding research to support this study, a majority of the existing literature only contributes to the negative stigma surrounding this population. As a result, research is necessary to better understand and identify the environmental factors that enhance QoL.

## **Literature Review**

The following literature review will provide reasoning for measuring QoL versus similar terminology, such as well-being and mental health. In addition, evidence pertaining to the level of impact the environment has on occupational engagement in college student athletes will be analyzed and critiqued to support the hypothesis. Furthermore, research describing how support systems, motivations to play, and specific life skills contribute to engagement in occupations and thus, impact overall QoL.

A qualitative approach guided this research through use of semi-structured interview questions influenced by the person-environment-occupation (PEO) model. (Alase, 2017) This methodology allows for in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives on their occupational engagement and performance. The PEO model clarifies exactly how the individual's occupational engagement is influenced by their environment. In addition, routine expert reviews, debriefs and member checks were carried out within the research group to control analysis bias and to promote confirmability (Alase, 2017).

## **Defining Quality of Life**

As previously mentioned, we define QoL as having acceptable physical and mental health, hope, safety, meaningful social relationships, purposeful activities, values, and spirituality. Readers should not confuse this definition of QoL with mental health or well-being as these terms are often used interchangeably in literature.

Differences exist regarding how QoL is perceived worldwide amongst varying social classes, cultures and genders due to different life experiences. Additionally, it is also affected by internal conditions, personal experiences, societal norms and cultural values. As a result, QoL is

an extremely abstract concept with multiple definitions existing to define it. The World Health Organization (WHO) examines the cultural, social and physical contexts, client factors, personal goals, standards and concerns that comprise the individual (2014). Individuals with a disability defined QoL in terms of occupational autonomy and the ability to carry out desired occupations at their own will (Edwards, et al., 2017).

Mental health differs from QoL in that it is a state of comfort or happiness in which the individual understands their own competency, has resilience factors, and is able to be a productive member in society...it is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2001, p.12). Well-being differs from mental health because it is viewed as a positive outcome. It is meaningful and provides information on whether individuals perceive their life in a positive manner. Moreover, well-being includes universal judgments of life satisfaction and feelings ranging from despair to contentment. Although well-being and mental health are key factors to consider when assessing an individual’s overall satisfaction with life, they do not encapsulate all of the components that comprise an individual. An individual may have acceptable mental health but not feel satisfied with the state of their lives, or they could even perceive their life in a positive manner but desire something more. For these reasons, QoL will be measured to encompass all aspects of the individual’s life rather than specific components.

## **Types of Support Systems**

Extensive research on different institutional supports show results of increased QoL for student athletes. Over 80% of student athletes in the NCAA feel that their coach is supportive of their dual identity as both a student and an athlete (NCAA GOALS study, 2016). For instance, many colleges are introducing sports psychologists to their departments to address the

psychosocial components. Some coaches are bringing in time management coaches, team building coaches, and other specialists to develop the student-athlete as a holistic being. Legislative pieces have been implemented that limit the number of hours a student-athlete can participate in sports related activities, while trainers ensure the physical health of the student-athlete. In addition, training modules have been created for student-athletes to complete in order to increase understanding on prominent challenges student-athletes have.

Friend and family support are equally as important as the aforementioned formal supports. According to a study conducted on college students and the coping mechanisms used to manage their stress, social participation was named as a common stress reliever (C.P., 2017). More female than male college students were typically found to consult friends and families about their concerns as a coping mechanism. As evidenced, support systems can stem from a variety of resources. Having access to these support systems provide significant assistance to collegiate athletes when responsibilities become overwhelming.

## **Impact of Sport on the Individual**

As a result of this higher level intensity and time constraints, collegiate student-athletes experience impacts in their physical, social, and emotional health (Miller & Kissinger, 2009). For instance, some individuals feel the social and emotional impact of their sport due to the internal struggle of balancing the dual identity of a student and an athlete (Miller & Kissinger, 2009). Moreover, extreme exhaustion stems from prioritizing the occupations they need to engage in, such as homework and work, over the occupations they want to engage in, such as sleep or watching a movie with loved ones. This exhaustion ultimately leads to an occupational imbalance that wreaks havoc on their social and emotional health.

In regards to physical health, the physical intensity of training often leaves athletes depleted of energy to engage in other occupations, such as giving adequate time to their academics. If given a choice between sleeping and attending class, more often than not, rest will take priority if the individual is too physically exhausted to pay attention to a lecture for so many hours (Vetter & Symonds, 2010).

## **Prioritization & Occupational Imbalance**

The role of an athlete requires immense time and dedication to their sport as this population is expected to complete extended hours of physical training, traveling, community service and competing. Such time commitments typically result in sacrificing time for other meaningful occupations such as sleep, social participation and leisure activities (NCAA GOALS study, 2016). In order to succeed in the occupations they need or want to engage in, college student athletes must learn the significance of time management and prioritization.

Much of what influences time management for a student athlete is a decision-making process based on a compilation of past experiences, school, and coaching institutional requirements. More often than not, the academic institution and coaching staff coordinate the athlete's entire schedule. As a result, one aspect amongst many that influence a college-athlete's QoL is time management. Time management refers to one's ability to organize the time spent on their daily activities effectively (Maquet & Skalej, 2015). Johnson and Podlog (2014) explain that time management skills largely contribute to an athlete's resilience following adversity (injury, family difficulties, school difficulties), sports and academic performance and recovery, and overall well-being. Athletes mainly manage time based on two temporalities: anticipation and immediacy (Johnson & Podlog, 2014). Athletes who manage time based on anticipation plan

ahead and make decisions about their schedules based on prospective events. Temporality of immediacy refers to an athlete's inability to cope with what actions are expected of them in the near future. For example, if a student athlete needs time to recover from practice, but also needs to pay attention in class, one activity is often compromised. Athletes typically use a combination of both temporalities dependent on the context of the decision at hand. Time management, coupled with being able to efficiently prioritize important occupations, enable success in the athlete's sport and academics (Johnson & Podlog, 2014). Overall, practicing life skills such as time management and prioritization of necessary occupations can greatly contribute to increased QoL.

## **Motivations to Play**

In a study conducted at Georgia Southern University, 12 college student athletes were interviewed about reasons for partaking in their sport. Common themes throughout the interviews included a passion for the game, athletic identity, escape from reality, and achieving a sense of accomplishment and achievement (Karoblis, 2016).

Intrinsic motivation infers a genuine enjoyment and satisfaction from engaging in an activity (Blecharz, Horodyska, Zarychta, Adamiec & Luszczynska, 2015). As previously mentioned, committing to such an identity infers an intense dedication that should not be taken lightly. As a result, athletes who play for intrinsic motivations self-report better performance and higher levels of self-efficacy, in comparison to their extrinsically motivated counterparts. An extrinsically motivated athlete would engage in an activity to obtain outcomes distinct from their sport (Blecharz, Horodyska, Zarychta, Adamiec & Luszczynska, 2015). Extrinsic motivations would include monetary incentives or parental influences. Extrinsically motivated collegiate



athletes also exhibit a higher risk of experiencing occupational alienation as they are dedicating immense amounts of time and mental focus to something they do not truly enjoy (Vanleit, Starrett & Crowe, 2006). In addition to their genuine love for the game, athletes may engage in their sport as a means of reinforcing their identity and becoming apart of an established group.

Seeing as how sports teams spend immense amounts of time together, it is quite common for athletes to befriend each other. This friendship may stem from convenience, or the shared interests and struggles experienced together. Either way, self-identifying as a college student athlete provides motivation to engage in athletics. In general, identity is composed of self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in a particular group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identifying as a college student and a college athlete fit the individual into a particular group with specific roles, expectations, and incorporations. College students and student-athletes are both expected to perform at a certain level to qualify themselves for their desired identity.

As expected, obtaining a higher education presents a stressful time in an individual's life. Even though partaking in their sport presents numerous obstacles and time demands, athletes typically viewed their sport as an escape from reality (Karoblis, 2016). An athlete's emotional connection to their sport enables them to find some relief in playing when the stressors of life become too overwhelming. This connection, when paired with a satisfying performance or tough win provides a significant coping mechanism for this population. There is no doubt that student athletes partake in their desired sport for a number of reasons beyond what has been mentioned in this literature review. However, researchers hypothesize that a majority of the reasons that enable and motivate the individual to continue fulfilling the responsibilities of this specific role ultimately stem from their environment.

## **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of college student athletes' perception of the physical environmental factors that influence their quality of life. By identifying these factors, results will also show how they impact participants' satisfaction with their own occupational participation. Many studies on college athletes, assess the negative aspects associated with student athletes such as drugs, alcohol, and decline in grades (Caldeira et al., 2017; Ford, 2008; Levine, Etchison, & Oppenheimer, 2014.) We hypothesize, if college student-athletes are given adequate institutional support and resources, then an increased QOL can be obtained. Considering the large percentage of college students who partake in NCAA sports, the QOL of these individuals and the existing environmental factors that influence them needs to be evaluated.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The person-environment-occupation (PEO) model was used to guide this study for the purpose of examining the environmental influences that impact a student-athlete's occupational engagement (Law et al., 1996). PEO consists of three components, the person, the environment and the occupation. The person is perceived as a unique individual with varying roles and responsibilities that comprise their lifestyle. The environment is defined as the setting in which occupational engagement is carried out in. Occupations are the activities that provide meaning and value to the individual's life. These components are considered dynamic as they are expected to continuously change and evolve throughout the lifespan. It is assumed that the more these components overlap, the greater QoL experienced by the person. Conversely, the less these components interact, the less harmony flows amongst successful occupational functioning.

The PEO frame of reference identifies the relationship between the student athletes, their occupational engagement and the environment. Through this relationship, researchers gained an understanding of the participants' perception of their own occupational engagement and the level of satisfaction achieved. Moreover, by examining this relationship, researchers determined the quality of engagement in hopes of enhancing occupational functioning. Interventions guided by this model indicate that OTs must focus on the varying avenues in which the person, the occupation and the environment interact and how this can elicit change (Law et al., 1996).

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

A qualitative approach was used for this study to analyze the narrative data derived from semi-structured interviews. Researchers evaluated how participants interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences. In addition, researchers examined the environmental factors that influence perceptions of QoL based off information from the data collected.

### **Population**

This study's population included English speaking Dominican University of California (DUoC) athletes. Inclusion criteria consisted of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership at the Division II level. Participants must have completed at least one full competition season. This population sample consisted of a range of ages, genders, and sexual orientations. All student athletes qualified as a full-time, undergraduate student and each presented with the appropriate cognitive level to sign an informed consent form. Participants who played multiple sports or were graduate level students were excluded. The researchers interviewed 15 student athletes, nine identified as female and five identified as male and all were between the ages of 18 and 22. Participants were actively on one of six teams: cross country, basketball, soccer, golf, tennis, and volleyball. (See Table 1)

### **Data Collection**

Researchers utilized audio recording applications available on their cellular devices in order to capture and save interview content. The researchers conducted 15 one hour-long interviews were transcribed verbatim by researchers using the transcription website, Temi, and

implemented into the coding software, Dedoose. The interviews All information was stored on password-protected computers with researcher access only.

## **Data Management and Analysis**

Data consisted of audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with questions influenced by the PEO model. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected as researchers focused on participants' "lived experience" from a phenomenological approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To analyze the data, researchers completed initial codes of interviews which they conducted. Following initial coding, each interview was then group coded in order to reach full consensus between all five researchers. Codes were defined individually as they were identified. After all interviews were coded with full consensus, codes were collapsed or combined in order to create four overarching themes, which will be discussed further along in the article. Periodic expert reviews from faculty supervisors, debriefs and member checks within the research group took place to control bias in analysis and promote confirmability (Alase, 2017).

## Findings

Findings from the study resulted in four major themes, two of which included subthemes. Support systems, stresses during the championship season, motivation to play their sport, and the physical, mental, and emotional impact of their sports were critical in examining the QoL of a collegiate student-athlete. Moreover, participants recognized, through self-reflection, to have unique challenges and needs in comparison to the typical college student. Such reflection only further impacted their perceived QoL.

### Theme 1: Impact of Sport on Individual Student-Athlete

The participants spoke in-depth about the impacts their sport had on their QoL. Participants indicated that their sport impacted their overall QoL in both positive and negative ways. In addition, their sport had evident physical, social, and mental impacts that affected their daily lives. These reported impacts played a significant role into the participant's overall satisfaction of their QoL. Dante stated:

Physical, I mean we're running everyday and it just helps. Mental... all the coaches and student athletes.... pushed me to another level mentally and has helped me grow as a person... I would say social relationship, I have a really close knit group of friends, but I want to expand and meet new people and stuff it's really hard because being so busy and everything.

Participants identified a number significant impacts, through discrete examples, their sport has across multiple facets associated with the broader concept of QoL.

**Physical impact.** Participants described the physical demands of their sport as both a positive and negative impact to their sense of QoL. Some participants indicated that the physical

demands of their sport negatively impacted their ability to be productive the rest of the day because they were too physically drained from practice or conditioning. Carly indicated how the physical toll of her sport, in addition to the physically demanding workouts impacts her QoL negatively:

Physically, I feel drained... because we have to push ourselves everyday to work harder and get better, like today we had to do a lift and my legs felt so shaky. Just walking here my legs just get tired and sometimes if I shoot a good amount my shoulder starts to hurt... I usually have bruises everywhere, knees, elbows, hips, cuts on my elbows from diving, getting hit and falling.

Other participants described how the physical demands of their sport led to tiredness, reducing productivity in their daily lives. Dante stated:

Oh yeah a lot of fitness and weight training. Freshmen year I'd skip a lot of class just because I'd have to lay in the room like I can't move and I'm not going to get up for class.

Although the physical demands of the participant's sports largely had a negative impact on their overall QoL, other participants noted the physical demands of their sport had a positive impact to their overall QoL. Blakely described how the physical demands of her sport had a positive impact on her overall QoL:

I don't think if I weren't in a college sport that I'd even work out. That's why I'm sad that I'm gonna end tennis this year because I'm scheduled to go to the gym and now it's like when am I going to find that time. It's great; it has gotten me in the best shape of my entire life.

Participants also communicated a barrier to nutrition due to either a lack of synchronicity between practice times and dining hall hours or high costs of food on campus. This barrier to

nutrition led to unhealthy food choices, or food deprivation, both of which had a negative impact on the participant's quality of life.

**Mental Impact.** The mental impact of the participant's sport came from a variety of sources including gameday stresses, time demands, making a travel roster, pressure from coaches to perform, self-criticism, team politics, or as a stress relief from a difficult day. Participants indicated one or more of these sources as having a mental impact in their daily life, in addition to their overall satisfaction with their QoL. Angelica noted:

When you've had a crappy day at school, and have an exam, and go to practice, I'm able to release it, and just hit the ball and get all my anger out.

Carly described how her sport had a negative impact in her mental well-being which also lowered her satisfaction with her overall QoL.

We're so worried about everything and sometimes with basketball I'll be thinking I'm doing good and then my coach is like you're sucking and I'm like oh or like I'll do a move and I'll miss a layup and he's like and I'm like I'm sorry people miss layups so sometimes there's always that emotional battle in your head it's like a mental game.

**Social Impact.** The participants' sports also had a significant impact on the participant's socialization. Many of the participants socialized with teammates, fellow student-athletes, and classmates. Participants noted the reason for this was out of convenience, relatability with their peers, and an understanding of one another's struggles and goals. Many of the participants identified the positive social impact of being a student athlete. Participants indicated that it made them feel as though they belonged on campus, it helped them transition into college more easily, and it provided a support system. Rachel described the way in which she chose her friends.

I pick my friends based on their flexibility and like understanding and, and it's a better



environment for me because I have the support of friends because they understand the work that I put it in.

However, participants also noted ways that their sport had a negative impact on their socialization. Participants felt like they had less time to socialize with friends, specifically in the participant's championship season. Additionally, participants expressed a desire to create more friends outside of athletics and classes, but described the difficulty with creating time to regularly socialize with those students. Practice times, sport related travel demands, and general tiredness played a role into participants not socializing with students outside of athletics or their classes. Makayla acknowledged what her reality is in regards to making friends and socializing with people on campus.

Like if you aren't my teammate, it's just hard to coordinate a day, so sometimes I just have to shake it off, because it's nothing personal, but we just don't have the same free time.

Participants also described the microscope under which student-athletes are looked upon, and described how this impacted her decision to engage in activities involving alcohol consumption, drug use, or anything that could be negatively perceived in the media.

## **Theme 2: In-Season Responsibilities and Sacrifices**

Student-athletes tended to prioritize athletics and academics over all other occupations, especially while in their championship season. Most of free time during the championship season is dedicated to catching up on missed classwork, homework, taking naps, and occasionally leisure activities. Participants indicated that there is an increased in time demands directly related to their sports while in their championship season. Krystal noted:

We were always at practice and stuff, so we miss... things and meeting new friends at socials... and so it, it's funny, when the season ended, my roommate and I were like, well we don't know anyone because we've been so busy and so I feel like I miss on some of the social stuff that I could have been making relationships there.

Despite the increased time demands during the championship season, participants noted that this did not necessarily lead to an increase in stress or decrease in QoL. Some of the participants indicated the more structured schedule improved time management compared to the non-championship season where participants typically took harder classes, worked jobs or internships, or engaged in activities they gave up during their championship season. Participants noted that these were necessary sacrifices to make in order to succeed as both a student and an athlete. Chris described how the responsibilities, demands, and necessary sacrifices of the championship season impacted his non-championship season

We are playing less in the non-championship segment, it gives me more time and I have a more flexible schedule to go out and find a job, get an internship, or whatever it may be.

### **Theme 3: Support**

Participants in the study indicated varying levels of mental and emotional support for student-athletes from both formal and informal systems. Participants spoke about the lack of support they received specific to mental health, the existing support they used, and their recommendations for ways to support all student-athletes' mental health.

**Existing Support.** Participants most commonly reach out towards their family, friends, and teammates when in need of support. Some participants also noted they reach out towards their coach or a faculty member in the athletic department. Dante noted:

I'll call my dad and be like this happened and he's like I've been through it too.

Chris noted described how his teammate support and friend support came from the same individual.

Luckily my roommate is also soccer so we encourage each other were like don't worry about it you'll do better.

**Lack of Knowledge or Use of Support.** Very few student-athletes reached out to formal support systems on campus such as PSAAC, Counseling Services, or the CARE team when in need of support. The participant's described that either they were unaware of the services, they didn't want to deal with the stigma of mental health, or they did not feel a need to use these services. Elijah described the extent of their knowledge about the formal support services offered at Dominican University by saying,

I've heard of PSAAC...That's probably the one I heard about the most, and then student counseling as well because I've had friends that told me about it that are in it. And then I haven't actually... heard about the CARE team.

**Desired Support Services.** However, nearly all student-athletes indicated the need for a sports psychologist when asked about ways to improve QoL in the broader student-athlete population. Participants admitted that it would be most beneficial to someone who specializes with student-athletes and can relate to the experiences of being a student-athlete. Rachel identified that having a sports psychologist would be helpful, and further described how a sports psychologist would benefit the individuals QoL.

I think maybe a sports psychologist because the mental part of the game is completely different than what I'm used to. And I think it would've been beneficial to have someone kind of walking me through that. And keeping me in the right state of mind, so maybe

some more support surrounding like the mental health aspect of being a college student athlete.

#### **Theme 4: Motivation to Play**

Participants stated their reasons for engaging in their selected sport was based on a variety of reasons. Many of the students explained how they had a love and passion for their sport and had a strong desire to continue playing their sport. Elijah described two major reasons why he was motivated to continue his sports career into college.

My motivation is just to just the love for the game and just again, like going back to the beginning, just making sure that I have something to pay for college because I just don't want to put that burden on my parents.

The financial relief that a sports scholarship could provide on the cost of college was another major motivation for participants to continue to playing their sport in college. In addition to these two reasons, other students had a different reason to continue their sports career. Dieonte noted that he played collegiate sports because it would have been a waste of time if he didn't.

I spent so much time in this as a kid in high school that I would be wasting like all those years of my life if I hadn't done it [in college].

## **Discussion**

Based on the efforts in finding research on college-student athletes, it became evident that most of the existing literature on this population concerns negative studies, such as the rate of dropouts, eating disorders and substance or alcohol use. Consequently, few studies focus on identifying the missing supports for this population in an effort to increase their QoL. Through data analysis, researchers determined the participants' unique challenges to partaking in meaningful occupations.

The results of this study indicate that a majority of the factors impacting QoL were largely due to environmental factors that were out of their control. These findings aligned with the literature found on QoL. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO), determines QoL by analyzing the individual's cultural, social and physical contexts, client factors, personal goals, standards and concerns (2014). In contrast, individuals with a disability defined QOL, not in terms of health or disability, but by occupational autonomy (Edwards, et al., 2017). Most participants expressed stress and concern over the lack of control over the amount of time they could dedicate to occupations they wanted to engage in, such as sleep or social participation. Moreover, in a study conducted on children with celiac disease, Meyer and Rosenblum identified quality of life as "the person's perception of the impact of the condition on his or her objective functioning and subjective assessment of well-being" (2016, p.1). Such studies suggest that it is important to note that the individual's internal conditions, like perspective, largely contribute to QOL.

Most participants openly stated their intrinsic motivations to continue playing their sport, mainly due to their genuine love of the game. However, when identifying major themes throughout the data, the sport's physical, social and emotional impact, sacrifices and support

systems stemmed from their environment. This indicates that despite the numerous challenges of being a student-athlete, extrinsic motivations supported continued engagement in their sport for when stress overwhelmed participants and intrinsic motivation to play was not enough. This is not to say that all participants were only extrinsically motivated to play, as themes of intrinsic motivations were also identified: love of the game and a desire for self-improvement, to name a few. It is important to note that extrinsic factors most likely enabled participants to continue playing their sport when other occupational demands overwhelmed their schedules. Overall, results imply that institutional improvements can be made to increase the QoL for student-athletes, specifically in the areas of increasing awareness and accessibility to institutional support services and flexibility in academic and athletic scheduling.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) Code of Ethics and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guided all ethical considerations through the entirety of the study (AOTA, 2015). Although all ethical principles were taken into consideration through the course of the study, the four major guiding principles included autonomy, veracity, fidelity, and nonmaleficence.

AOTA (2015) defines autonomy as the right of an individual to privacy, confidentiality, consent, and self-determination. Participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to their interview. Students were instructed to end the interview if they became uncomfortable or no longer wanted to participate in the study. All interviews and transcriptions were collected by the researchers and kept and accessed only on personal, password-protected devices.

Nonmaleficence is defined as refraining from actions that cause harm to others (AOTA, 2015). Participants created their own pseudonyms to be used for the study. Demographic information was not reported in a capacity that could be used to identify any participant to ensure that participants do not receive backlash for any response during the interview. AOTA (2015) defines veracity as providing comprehensive, accurate, and objective information. Participants were given a detailed verbal description about how the information from the interviews would be used. AOTA (2015) refers veracity as the duty one has to keep a commitment once it is made. Participants were informed that if they felt any psychological discomfort as a result of the interview, they were to immediately reach out to an identified contact who would connect the participant with a licensed therapist for a consultation, at no cost to the participant. This was all taken into consideration to ensure the well-being of the student-athlete participants throughout the course of the study and protect the privacy of the participants to prevent the potential for

backlash from coaches.

All interviews were conducted on university grounds, and recorded using a password-protected device. The IRB approved the recruitment procedure, method to maintain confidentiality, and interview questions. All research was conducted in compliance with university standards.



## **Conclusion**

The student-athlete experience is a rare opportunity that only a fraction of individuals whom attend a four-year university can take part in. In taking in the roles of being an elite athlete and full-time student, much of an individual's occupations are influenced by the requirements put before them. The data from the interviews collected throughout the duration suggests many components of a student-athlete's occupations that contribute to overall QoL. It is important to note that not all collegiate sports teams are represented in the study which may limit the data set. Furthermore, a population size of 15 limits the transferability of the results. Four common themes were identified that encapsulate aspects of the college-student athlete experience in relation to environmental factors and QoL; they are impact of sport on the individual student-athlete, in-season responsibilities and sacrifices, support, and motivation to play. Studying current barriers and supports of this population is essential in order to better support these individuals moving forward.

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## **Appendix A Participant Demographics**

Table 1 Demographic information collected from participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Sport</b>
Marley	21	Male	Occupational Therapy	Basketball
Deionte	21	Male	Business	Golf
Adrian	20	Male	Business	Basketball
Carly	20	Female	Occupational Therapy	Basketball
Elijah	19	Male	Communications	Basketball
Chris	19	Male	Business	Soccer
Lisa	19	Female	Biology	Cross Country
Emily	19	Female	Occupational Therapy	Golf
Makayla	20	Female	Business	Soccer
Dante	19	Male	Business	Soccer
Rachel	21	Female	Business	Soccer
Blakely	22	Female	Business	Tennis
Angelica	21	Female	Biology	Tennis
Sophie	19	Female	Undeclared	Volleyball
Krystal	18	Female	English	Volleyball

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. What is your age and gender?
  2. What is your major?
  3. Where are you from originally?
  4. Can you tell me the story of how you got into sports before you came to Dominican?
    1. What lead to your decision to continue playing sports in college?
  5. What sports team are you currently apart of?
    1. How many seasons have you been a member of that team?
  6. Are you currently in season or off season?
  7. Please describe your typical day?
    1. In season?
    2. Off season?
    3. How does the way you spend your time change between in season and off season?
      - i. How does that affect your lifestyle?
  8. How much control do you have with how you spend your time in season versus off season?
  9. What is your current stress level on a scale from 1-10?
    1. What does (that number) mean to you?
    2. What factors play a role in that stress level?
  10. What is your stress level on a scale from 1-10 on season/off season? (This depends if they are currently on season or off season)
    1. What does (that number) mean to you?
    2. What factors play a role in that stress level?
  11. Describe how you manage your time in order to meet the demands of your current responsibilities?
    1. What methods, if any, do you use to manage and organize your time and daily life?
    2. On a scale from 1-10, what would you rate your satisfaction with your current responsibilities?
  12. What activities do you choose to do outside of (your sports) and school?
    1. Leisure?
    2. Social?
    3. Spirituality?
    4. Work?
    5. Sleep?
  13. What activities do you feel like you have to “give up” during your on season?
  14. What impact does your sport have on your daily life?
    1. Physical?
    2. Social?
    3. Emotional?
  15. How do you cope with these (*plug in with what they said*)?
  16. Describe what, if any, informal support you use in your life? For example friend, family, and loved ones.
  17. (Show list of services) What of these services have you heard of or used?
  18. Are there any additional services that you would like to see at Dominican?
    1. If you could create a service what would it look like?  
*These options are if they don't understand the question, give 3 at most: mental health coaches, sports psychologists, academic center for athletes, PT*
- \*Read/show definition for quality of life: For the purpose of this study we have defined quality of life as having personally acceptable physical and mental health, safety, meaningful social relationships, purposeful activities, values, and spirituality.*
19. What is the impact of these services to your quality of life as a college student athlete?
    1. Are they positive or negative or neither?
  20. What changes, if any, would make to Dominican to further support your quality of life as a college student athlete?



21. With all of the challenges that come with being a college student athlete, what makes you continue your participation in the sport?
22. We have talked about a lot today and I'm thankful for your participation. Is there anything that I forgot to ask, that you would like to share?