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Collegiate Football Players Perception of the COVID-19 Virtual College Experience

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Collegiate Football Players Perception of the COVID-19 Virtual College Experience

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty
of the Department of Leadership Education
College of Education
Of Winona State University

By

Cole L. LaLiberty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Chapter I - Introduction	4
Problem Statement	5
Purpose of the Study	6
Background of the Study	6
Theoretical Framework	7
Research Questions	7
Limitations	8
Delimitations	8
Definition of Terms	8
Summary	9
Chapter II – Literature Review	10
Historical Overview of the Problem	10
Origin of the Problem	11
Methodology	12
Collegiate football players & the Virtual College Experience	12
Collegiate Football Players’ & Competitive Anxiety	14
Summary	15
Chapter III – Research Methodology	17
Research Design	17
Sample and Setting	18
Research Questions	19
Instruments	19
Data Collection Procedure	19
Data Analysis	20
Summary	20
Chapter IV – Results	21
Introduction	21
Description of the Sample	21
Demographic Questions	22
Demographics	22

Summary	27
Chapter V: Discussions and Conclusions	28
Discussions and Conclusions	28
Perceptions of COVID-19.....	29
Challenges of COVID-19	30
Adapting to COVID-19.....	30
Conclusions.....	31
Future Research	31
Summary	32
References.....	33
Appendix A.....	38
Appendix B	40

Abstract

The world was faced with chaos as the COVID-19 virus surged impacting the lives of everyone around the world. Quickly, nations and states began to lockdown as people were required to stay inside and socially distance from one another. The pandemic changed the lives of collegiate football players' drastically. It left collegiate football players stranded away from teammates, coaches, families, and resources. The research design was a mixed method design consisting of both qualitative and quantitative data. The data obtained from this research focused on major themes of how collegiate football players perceived the pandemic's virtual college experience, the challenges faced, and ways they were able to adapt to the challenges. The crucial data points of perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience included the dislike of online learning, seasons being cancelled, and no sense of routine. Challenges associated with the virtual college experience were staying in shape, finding motivation, and online learning. Collegiate football players adapted by overcommunicating, video chatting, connecting with friends and family, and physical activity. Collegiate football players faced the unknown. Routines uprooted and the complete reliance on themselves. Collegiate football players found unique ways to adapt to a serious and unsafe situation.

Chapter I - Introduction

Collegiate football players routines and practices were upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 shutdown daily life in athletics causing coaches to rethink and strategize on how to support players. Players now faced a new set of obstacles. The result of COVID-19 led colleges to close doors indefinitely. Collegiate football players were forced to vacate campus as soon as possible with no information on when to return. Course instruction switched from in-person to completely online in a matter of hours, and players were no longer able to physically interact with teammates and coaches. Additionally, players were prohibited from the training facilities that allowed them to be in top physical condition. All football related meetings were also switched to online.

Collegiate football players have a very regimented schedule, requiring substantial time, energy, and resources to improve their craft. The busy schedule often includes early mornings and late nights filled with endless interactions between teammates and coaches. A football player spends an overwhelming majority of time with the team each day. Each week players focus on academics, weight room training, practice, film study, and recovery. All activities and resources are provided on campus. Players also spend most of the time in the classroom. Balliu (2021) found athletes prefer in-person class over online class. Along with athletic support, academic resources are provided for collegiate football players. Academic support centers are in place on campus to support athletes in the classroom. Educated athletic-academic advisors assist players in scheduling of classes, how to maintain eligibility, and aid with coursework through weekly meetings. Student-athletes, particularly college football players, need academic support because they feel they will not be able to achieve the minimum standard to comply with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Ridpath, 2010).

The pandemic brought uncertainty and cancellations. The post-season of Winter sports were cancelled and shortly after the spring season was cancelled. With the fall football season just months away, collegiate football players were unsure of their futures. There was little information on if or when there would be a football season. Many players were unsure of how to keep in physical condition during their time away from campus. In turn, this forced coaches to design alternate strategies to ensure players came back in the best shape possible. The Covid-19 pandemic surfaced several new challenges to college football players.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) decided the spike in coronavirus numbers was high enough to be considered a global pandemic (Patel and Jernigan, 2020). COVID-19 is a virus that affects the respiratory system of the human body (Ciotti et al., 2020). This potentially fatal virus affects individuals of all ages and demographics in many ways. Although, little information surrounding the virus was known. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) began implementing policies and procedures to attempt to slow the spread and protect people. Before anyone could blink, the COVID-19 pandemic was in full effect, cases were surging, and the world was shutdown. Going forward there was little information as to how long it would last or what would happen next, the important thing was for everyone to do their part and slow the spread. This introduction will provide the basis of the study, state the problem, purpose of the study, limitations, delimitations, definition of terms, and the design of the study.

Problem Statement

Collegiate football players daily routines were upended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Collegiate football players were forced to be off campus, engage in virtual learning, have no

physical teammate interaction, maintain physical conditioning while being away from their facilities, and did not know if there would have a season.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand collegiate football players perception of the COVID-19 pandemic, its challenges, and ways they adapted to those challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the cancellation of sports seasons, leaving football players to question if their season would take place. The pandemic brought change to the lives of football players, revealing several challenges. The methodology of this study will be both qualitative and quantitative data received by a survey. The data of this study was guided around football players perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, challenges players faced, and how they adapted to the challenges.

Background of the Study

In December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China (Huang et al, 2020). COVID-19 has spread at an alarming rate, reaching the United States less than two months after the first case. On January 31, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared a United States public health emergency (Jernigan, 2020). By February 4, 11 cases had been reported in the United States and the number would only increase from there. Patel and Jernigan, (2020) estimate the incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2-14 days forcing infected individuals to isolate for a 14-day period. The isolation stage caused individuals to be isolated from family, friends, and everyday activities. The best practice during this time was to follow the policies put in place by the CDC. The policies include social

distancing, wearing masks, clean and disinfecting areas, monitoring your personal daily health, and contact tracing. The CDC needed time to assess the situation and understand the disease.

Collegiate football players had a very structured routine. The routine is largely face to face and requires a significant amount of physical contact. Access to on campus athletic and academic resources was paramount to a collegiate football players' success (Lampitt, 2017). Football players depend on having access to their physical facilities in order to have success on the field and in the classroom. In March 2020, all college campuses moved to virtual learning, and students and student-athletes were no longer able to be on campus.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study is Astin's Theory of Student Development. Astin's Theory of Student Development is defined as "involved students who participate actively in student organizations, spend considerable time on campus, interact often with faculty outside of the classroom, and devote considerable time to studying." (Long, 2012). Astin's Theory applies directly to the topic of this study. Collegiate football players spent much of their time on campus navigating through a rigorous schedule. A requirement by the National Collegiate Athletic Association is for Student-Athletes to maintain a specific grade point average, thus, forcing football players to spend considerable amounts of time studying outside of the classroom.

Research Questions

The primary research questions

RQ 1: What perceptions did collegiate football players' have during the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 2: What challenges did collegiate football players face during the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 3: How did collegiate football players adapt to the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

Limitations

The study was designed to avoid as many limitations as possible. However, no study is completely free of limitations, and it can help expose future research areas (Ross and Zaidi, 2019). The participants were asked when responding to interview questions to be honest in their responses. Respondent bias is always a possibility, but participants were able to opt out of the study any time.

Delimitations

Participation in this study was limited to current collegiate football players. The study took place at a Division II university in the Midwest.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety: A term that can be described as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes.” (American Psychological Association, 2021).

Competitive Anxiety: Somatic and emotional changes near or during competition (Hagan et al. 2017).

COVID-19: An infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that affects the respiratory system of infected individuals (World Health Organization, 2021).

Social Distancing: A term representing the practice of increasing space between individuals and decreasing the frequency of contact to reduce the risk of spreading a disease (Center of Disease Control, 2021).

Online Learning: “Any form of learning that takes place over the internet. Including internet-based instruction; remote teacher online instruction; and blended learning (Beek, 2011).

Summary

Chapter One introduced the design of the research study and provided information to analyze collegiate football players perception of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, its challenges, and how they adapted to those. Chapter One provided the studies problem, purpose statement, limitations, delimitations, and the methodology of the study. Chapter Two contains the literature review, and all significant research related to the topic of this study.

Chapter II – Literature Review

This study examined collegiate football players perception of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, its challenges, and ways they adapted to those. A literature review is defined as a synthetic review and summary of the known and unknown regarding the topic of a scholarly body of work (Maggio et al., 2016). Chapter Two provides insights on collegiate football players' perception of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, its challenges, and ways they adapted to the challenges. The first piece of this chapter gave the historical overview of the problem. The second piece of this chapter provided the origin of the problem. The third piece of this segment provided a snapshot of the methodology and why the study was chosen. The fourth piece of the chapter provided insights on collegiate football player's perception of the COVID-19 virtual college experience and its challenges. Lastly, to end the literature review, the last segment provided a brief glimpse into Chapter Three.

Historical Overview of the Problem

March 2020 was a very significant month for collegiate football players. Collegiate football players spend much of their time interacting with teammates, coaches, support staff, and other students throughout each day of their experience. Social interaction is a large part of their college experience (Graupensperger et al. 2020). Players went to class and were able to get in person help on their academics and full access to their coaches. In March of 2020, due to the Coronavirus, all campuses were closed, and collegiate football players were forced to be off campus, with no physical access to their coaches.

The World Health Organization (WHO) decided the coronavirus (COVID-19) increase was significant enough to declare a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta and Vanelli,

2020). The spread of COVID-19 forced the closures of college campuses, forcing students and student athletes to relocate until it is deemed safe to return to campus. The virus forced people into isolation, quarantines, and social distancing causing a major disruption to the routines of everybody, especially collegiate football players. There are numerous new challenges COVID-19 has placed on collegiate football players' and the world.

Origin of the Problem

On December 31, 2019, the government of China's health officials reported a large cluster of respiratory illnesses in the Wuhan, Hubei Province of China. This severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) (COVID-19) was identified in the U.S. in January of 2020 (National Foundation of Infectious Diseases). COVID-19 changed the lives of collegiate football players. Throughout the pandemic, campuses closed and reopened multiple times. Guidelines were changed multiple times. Winter and Spring sports seasons were cancelled or postponed, and football players were unsure if they were having a 2020 season or not. This is a difficult time for collegiate football players as they were removed from their teammates and forced off campus. With no access to facilities and training centers, football players wondered how they were going to stay in top physical condition while having little access to adequate facilities. Sports have been making their way back to the new normal. During this time, it is important everyone understands how important the restrictions and guidelines are to ensure a safe return to a normal for collegiate football players.

Methodology

The data collection for this mixed-method analysis was from a survey administered to collegiate football players at a Division II University in the Midwest. Mixed method research is designed to include both quantitative and qualitative data in a study (Creswell, 2012). Surveys are beneficial to mixed method research because it allows the researcher to ask ranked questions and free response questions (Ponto, 2015). Due to the circumstances of COVID-19, surveys were solicited via email, and each survey was on the Qualtrics platform. Surveys allowed for the participants to respond open and freely based on their experience. Because of the amount of data analyzed, surveys allowed the subject to speak freely without the worry of their option not being able to be selected. The recorded data allowed researchers to identify key themes on the perceptions, challenges and means of adaption during the COVID-19 virtual college experience.

Collegiate football players & the Virtual College Experience

As time rapidly moves by, the COVID-19 pandemic continued. At times, it seemed the world has gotten it under control, but just in time for another surge, forcing citizens away from each other and back in their houses. Europe is dealing with a massive surge in cases indicating the United States could be next. Medical doctors are doing everything they can to develop the best possible vaccine to combat the COVID-19 virus. Doctors also must gain the trust of the American people, so they feel comfortable taking a vaccine. At this time everyone needs to do their part and follow all the guidelines put in place by local, state, and federal government.

Collegiate football players faced many new challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges they were not prepared for and may not be equipped to effectively handle. Each college football player had to maintain compliance with the NCAA in order to be eligible

to compete. Furthermore, college football players had to meet the requirements set forth by their university's degree requirements. A tall task for a student-athlete. College football players, when at their respective institution, were equipped with an athletic academic advisor. The role of the athletic academic advisor is to ensure college football players are in good standing by the NCAA requirements and institutional requirements (Vaugh and Smith, 2018). While college football players are balancing academics, competitions and travel, practice, and training sessions, the access to athletic academic advisors is of utmost importance. Without drop-in access, college football players are at a substantial disadvantage.

Another aspect to consider is the social interaction and athletic identity college football players lost during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. This presented a real challenge. As college football players relied on the social interactions with teammates, coaches, support staff, and the general populations (Graupensperger et al. 2020).

The ability to have access to training facilities and programs was eliminated for most college football players during this time. Athletes were forced to stay in peak performance shape while being away from school. Delgado, (2021) shares that most student-athletes did a sufficient job exercising during the initial lockdown but advises a slow reentry into sport specific exercises. Being asked to be game ready after a lockdown is an unreasonable ask for college football players.

Mental health has continued to be at the forefront for college football players. Players were asked to socially distance themselves from teammates and do much of their training alone. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted athletes' mental health and has increased reports of depression and anxiety (Davis, et al. 2020). However, Graupensperger et al. (2020) highlights the importance of positive social connections and staying in touch with others on

mental health. It is important to note that not every college football player has the means for supportive social connections during the time of COVID-19.

Among many concerns regarding collegiate football players and the COVID-19 virtual college experience, virtual learning is of equal importance. Virtual learning during the pandemic was linked to emotional distress among student-athletes. Bullard, (2020) shares that female student-athletes are more likely to manage their time efficiently than males during virtual learning. College football players had a difficult time getting access to instructors and found difficulty managing the online platforms used.

Collegiate Football Players' & Competitive Anxiety

There has been a gap in the research regarding collegiate football players' specifically in this time of COVID-19 a researcher looks to understand. Collegiate football players relied heavily on a structured routine. A large part of that is competition and class work. Mehrsafari et al, 2021 studied competitive anxiety among professional football players when returning to play after the initial shutdown from the pandemic. The researchers found the competitive anxiety surrounding competition and COVID-19 could negatively impact performance. The American Psychological Association defines anxiety as an "emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes". The environment collegiate football players were in during the beginning of the pandemic could prove to be anxiety provoking. When COVID-19 began, collegiate football players could not use the on-campus training facilities they once had full access too. Players were also forced to engage in online learning, a method of instruction many collegiate athletes were unaccustomed to. From March-July 2020, college football players had been in the twilight zone. They knew very little information surrounding the status of their

season. Throughout the entire five-month process football players were expected to maintain the physical and mental conditioning they reached before the shutdown. Athletes remained optimistic but understood the challenges in front of them. They needed to ensure they were psychologically and physically in the right place if they wanted to compete. A major concern for athletes in returning to play was the fear of contracting the coronavirus during competition or team activities. Another fear was athletes not being ready to play. It is nearly impossible for a college football player to replicate the mental and physical conditioning they receive on campus when they are away. This is required to play at a high level. Furthermore, football players were worried about the injury risk associated with training away from campus. How can the human body be prepared to endure the physical demands college football requires without the proper preparation? The NCAA passed legislation allowing student-athletes to option out of the 2020 season without it affecting eligibility. For those who did not opt out the 2020 sports seasons, this study aims to look at the perception of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, the challenges faced, and how did they overcome them.

Summary

Chapter Two provided the literature that is applicable to the current study. The literature review provided information on the gap in knowledge and why this study occurred. The first segment of Chapter Two focused on the historical overview of the problem. The second segment described the origin of the problem and its relation to this study. The third segment gives a synopsis of the methodology behind the study. The last segment is broken into two pieces. The first section being on the challenges collegiate football players faced during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The second segment being on collegiate football players and the

competitive anxiety of returning to a new normal. The Chapter Three will present an outline of the methodology that was used for this study.

Chapter III – Research Methodology

The study aimed to understand collegiate football players perspective on the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The survey was a combination of general demographic information and free response questions. The demographic questions asked about participants age, class in school, race, if they live on or off campus, and permanent residence proximity from campus. Also, three free response questions were asked regarding perspectives of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, three major challenges associated with COVID-19 virtual college experience, and ways they adapted or coped with the challenges. The questions were open to any time of the COVID-19 pandemic (Spring 2020 – Spring 2022). The purpose of the study was to understand the perspectives, challenges, and coping methods of student-athletes throughout the course of the pandemic. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, student-athletes encountered adversity never seen before. Student-athletes were sent home from the universities and were forced online for all classes. There is no doubt this obstacle impacted student-athletes in many ways. Lastly, this Chapter Three included the research design, sample and setting, research questions, instruments, data collection procedure, data analysis, and summary of the research methodology.

Research Design

This study was a cross-sectional research design. A cross-sectional study is an observational study that analyzes data from a population at a single point in time (Wang and Cheng, 2020). This cross-sectional research design required the use of a survey to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The Review Board approved the carryout of this study. The purpose of the Review Board is to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects. The head football coach and athletic department approved the survey to be dispersed to their student-

athletes. The survey was sent to participants through email. Once the email was received, participants were able to click on the link taking them to the Qualtrics survey. The survey was comprised of eight questions. The first questions of the survey gathered demographic information of each of the participating football players. The next part of the survey focused on college football players perspectives, challenges, and coping strategies during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. These questions were free response open ended questions.

The purpose of the survey was to identify perspectives, key challenges, and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey gave information on how student-athletes perceived the pandemic, the challenges they faced, and how they were able to overcome those challenges. The goal was to understand how student-athletes were affected by the pandemic and give guiding information on what changes can be made to better support student-athletes in the future.

Sample and Setting

The setting for this study was a medium sized Division II university in the Midwest. The town the university calls home had a population of about 27,000 people. The university had an enrollment of 7,600 students, 340 of those students were athletes, and roughly 100 were college football players. The university was a four-year public university that was included of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students.

The football team at the Division II university had individuals from the Midwest primarily but also from other parts of the country as well. The participants age ranged from 18-24 years old and anywhere from freshman to graduate student.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

RQ 1: How did collegiate football players perceive the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 2: What challenges did collegiate football players face during the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 3: In what ways did collegiate football players adapt or cope with the challenges associated with the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

The research was gathered through a survey given to the football players at the university.

Instruments

This study was completely voluntary for the participants, and they were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence. The study will help administration and decision makers understand the challenges collegiate football players faced due to the virtual environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. If the participants had any questions regarding the study, contact information was provided for both the primary researcher and the faculty advisor for the researcher. Prior to beginning the survey, the participants were given a consent form and information to contact the Human Protections Administrator with any questions.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to any data collection procedure, the research procedure needed to be approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of the IRB is to assure both in

advance and by periodic review that steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as subjects in research (Food and Drug Administration, 1998). This is an extremely important step in the process prior to collecting data from the participants. Before beginning the survey form, the participants were informed the purpose of the research and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Data Analysis

After the IRB approved the research design, participants were sent a survey using Qualtrics. The data collection was also through Qualtrics. Data collection was based on demographic information such as race, academic class, age, on or off campus living, permanent residence proximity away from campus, and free response questions regarding perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, top three challenges they experienced during that time, and how they adapted to those challenges. No research collected can be identified to a specific individual as all participants remained anonymous. The survey was sent through email to all the college football players at the university. All the football players received the same email and clicked on the same link to access the Qualtrics survey. No information was saved or downloaded; the information will be deleted following the end of the research.

Summary

This Chapter showed the research methodology, research design, sample and setting, research questions, instruments, data collection procedure, and data analysis. This study was a cross-sectional research design and the survey gathered data that was both qualitative and quantitative. Chapter IV will focus on the results of the data.

Chapter IV – Results

Introduction

To better gain an understanding on how collegiate football players perceived the COVID-19 virtual college experience, the researcher conducted an online survey and disbursed it to the football players a Division II university in the Midwest. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the data.

The results of this study presented in this chapter, provide a clear understanding of the data. This consists of a description of the sample, demographic data, data analysis, and summary of the chapter. The findings of the study are represented in Chapter V.

Description of the Sample

Participants of the study included collegiate football players who were associated with a Division II university. There were 87 college football players who had the opportunity to participate in this research design. Of the 87 possible participants, 43 filled out the survey after completing the informed consent form, ending with a 49% response rate.

The research gathered data from the 43 participants that responded to an email solicitation sent out to the college football players at the Division II university. The email contained the purpose of the study, informed consent, and the link to the Qualtrics survey allowing participation in the study. Additionally, information regarding survey length and format of the survey was included. It was clearly stated in the email, consent form, and survey that all participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could stop at any point.

Demographic Questions

There were five demographic questions asked. This allowed the researcher to look at themes regarding the college football players perceptions on the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The participants could only move forward with the survey after confirming they were eighteen years or older and had read the consent form.

Demographics

The data consisted of 43 participants that were grouped by their academic year. There were six freshman, thirteen sophomore, five junior, eighteen senior, and one graduate student. The participants were all a part of the football team at the Division II university (See Figure 1).

Figure 1.

What year are you academically?

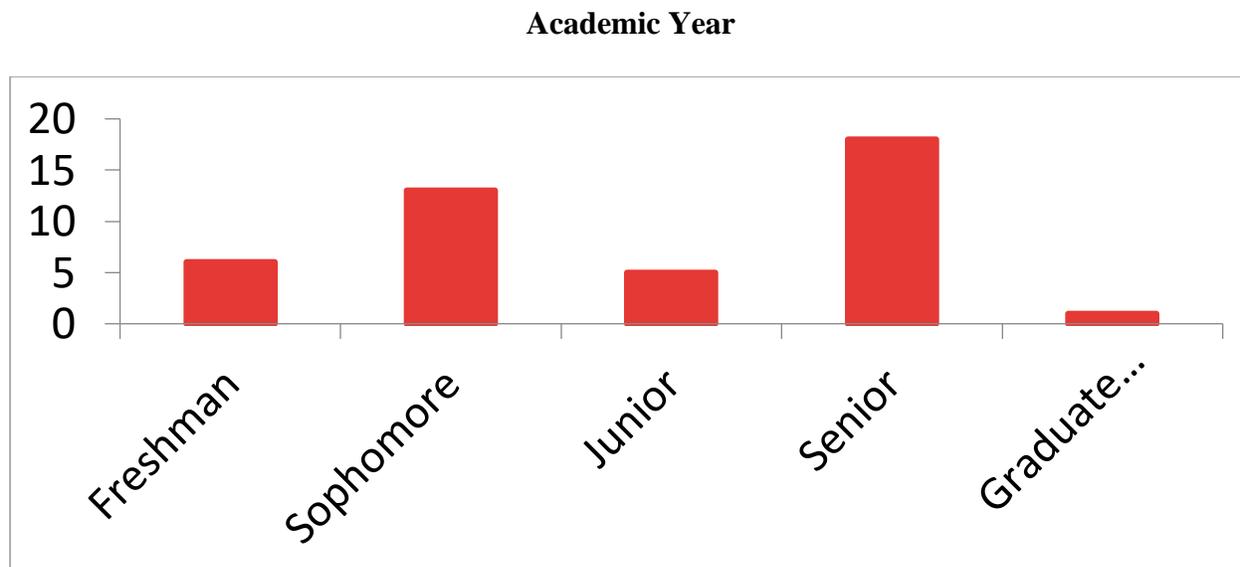
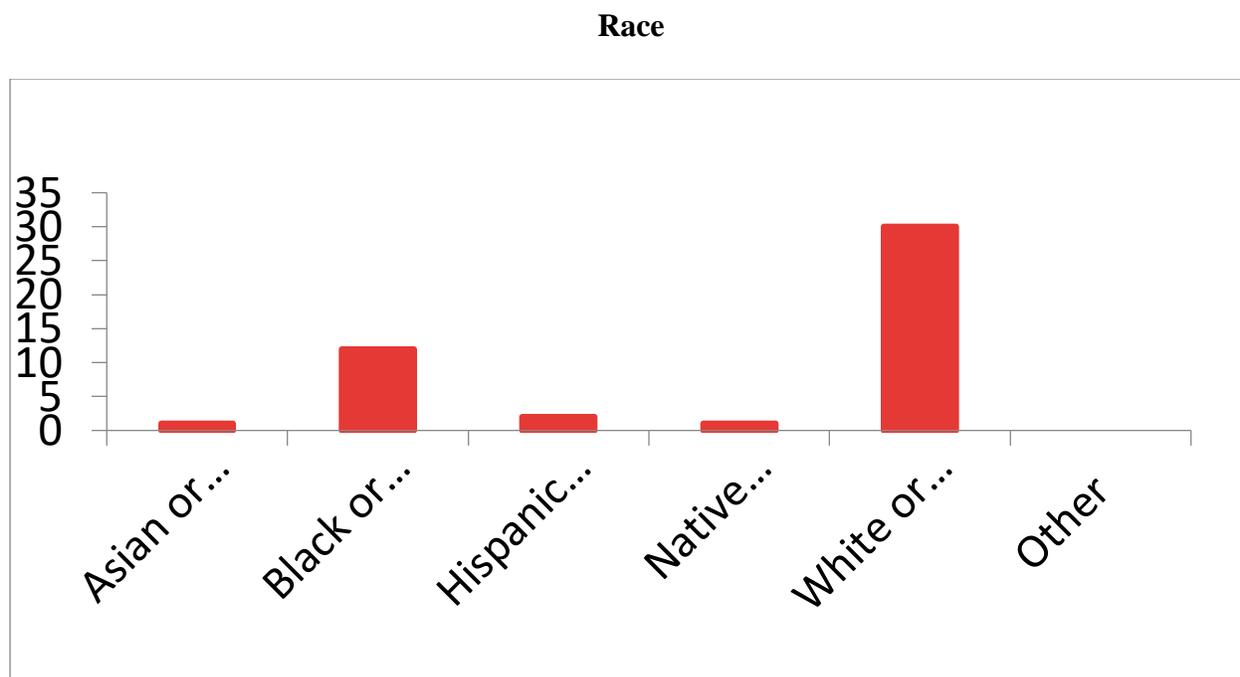


Figure 1 represents the academic year of each football player who participated in this study.

There were 43 total participants

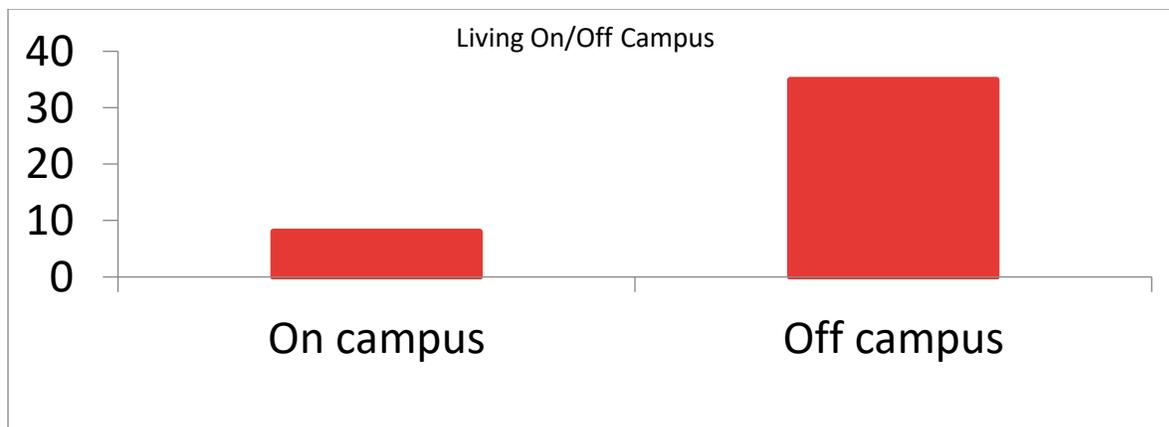
The participants were asked to select their racial identity. 25% of participants identified as Black or African American, 65% of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 4% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 4% of participants identified as multiracial (See Figure 2).

Figure 2.



The respondents were also asked if they live on or off campus. 81% of participants live off campus and 18% live on campus (See Figure 3).

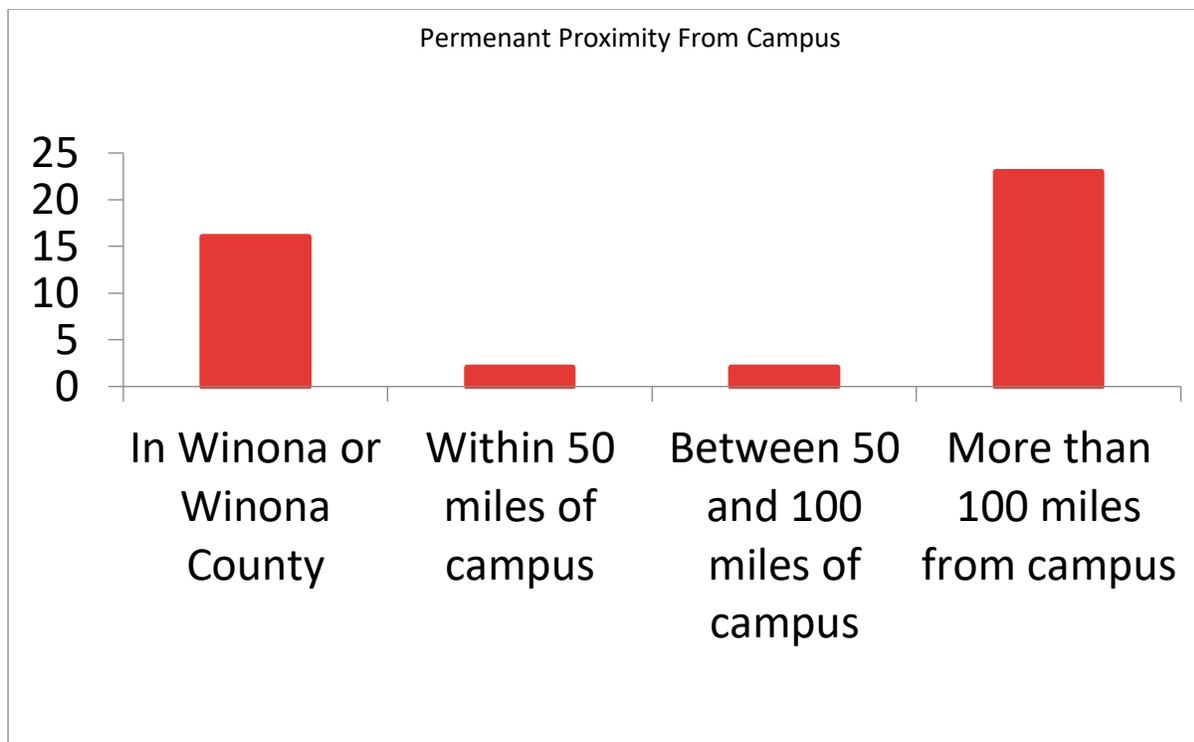
Figure 3.



Lastly, the respondents were asked how far their permanent address is from campus. 37% of participants have permanent addresses in town or in the county. 4% of participants identified as living within 50 miles of campus. 4% of participants identified as living between 50 and 100 miles of campus. 53% of participants identified as living more than 100 miles from campus (See Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Where is your permanent address?



The focal points of the survey were looking at college football players general perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, the three biggest challenges that were faced during the COVID-19 virtual college experience academically and athletically, and ways college football players were able to adapt to those challenges both academically and athletically. Participants responded to the questions in a free response manner. The participants could only move forward with the survey after confirming they were eighteen years or older and had read the consent form.

Question 6 asked what was the overall perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience? This question was used to identify common themes among participants and compare themes of Freshman and Sophomore compared to Juniors, Seniors, and Graduate Students. There were many common themes among the participants in the freshman and sophomore class. The

overarching themes included having difficulty with online learning, not having the full college experience, no season, and difficulties communicating. However, two participants reported enjoyment and less stress during the virtual college experience. The common themes among juniors, seniors, and graduate students included hard to transition and didn't like online learning. Others reportedly enjoyed it after a new routine was developed.

Question 7 asked participants about their three biggest challenges during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. This question was used to identify common themes among participants and compare themes of freshman and sophomore compared to junior, senior, and graduate students. The common challenges among freshman and sophomore included online learning, communication, lack of socialization, decreased mental health, and limited access to normalized resources. Juniors, seniors, and graduate students reported trouble with communication, staying focused, mental health, staying organized, no routine, and staying fit. Both groups stated they did not enjoy online learning and struggled due to not having access to their typical resources.

Question 8 asked participants about how they were able to adapt or cope to the COVID-19 virtual college experience. This question was used to identify common coping techniques and compare them between freshman and sophomores, and juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Common themes among the freshman and sophomores were over communicating to support staff, spending time with friends and family, and physical activity. Themes among the participants identifying as juniors, seniors, and graduate students included surrounding themselves with the right people, physical activity, and created quality organizational systems. Both groups used spending time with friends and family and physical activity as ways to adapt to the COVID-19 virtual college experience.

Summary

This chapter represented the results of the study. The methodology was represented in Chapter Three. The multiple components of this study were considered in order to better understand collegiate football players perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience, its challenges, and the ways college football players were able to adapt to those challenges. This data was a representation of the 43 college football players who participated in the survey. Chapter Five explored the discussion and conclusions of the data as well as suggestions for future research.

Chapter V: Discussions and Conclusions

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how collegiate football players perceived COVID-19 virtual college experience. The research took a deeper look into collegiate football players perceptions, challenges, and adaption strategies during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The population consisted of 43 college football players from a Division II university in the Midwest. The researcher distributed an online survey to the college football players with the assistance of the university's athletic department.

The online survey focused on three main areas: collegiate football players' perceptions, challenges, and adaption strategies associated with the COVID-19 virtual college experience. Each question was designed to identify key themes. Throughout the research process, the data was continuously compared to the findings discussed in Chapter Two. Therefore, based on the data, the researcher discussed the significance of the data and established conclusions which led to guidance on future research.

Discussions and Conclusions

The primary research questions were:

RQ 1: What perceptions did collegiate football players' face during the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 2: What challenges did collegiate football face during the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

RQ 3: How did collegiate football players adapt to the COVID-19 virtual college experience?

The data collected was based off 43 collegiate football players' who voluntarily participated in this study. The results were analyzed to find themes regarding the primary research question.

Research continues to be developed on the COVID-19 pandemic as people across the world have been impacted by the pandemic. The researcher has established a purpose to analyze the perceptions, challenges, and adaption strategies used by collegiate football players during COVID-19 virtual college experience. The data gathered uncovered several findings that add to the body of literature collected.

Perceptions of COVID-19

The institution began implementing virtual learning in the spring of 2020. This presented uncharted territory for everyone, including collegiate football players. The study was designed to go in depth about the overall perceptions collegiate football players had on the COVID-19 virtual college experience. After the data was collected, multiple themes were created based on the responses of the participants in the freshman and sophomore group (group 1) and the Junior, senior, and graduate students' group (Group 2).

Group one consisted of collegiate football players in the freshman and sophomore class. The themes identified for the group regarding the perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience include the dislike of virtual learning, did not get the full college experience, and the fall football season was cancelled. Group two, consisting of junior, senior, and graduate students indicated that it was a difficult transition and did not like virtual learning. However, many responses included a positive perception because participants made new routines and were forced to be organized and find their own motivation.

Challenges of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the world into a new way of life. This new way of life would create unknown challenges to everyone including collegiate football players. The study identified key themes of the challenges collegiate football players faced amidst the COVID-19 virtual college experience. Common themes for group one includes virtual learning, staying in football shape, lack of socialization, and no access to normal resources. Group two indicated the main challenges to be staying focused and motivated, social connection, staying in football shape, and an uprooted routine. The themes in both groups were similar in their responses. It is important to note the importance of routine to collegiate football players.

Adapting to COVID-19

While the collegiate football players were faced with challenges unaccustomed to them, they were able to find ways to adapt and make the most of the unprecedented situation. As previously stated, collegiate football players depend on a strict and consistent routine. The pandemic forced them to adapt to situations in different ways. The study was designed to highlight specific adaptive themes collegiate football players used to maintain a sense of normalcy during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. Collegiate football players in group one adapted to the COVID-19 virtual college experience by overcommunicating to support staff, taking advantage of time with friends and family, facetime, and physical activity. The main themes for group two include surrounding them with the right people and physical activity as the main ways they adapted to the situation.

Conclusions

The findings of this research study indicate collegiate football players perception of the COVID-19 pandemic was negative. In chapter one, the importance of routine to a college football player was discussed, and the pandemic put an end to that routine. Collegiate football players attend college for two main reasons; to obtain a degree and participate in the sport they love. The study showed the perceptions and challenges collegiate football players faced during the COVID-19 virtual college experience. However, it is important to note the incredible and resourceful ways collegiate football players were able to adapt to the COVID-19 virtual college experience. Participants in the study explained how the challenges forced them to create new routines and habits to adapt to the situation. Many of the participants indicated they had to take it upon themselves to get organized, stay focused, and stay in shape. Thus, creating a sense of autonomy benefiting them when there is a return to a new normal. Collegiate football players took it upon themselves to make the most of the situation despite all of the hardship associated with the pandemic.

Future Research

A possible suggestion for future research would be to collect data from coaches and athletic administrators at the Division II level and gain their perspectives on the research questions. This could help gain a better understanding due to the different perspectives from each group of individuals. Also, future researchers could expand the study and include collegiate football players in Division I (FBS and FCS), Division II, and Division III institutions.

Recommendations for practitioners at this institution may include implementing courses and workshops to aid in organization and time management. Continuing recommendations to

practitioners should include over communication and involvement with student-athletes in times where there is so much unknown. Future research could be focused on where exactly collegiate football players spent their time during the initial phase of the pandemic. Because states in the United States handled the COVID-19 pandemic differently, there is a point of interest regarding how players in different states handled the situation. The last recommendation or suggestion based on this study is that how one decision can impact every other part of an organization.

Summary

This studies purpose was to shed light for better understanding on the perceptions and challenges collegiate football players had during the COVID-19 virtual college experience and the unique ways they adapted to the situation. The data obtained through the survey shed light on the negative perceptions collegiate football players had of the virtual college experience. As COVID-19 challenged all participants, the biggest challenge was the abrupt change in routine. The study showed how collegiate football players were able to adapt while facing an adverse situation.

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Appendix A

Collegiate Football Players Perception of the COVID-19 Virtual College Experience Survey

Start of Block: LaLiberty's Survey

In order to better understand the perceptions collegiate football players had on the COVID-19 virtual college experience, I have chosen the topic as the central idea of my master's thesis at Winona State University. I have compiled and attached a survey for your completion to help better understand the perceptions collegiate football players have on the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The insight you share will be invaluable toward gaining knowledge on this topic and helping to further educate and advocate for collegiate football players and other student-athletes.

While participating in the survey is completely optional, your decision to participate will add value and a level of understanding to the COVID-19 virtual college experience that you have personally experienced and shed light on the challenges that may not be known to others. The 8-item survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All survey results will be confidential. No names of individuals, institutions, or any other identifying information will be included in the results of the study.

There are no foreseeable risks or inconveniences anticipated with your participation in this study. All responses will be kept confidential with only the researcher having access to specific data. Information obtained in connection with this study will be reported in aggregated form. Please see the attached consent form for more details. It is the intention that the results of the study will be made available by request. Please email claliberty14@winona.edu for a copy of the results.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this survey. By completing and returning the survey, you are granting consent to participate in this research.

Survey Link: https://winona.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2aUB5hhGoHbIGLI

Contact Information:

If you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact me at

claliberty14@winona.edu. You can also contact my faculty advisor at steven.baule@winona.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in the study, contact the Human Protections Administrator Brett Ayers at 507-457-5519 or bayers@winona.edu. This project has been reviewed by the Winona State University Institutional Board for the protection of human subjects.

Appendix B

Q1 In order to better understand the perceptions collegiate football players had on the COVID-19 virtual college experience, I have chosen the topic as the central idea of my master's thesis at Winona State University. I have compiled and attached a survey for your completion to help better understand the perceptions collegiate football players have on the COVID-19 virtual college experience. The insight you share will be invaluable toward gaining knowledge on this topic and helping to further educate and advocate for collegiate football players and other student-athletes.

While participating in the survey is completely optional, your decision to participate will add value and a level of understanding to the COVID-19 virtual college experience that you have personally experienced and shed light on the challenges that may not be known to others. The 8-item survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All survey results will be confidential. No names of individuals, institutions, or any other identifying information will be included in the results of the study.

There are no foreseeable risks or inconveniences anticipated with your participation in this study. All responses will be kept confidential with only the researcher having access to specific data. Information obtained in connection with this study will be reported in aggregated form. Please see the attached consent form for more details. It is the intention that the results of the study will be made available by request. Please email claliberty14@winona.edu for a copy of the results.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this survey. By completing and returning the survey, you are granting consent to participate in this research.

- I consent (1)
- I do not consent (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If In order to better understand the perceptions collegiate football players had on the COVID-19 vir... = I do not consent

Q1 Are you 18 or older?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you 18 or older? = No

Q2 What year are you academically?

- Freshman (1)
 - Sophomore (2)
 - Junior (3)
 - Senior (4)
 - Graduate Student (5)
-

Q3 What is your racial or ethnic identity?

- Asian or Pacific Islander (1)
 - Black or African American (2)
 - Hispanic or Latino (3)
 - Native American (4)
 - White or Caucasian (5)
 - Other (6)
-

Q4 Do you live on or off campus?

- On campus (1)
 - Off campus (2)
-

Q5 Where is your permanent residence?

- In Winona or Winona County (1)
 - Within 50 miles of campus (2)
 - Between 50 and 100 miles of campus (3)
 - More than 100 miles from campus (4)
-

Q6 What were your perceptions of the COVID-19 virtual college experience? (Athletically and Academically)

Q7 What were your three biggest challenges associated with the COVID-19 virtual college experience? (Athletically and Academically)

Q8 What methods did you use to cope or adapt to the challenges you experienced? (Athletically and Academically)

End of Survey

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your responses have been recorded.

End of Block: LaLiberty's Survey
