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THE PREPAREDNESS OF FIRST-YEAR FOOTBALL STUDENT-ATHLETES IN ONLINE CLASSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

A Dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department of Higher Education
The University of Mississippi

by

ROY CLIFFORD MCCAIN

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities in the United States currently face an n issue of student-athletes enrolling in online courses and not being prepared. Research has shown that students take these classes for a variety of reasons and perceive a variety of advantages and disadvantages to these types of classes and even more specifically, the subjects taken in the online format. Their level of preparedness, the reasons for this level, and the perceived assistance needed were also issues to be examined. This study aims to determine how prepared for online courses the first-year football student - athletes were during the 2018-2019 school year. In addition, it seeks to determine how these and other student-athletes can be better prepared for their first college online course.

Based on a review of the literature on online education and theories of student success, online teaching and learning, and social class, face-to-face interviews were conducted with fourteen first-year football student-athletes at The University of Mississippi. Analysis of the responses demonstrated that the students had different perceptions of what could help future student-athletes attempting their first online class. On this basis, several recommendations on the building and departmental level were made to help student-athletes be more prepared for an online course in their first year.

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I would like to begin by thanking my wife Laura for all her patience, love, and assistance during this three-year journey. We lost a lot of time to classes, assignments, and writing. Without your support, this would never have come to pass. Your selflessness during this time was unmatched. We have endured great times and difficult ones. You have always been my rock and the reason to keep pushing when things were tough. Thank you for your support and love.

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The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at The University of Mississippi

Dissertation in Practice

Manuscript One

Cliff McCain

The University of Mississippi

The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at The University of Mississippi

In a world that is ever-changing, education itself must adapt and be able to change and continue to meet the needs of its students. Morris (2006) stated "Although most of us passed our undergraduate years in low tech mode—listening to lectures, reading books and articles, and participating in structured classroom discussions—we now find ourselves increasingly involved in a high-tech work environment and lifestyle" (p.1). One adaptation in higher education has been the adoption of methods of teaching to fit the modern student. Among the ways that many of these students, including those at the University of Mississippi, attend class is through an online presentation. While online education may be a popular form of delivery, not all students are prepared to undertake this type of education.

Conversations in the Student-Athlete Support Center (SASC) with student-athletes have led to a hypothesis of a definite problem that first-year football student-athletes (FYFSA) are not adequately prepared for the navigation of online courses. For a variety of reasons such as a lack of discipline, a different learning style or a lack of technological skills and competencies, these students often are wary and struggle with these types of classes. This is the first manuscript of three in which this study will be presented. In this manuscript, having identified the problem of practice upon which the study is focused, the positionality of the author will be detailed. The assumptions that are held going into the research are also described, and any changes in these views that occurred during the research will be acknowledged. This study will be conducted with the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED) in mind. How this study relates to these principles is illustrated along with the conceptual framework for the study

and a review of the literature. Finally, the methodology, research questions and next steps for this study are shared.

Problem of Practice in the Local Context

Online education on the university level requires proficiency in key areas to be successful. The problem of practice for this study is the problem of first-year football student-athletes being unprepared to take online classes at The University of Mississippi. These students come to the university and face challenges like all students. However, if a student is not a good candidate for online classes, a new set of problems arise. An example of this occurred recently at the school involved in the study. This student enrolled in an online computer applications class and struggled from the outset. When assisting the student, the suggestion was made to split the screen so he could read the directions and look at his working document at the same time. His response was "I don't know what that is." This student, who does not know the basic aspects of using a computer, is in an online class during their freshmen year of college. This created a new set of obstacles for the student before even trying to learn the actual material from the class. At this university, the necessary skills to be successful in online classes are broadly defined as how a student learns or studies as well as their technological abilities. They need to have the appropriate study skillset as well as the technical abilities required if they are going to be successful. The school offers a sixty-question survey to anyone who is considering taking an online course called the "Are You Ready?" Online Student Readiness Survey. This voluntary survey should give potential students an idea of what is needed to prosper in an online setting. These questions are broken into five areas: self-directedness, learning preferences, study habits, technical competency, and technology skills. These five can be sorted into two broader groups: how the student studies or learns and technological ability. After completing the survey, a report is provided with a score on a scale of 0–60. Also, suggestions are offered based on the answers.

These suggestions tell the student if they would be a good fit for online education to the university and the areas in which they are deficient ("Are You Ready?", nd).

The Student-Athlete Success Center (SASC) on campus is available to nearly four hundred student-athletes. The facility was built in 2007 with a gift from major donors. The 22,500 square-foot center includes tutoring rooms, offices, two computer labs, a study room annex, and an auditorium. The staff includes seventeen full-time members and another approximately one hundred part-time employees. The center is part of the Department of Athletics and is divided into three sections: Academic Enrichment, Academic Counseling, and Student-Athlete Enhancement. The Success Center mission statement was found within the department handbook and stated: "The mission of the Student-Athlete Success Center is to promote academic and personal achievement through quality developmental and need-based programs designed to empower and holistically develop student-athletes for life after collegiate athletics" (Fedex,p. 1).

Professional Positionality about the Problem of Practice

Thompson (2014) defines positionality as "a critical understanding of the role a scholar's background and current (socially constructed or perceived) position in the world plays in the production of academic knowledge" (p. 794). Knowing a researcher's positionality can help contextualize how the person looks at an issue. I have a variety of experiences that will be explained below that have shaped my positionality on online education, first-year football student-athletes (FYFSA) and the educational process in general. These experiences give me a perspective that is unique and shapes who I am and the way I view things. This shaping applies to how I view online education and how it affects students.

Professional Positionality

First and foremost, I am a life-long educator who has taught students from many different backgrounds and a wide variety of abilities. With these students, I have had to search for the best methods of instruction to meet the type of learning style each student possessed. This question has always been an issue for instructors, and I have experienced it on the high school level as well as an instructor in "First-Year Experiences" at the University of Mississippi. No matter the subject, how students learn and the best way to teach them while reaching the class as a whole is a constant struggle. Many times, students with one learning style or ability level are flourishing while others are either bored, behind or lost. I want to understand how online education fits into that equation and the ways it can help educators reach all students. This includes those who are first-year football student-athletes (FYFSA).

Along with my years of classroom instruction, I currently teach history online at the community college level. These classes are composed of community college students but also include dual-enrollment high school students. Like all online instructors, I see the areas my students succeed in and where they struggle. Research shows that most students fare better on quiz assignments online and struggle on tests (Fonolahi & Jokhan, 2014). If this is true for FYFSA, the reasons why need to be explored.

In addition to the previously mentioned teaching experiences, I work with a caseload of student-athletes, some of whom are first-year students. Many of these students have taken online classes. In my position as a learning specialist, I am tasked with several duties. I help my students with any subject-based assignments. In this function, I act as a tutor for subjects in which I have an appropriate background. I also help these students stay on track and keep up with assignments. I hope to learn how to assist these students with whatever barrier they are

facing. In addition, I will make suggestions on the SASC policies designed to help our students succeed in online classes.

Personal Positionality

The first three areas that shaped my positionality were all strictly professional influences. The fourth piece of the puzzle is on a more personal level. I am a lifelong learner who constantly is looking to improve my knowledge and become a more well-rounded person. I view education and students through the lens of someone who both values formal education and yearns for knowledge gained in post-scholastic settings such as conferences or simply books. I know that not all students look at education and learning in this way but my upbringing, formal schooling and attitudes toward lifelong learning shape how I think others should learn. I identify with Pearse and Dunwoody's (2013) assertion: "Lifelong learners have an unquenchable thirst for learning. They are fascinated with discovering something new: they are ever curious, excited by the prospects of knowing" (p.111). I fully understand many students do not concur.

As an educator, I want to impart this love of learning to my students.

Assumptions

As I began this study, I had to acknowledge several assumptions I have about education, online education, and FYFSA. My first assumption is that education can and should lead to increased professional opportunities, and thus a chance at a better quality of life. These students believe this to be true and are trying to earn a degree for this purpose. They may not have a definitive plan, but I do believe a degree will help them. My second assumption is that online education can be an effective tool to reach students but only if used properly. Like any form of instruction, online education must use sound educational techniques and take into account the learning style and educational ability of the student. A third assumption I have developed is that students believe most online classes are an easier path because classroom attendance is not

required. While it may give them more freedom, this is a dangerous thought that I see many students develop. My final assumption is that there is a better way to use online education to assist first-year students. Online education has the potential to be a powerful educational tool and could be used to help maximize the potential of students.

The aforementioned assumptions developed for several reasons. On a personal level, I grew up in a home where education was a priority. A college education was not an option; it was a must. The only discussion was where I would attend and what I would study. I came from a middle-class family background, not qualifying for financial aid. In addition, I was an average student who did not receive an academic scholarship. Because of these factors, I maintained employment during my post-secondary education. In addition to my upbringing, the fact that I am married to someone who works in post-secondary education has affected my beliefs. My wife and I both hold a high regard for the value of higher education.

Educationally, the fact that I was fortunate enough to earn a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees at this point has influenced me greatly. I know the doors these degrees have opened for me and want the same for my students. Education has changed my life. It has allowed me to come from a very middle-class background in the Mississippi Delta to a job I love in higher education. I would not have been able to achieve what I have thus far without education. My enrollment in the Doctor of Education program at the University of Mississippi (U of M) is further proof of my belief in the power of education.

My professional experiences in education have certainly helped shape some of the assumptions I have developed over the years in the field of education. My job at The University of Mississippi has given me a firsthand look at first-year students and the obstacles they face. I have seen the processes that help them in their journey and the roadblocks they encounter. In

addition, I have seen both the positive and negative impacts of online education on students. I have also developed professional assumptions because of the experiences I have had as an online instructor. That experience allows me to look at the online process through the lens of the instructor. Finally, as a lifelong educator on many levels, I have seen the educational techniques that have worked and those that do not. Also, it has given me an insight into the various learning styles of students and how best to deal with each type.

This study has changed my assumptions in one very important way. When I began the study, I was working on the premise that online education was a broken system and it needed to be fixed, especially concerning student-athletes. However, as I began my review of the literature and other research, I discovered a great many benefits I had not considered. Benefits such as allowing a student who has a learning disability to read or watch a lecture repeatedly to get the information became readily apparent. I began to shift my assumption more to a perspective that what was "wrong" was how the system was being used. Perhaps it was not the best method of delivery for all students. In some cases, the problem could lie in how a particular instructor operates the online class. My assumption now is that online education is a good tool. However, the tool must be applied correctly and to the appropriate students.

Contextualization of the Problem of Practice

To truly understand the relationship of online education to the success of first-year football student-athletes (FYFSA) at this university, a thorough review of literature on what other schools, scholars and pure practitioners are doing or saying is necessary. There are several studies and bodies of literature that are of great importance to the problem of practice to be undertaken. While reviewing the literature, two areas will be examined: online education and student success. The review will concentrate on students from community colleges and

universities. While online education is on the rise for high schools, this review will not consider literature based on high school students except in the framework of considering if these students are at-risk because they were not prepared for online education or post-secondary education in general when they entered college.

Online Education

A primary focus of this study is online education. This section of the review examines some of the advantages and disadvantages of this method of delivery. While all the positives and negatives cannot be discussed, an effort was made to identify some of the major issues.

advantages of online education. While there are ways that online education could be beneficial for students being successful, this is not always the case. There is evidence on both sides of the argument. Li and Irby (2008) from Sam Houston State University lauded the benefits of online education stating that it provided:

> An education at the learner's own pace and learning style without the constraints of time or place. When effectively managed, online education can empower learners to reach their career goals and to meet degree or certification requirement. Online education also reaches out to places where educators have never touched before and creates opportunities for the underserved and people living on the other side of the world. (p. 449)

But what are other advantages of online classes? Some go beyond what occurs in the class. When explaining why online education has become so popular, McPherson and Bacow (2015) asserted, “The two most obvious explanations involve cost and convenience. The Internet, at least in its asynchronous use, affords delivery of instructional material” (p. 140). Students are unable to physically go to a college campus every day can complete many courses

remotely. This allows them to both work and to go to school. This could make the difference in someone being able to complete a degree or not.

disadvantages of online education. Not everyone in education is as enamored with the benefits of online education. Some have very strong opinions to the contrary. An article by Keis and his associates found three main disadvantages to education when compared to face-to-face classes. The number one complaint found in the study was the inability of the students to interact with instructors or other students. Ranking second in the list of complaints was that it requires too high a level of self-discipline and initiative. Finally, a third complaint was noted with the students saying the online class actually takes up more time than face-to-face classes (Keis, Grab, Schneider, & Ochsner, 2017).

Online Instructional Methods and Techniques.

A major issue to examine is what type of instructional methods affect students in general and students in their first year in particular. The first component of online instructional methods and techniques to explore is the area of student engagement. A major criticism of online education is that the student never really becomes fully engaged in the school community. It can be seen as a lonely process that is done by the student with no interaction involved. To be successful, this cannot be the case. The instructor must make an effort for the student to be fully engaged. A 2012 study by Bolliger and Wasilik discussed a "disconnect" that is often found in online classes which can be the most potentially harmful aspect of this form of education. They stated: "Students need to have opportunities to participate in discussions and interact with one another in order to feel involved and stay engaged in online courses" (Bolliger &Wasilik, 2012, p. 156). Assignments such as chapter quizzes and tests will not allow the student to gain all they can from a class. Instructors must find a way to be more present with the students using such

means as video announcements and constant email correspondence. Face-to-face or online, students feeling connected to their instructors is important.

An article in *Communication Education* by Moore, Masterson, Christophel, and Shea (1996) noted, "Research on student ratings of instruction has shown a consistent relationship between student reports and cognitive learning" (p.30). Teachers have to find a way to be more than a name listed on a class schedule. Another article by Boling, Hough, Krisky, Saleem, and Stevens (2012) agreed. It involved promoting positive online learning experiences. Both students and faculty participated and the major finding was that the one characteristic that students find favorable in online courses are the aspects where there are social interactions. This is an important point to any research in online education because interaction is one of the hardest features to create and instructors have to make a point to create it in their course.

Types of assignments are a major component of a successful online program. As with any form of delivery, several factors must be present for students to learn. Rote learning is suspect in the brick-and-mortar classroom and even more ineffective in the virtual one. One model to follow when instructing students is Kolb's Experimental Learning theory (Russell-Bowie, 2013). This theory contends that there are four main stages to the gaining of knowledge: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Russell-Bowie, 2013). These things are not easy but, more effective than testing online students with multiple-choice tests alone. Many classroom instructors will use group projects as a staple of their instruction, but avoid the activities online. This lessens the opportunity for students to learn. With so many forms of electronic communication available now, online groups are no more difficult to achieve than traditional ones (Trammell & LaForge, 2017).

A study by Kebritchi (2014) provided another look at what students perceive as quality online teaching methods. The participants were thirty online graduate students in the college of education at one university with four different instructors. When examining the brief survey results, the most important takeaway was that there was a very significant correlation between an episodic teaching method and a student view of quality education. As the instruction became more narrative, student satisfaction decreased. This is a major point when examining what methods and techniques instructors should use to teach online classes. In addition, it was pointed out that interactivity, dialog and consistent communication are the elements that are most identified for quality online instruction.

Another aspect to consider when choosing assignments and activities to use in online classes depends on students' learning styles. This is even more imperative if a student is in their first year of school. Pashler (2008) explained the term "learning styles" as the concept that individuals differ regarding what mode of instruction or study is most effective for them. Blevins (2014) has broken learners down into three categories: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Online instructors must do their best to use a variety of presentation methods and assignments that consider all of these learners. Assignments that involve seeing, hearing and doing are not always easy to achieve but are necessary.

In addition to actual assignments, the way the material is presented to students is crucial. One study conducted by Fidaldo and Thormann (2017) looked at alternative methods of instruction in online courses. The study involved students from an online course design class where instructors came to learn better techniques to teach online. There were twenty-six students used in the study. While there was a questionnaire given at the end of the course, the major portion of the information was not gathered this way. Instead, information was retrieved through

Blackboard where statistics such as “number of times accessed” are found. The most interesting result was that students preferred the video instruction segments of the classes. However, the instructors had reservations about the videos. The most prominent reservation was a lack of quality materials to present to the students.

Online Education in the Southern States

For example, Mississippi, like most states, has become heavily invested in online education on the post-secondary level. Both two and four-year schools within the state or participating in programs and offering more alternative types of delivery such as online education. As with most states, the concept of online education has exploded on the scene in the last ten years. In 2008, The University of Southern Mississippi saw a one year rise of thirty-eight percent in the number of students involved in some way with online instruction (“Mississippi Colleges”, 2008). While this is a seemingly enormous one-year jump, state schools are still trying to use the concept of online education to attract more students. For example, Mississippi State University’s distance education website pushes the benefits of online education and offers incentives to prospective students such as in-state tuition for online students, full-time faculty and available student services such as tutoring (“Center for Distance”). Obviously, in-state schools see online education as a way to boost their enrollment.

Online Classes at The University of Mississippi

Currently, this university offers an abundance of classes online in almost every subject area. Along with individual courses, This University offers a Masters of Business Administration degree online as well as masters and educational specialist degrees from the school of education (“Ole Miss Online”). Also, the university offers many courses through what is called the Istudy program. These courses can be both online or through a paper-based system that is similar to

what once was commonly called independent study ("The University"). In addition, as mentioned earlier, the university supplies a survey that can be completed before deciding whether to take an online class. This is yet another tool the university uses in its online education program.

Barriers to Success in Online Classes

Many factors come into play when determining if students will struggle in a college setting. Some occur before the students enter college and some transpire while they attempt to reach their goals. Some of the same barriers occur when the student is taking online classes and these barriers may be even more magnified than in a normal classroom. One problem for some students entering college is a lack of basic knowledge of technology. A 2014 article by Pellas discussed this issue and related that it is something that must be overcome if online education is to be successful. Lack of technological prowess adds an additional obstruction that has to be overcome in some students. Pellas' study involved 305 undergraduate and graduate students. A lengthy survey was administered that resulted in three conclusions about self-efficiency. The author concluded that self-efficiency could be improved by appropriate guidance and feedback, encouragement to set goals and scaffolding activities that build self-efficiency and self-regulation. This is important to further studies because it is a separate issue from academic ability. Being uncomfortable with technology could affect student performance even if that student is extremely strong in other areas. Pellas noted that this problem must be addressed.

It is often argued that the lack of ability to work with others is a drawback or barrier to success in online education. This is not the case if done correctly. It can be productive. A recent study showed that group assignments are a practical method used by online instructors. A 2013 study by Oguz and Poole involved graduate school nursing students who had a presentation

assignment in which they had the option to do as a group or as individuals. There was no grade incentive to choose one over the other. The purpose of the study was to see if working in a group would change the learning outcomes. Twenty-three students participated in the study by completing a survey. The results concluded that the level of acquired knowledge was the same whether the assignment was done in a group setting or as an individual. The researchers acknowledged a limitation in that the small sample of twenty-three may not be large enough to give a true picture. Another area that seemed important was the positive aspects of group work that were presented. They included compelling students to learn teamwork, negotiating workloads, dealing with peers who would not work and learning to develop a product under a time limit. While there could be limitations such as inadequate technology knowledge or lack of guidance from the instructor, this study showed that group work is not necessarily a barrier to success in online classes.

Attitudes about Online Education

Most people that are knowledgeable about education have an opinion of online education and its role. These attitudes toward online education can have a significant impact, either positive or negative. One group that online education affects is the students that are enrolled in the program. Trammell and LaForge (2017) asserted the number of students taking at least one online class was 7.1 million. This accounted for 33.5% of all enrollment.

With enrollment in online courses on the rise, students' attitudes are significant. A 2016 study by Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, and Nguyen found that that interaction in an online course was directly impactful on the students' perception of quality within the course. They stated that this quality has to come in three areas – content, instructor and other students.

Along with knowing what students think about online education, it is also important to know how students compare online classes with face-to-face classes. Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) presented a study that involved 368 students in three sections of a sociology class at a four-year public university. The study examined how student achievement and satisfaction are influenced by the type of course. The results of the survey indicated no significant difference in the effectiveness of the two types of classes. This is important because it shows that online classes can be just as effective as face-to-face classes, if delivered correctly.

A final look at attitudes involves why a student would enroll or not enroll in an online class. Whether or not the student's reasons are valid, it is worth noting what their thoughts are. In their study, O'Neill and Sai (2014) looked specifically at why students would register for a face-to-face lecture class when the same class was available online. They interviewed 48 students at a four-year public university in an educational psychology class. Interestingly, the most common reason the participants avoided online class was because they believed they could learn more in the face-to-face class. This goes to the heart of a problem of the perception of online classes where many deem them too easy and do not adequately teach the students. In addition, students believed they (a) did not like online classes, (b) thought they would get a better grade in a face-to-face classroom, (c) believed online courses were too difficult, (d) did not realize a class was offered online, (e) did not want to work too hard, and (f) the class was full when they tried to enroll.

Similarly, another online study examined 289 students regarding their perceptions of online and face-to-face classes and how those perceptions might be related to being previously exposed to some online classes. (Platt, Raile and Yu, 2014). When comparing online and face-

to-face classes, there were varieties of answers. For example, students compared the classes in the area of flexibility, and perceived the classes taken online were much more flexible. One of the conclusions was that the greater flexibility was driving the demand for online classes today. However, face-to-face classes had a much higher positive perception when looking through the scope of interaction. The final comparison had mixed reviews concerning the responses about which classes provided the most knowledge.

For students to perceive online education as a good product, the person delivering that instruction must be invested in the success of the program. Faculty perceptions of online education are also an important factor in student success. While being paid for an extra class seems to be an obvious benefit to an employee, there are other factors that determine job satisfaction in connection with online classes. A study by Bejerano (2008) revealed that instructors find online classes both too time-sensitive and unrewarding. They have to spend too much time training and setting up their class to get the same reward they feel from interacting in a classroom with students. To bring factors such as energy and engagement to online classes, these obstacles must be addressed. In addition, another study showed that instructors have to believe that online education is a proven method to be accepting of the concept. Gibson, Harris, and Colaric (2008) stated that instructors are more apt to try a new method if it can be clearly shown that the method does benefit the students.

Another study involved the aspects that created satisfaction for instructors with online classes. In this study, the authors examined the factors that increase the satisfaction faculty have with teaching online classes. One hundred and two online instructors at a public research university participated in the study. They were administered an online faculty satisfaction survey that included thirty-six questions. A 4-point Likert scale was used to answer the questions.

Before the survey, the authors identified three categories of instructor satisfaction. For example, The three categories were satisfaction with students, satisfaction with administration and intrinsic satisfaction where they were able to develop as instructors. Two results were important in the researchers' findings. First, it was confirmed that the before mentioned three categories were all important to instructor satisfaction. Secondly, satisfaction with the student was identified as the most important key to instructor satisfaction (Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009).

Apparently, one aspect of faculty attitudes or resistance to online education could be partially generational. Many older instructors have some apprehension about technology in general. A study in the *Journal of Education for Business* examined the attitudes of the instructors about technology as opposed to those of the students (Gibson, et al., 2008). This is important because all aspects of online education need to be effective for the program to be successful. The study examined faculty from a College of Business and a College of Education from one university. They were asked to complete a survey with questions about ease of use and usefulness of new technology. Over forty-six percent of the faculty completed the survey. The survey questions were based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Their results revealed that faculty viewed "usefulness" as the most important factor in agreeing that a new technology was positive. On the other hand, "ease of use" was not significant when viewing the same technology. The second of these points contradicted the prediction made in the study. This article shows that instructors are open to technology, if it is considered useful.

The attitude of school administration concerning online education is another major component of its success. Online programs in schools that make student success a priority over enrollment growth have the best chance to be successful. Fedynich (2013) commented on how easily schools can recognize the benefits of online courses:

> Universities also realize advantages of hosting online classes, as student population tends to increase. In combination with lower withdrawal rates of online students, universities have found online learning to be very cost-effective and efficient via many avenues never thought possible before online learning came into existence. More students tend to register and take the online classes, as this reduces the opportunity costs of education for the student and the university. As more courses are being offered online, enrollment increases, thereby bringing more money to the bottom line for the university. (p. 4)

According to Sorenson (2014), administrators will further impede success in online classes by viewing them as a money-making opportunity and putting too many students in an online class. How the size of an online class influences the level of instruction was the topic of a recent research study. The study was conducted by analyzing the peer reviews of 380 part-time instructors who worked for a for-profit school. The subject area was the School of Education. These instructors were evaluated by full-time employees using the College of Education's rubric. After the scores were calculated, it was examined to see if there was a pattern according to the number of students in the class. Sorensen (2014) looked at how different aspects of instruction were impacted. The one that showed the most difference with several students was the ability of instructors to use their expertise in delivering instruction. When instructors are not using the best methods of instruction because they have too many students, the administration has not made learning the priority.

Student Abilities and Characteristics

Even when all the groundwork has been laid, for example, with good instructional methods, some students will prosper in online classes more than others will. One area to be considered is identifying predictors for students that might drop out of online courses. A study

conducted by Cochran, Campbell, Baker, and Leeds (2014) looked at different factors that caused students to drop out. They tested several different hypotheses and found instances where they were true. The first area found to be true in predicting dropouts was older students were less likely to withdraw from online classes than younger students were. Also, males are more likely to withdraw from online classes than females. Students with a lower grade point average were more likely to drop out of classes than those who were doing well. Finally, students that had previously dropped out of a course were more likely to repeat this process than those who had never left a class. These factors are sometimes hard to control but it will help the school and instructor if they know which students are at risk to drop out.

A study by Kerr, Rynearson, and Kerr (2006) examined what type of students and what academic abilities are best suited for online learning. The authors undertook three different studies and had three general goals: (a) describing how the Test of Online Learning Success (TOOLS) was constructed and validated, (b) outlining the contributions TOOLS has made to online learners, and (c) reviewing literature that supports their findings. The TOOLS assessment analyzed forty-five items into five subcategories - computer skills, independent learning, dependent learning, need for online delivery and academic skills. In summarizing the results, the students who scored highest in independent learning were considered the best online students. This differed from an in-class student where academic skills were more important. According to this study, the ability to work alone without constant direction was more important than pure academics.

Similarly, Kokemuller (2011) conducted a study to identify the best candidates for online classes and which students are ill-equipped for classes of this nature. According to Kokemuller, in 2011 there were six million students taking online classes and there were four broad areas of

students that should explore taking online classes. The first was self-disciplined students. Another was students that have a sound technology background. Adult learners compose the third group that could prosper in online classes. The final area consists of students who are easily distracted.

Most of the above factors are characteristics that are not purely based on academic ability. A major academic concern that may lead to students underachieving or possibly dropping out, are those students who have special learning needs. Whether it is a physical disability, attention deficit disorder or other similar issues, these are problems that have to be addressed by the instructor or school. Many instructors of online classes do not feel that they can adequately meet the needs of these students. There may be programs available to help the students but the instructors themselves do not have confidence that they can help the students using an online delivery system (Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016).

Another study addressed students with disabilities in online classes. Hashey and Stahl (2014) discussed three types of interactions in online classes: synchronous (real-time instructor interaction), asynchronous (sporadic instructor interaction) and blended (aspects of both synchronous and asynchronous). The real advantage for students with disabilities taking online classes is that there can be a variety of delivery methods to meet the needs of the student. On the other hand, although this is becoming less of a problem, not all students have access in their schools to the hardware or software needed. One of the conclusions of the authors was that regardless of the program, the pivotal role to adequately teach the students with limited abilities belongs with the instructor. This was an important part of their research because it shows the importance of quality instructors. Quality instructors will overcome a lack of funds, hardware or even lack of student ability and provide quality instruction.

Still, other characteristics have no relation to student abilities at all. Many students are forced to become online students because of a lack of access to face-to-face classrooms. Factors such as work schedules and family situations are non-negotiable and put these students into the realm of online education (Dabbagh, 2007). The characteristics of good online students have at times been compared to the characteristics of an adult learner. A 2012 journal article by Johnson and Berge compiled information that was based on several similar studies. The three main characteristics identified by the authors as being significant for online students are self-motivated, self-disciplined and have the willingness to ask questions. These and other characteristics are also closely associated with adult learners making them potentially good online students. One interesting aspect Johnson and Berge (2012) found in their research was that online learners tend to be more interested in learning specific material rather than a course of study. This could also tie into the adult learner comparison when someone returns to school with the specific purpose of getting a job. These students are less concerned about electives and more focused on what they need to know to get a job or improve their position.

Student Success Defined

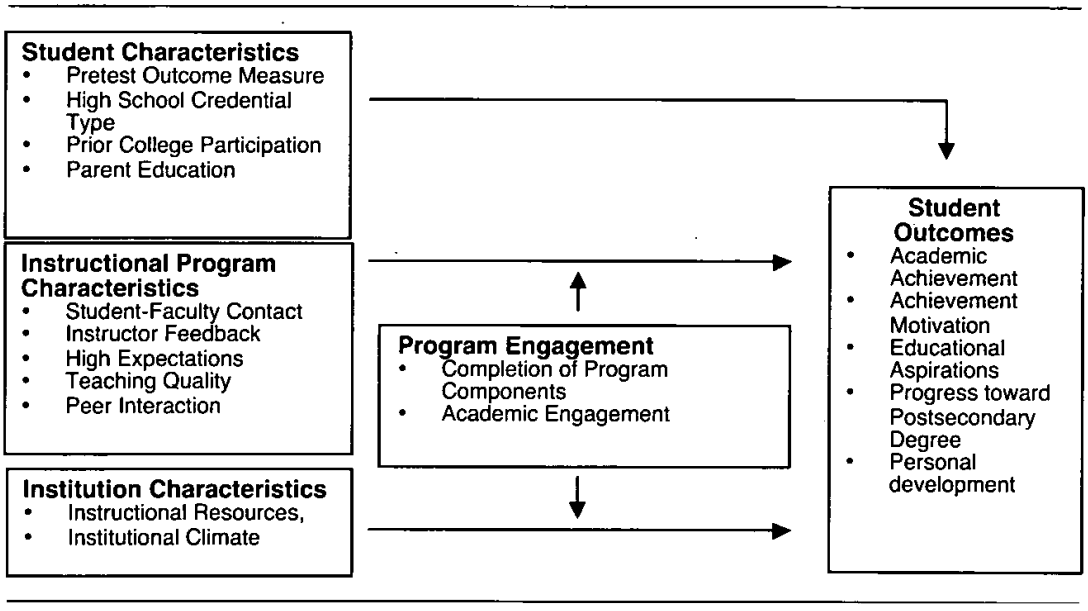
The opinion that may matter the most is that of the student. When do they feel successful? What are they seeking to gain? Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, and Purswell (2008) in the *Journal of College Student Development* explored this question when they stated:

> As previously mentioned, how students define college success isn't an understudied area of research. Instead, success has often been acquainted with doing well academically or graduating. Although good grades and graduation are important to college students, it is possible that they view success more broadly than researchers. (p.145)

Factors of Student Success

When examining student success, it is also important to look at the factors that play into that success. This study focused on the role online classes play in that success. However, online classes are just one of the variables that could play a part (Aydin, 2017).

One important factor in helping students succeed is knowing what factors to consider when students enter the institution and what programs are needed to help the students succeed. Robbins et al. (2004) maintained that there were three types of predictors of success for those students entering college: (a) traditional predictors such as and grade point average, standardized test scores and class rank; (b) demographic factors such as gender, race and socioeconomic status; and (c) factors of a psychosocial nature such as social involvement, motivation, self-management, and study habits. Another model links both the students' past with what the institution can provide. To clarify: What do the students bring to the school? What needs to happen in the classroom for the students to succeed? And what can the institution provide to help the students succeed? Below is a depiction of that particular model.



(Meyer, 2011, p.136)

This particular model was developed with at-risk youths in mind but its concepts could be a blueprint of dealing with students entering college. While the factors that go within this model may change from school to school, the idea that the three prongs of factors go into a successful student could be applied to many schools.

Techniques to Help Students Who May Struggle to Succeed

One suggested method of helping first-year students on the college level is to provide them with better tools before they are enrolled and walk onto a college campus. Many students are arriving on campus unprepared to be college students. While the overall potential of a student may not be something that can be changed, any increase in learning skills before they enroll in college can help them compete on the next level. Areas of the most concern entering college are math, reading, and writing. Different programs are being explored to prepare students for post-secondary work **(**Cabrera, 2006). The other half of the technique equation occurs once the students get to campus. They will arrive with a certain amount of skill and the school now takes over the job of how to help them. Programs that assist with the student's transition to college are now visible on many campuses. (Megwalu, Miller, & Haller, 2017) Even after making the transition to college life, many students require extra assistance. Tutoring and mentoring programs are another way to help students succeed (Rennar-Potacco, Orellana, & Salazar, 2017).

Student Success in Mississippi

Like all states, Mississippi should place a high priority on student success and the success of first-year students. With a vast number of four-year and two-year schools within the state, student success should always be at the forefront of people's minds. Mississippi's need and desire to improve student success begins in pre-school programs and extends through their

college experience. This is even more difficult in a state that has struggled financially to support education (Pittman, 2017). Because of the negative national perception of the history of Mississippi in terms of education, not all success is based on test scores. Rutherford, Hillmer, and Parker (2011) argued, "Success doesn't come only in numbers. Sometimes, success is measured by how much attitudes and perceptions shift from negative to positive" (p. 41).

Areas like the Mississippi Delta especially struggle to help students succeed because of a lack of financial means. A study in the *Journal of Negro Education* bemoaned the education failings in the region stated,

> In the Mississippi Delta, an overall pattern of economic disadvantage exists, creating special challenges for educators. According to Eckes (2005), the Delta has historically struggled with socioeconomic hardships, and even today one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, more than one-third of the adults lack high school diplomas. Furthermore, the author asserted that the spirit of segregation persists in the education system where white students predominantly attend private schools and blacks go to public schools. These socioeconomic conditions have a strong negative impact on the educational system. In fact, the fiscal bases of this area cannot generate sufficient resources to supplement state-financed educational programs. Problems in this region manifest in various forms such as lack of certified teachers, crowded classes, and shortage of funding, inadequate facilities, and outdated curriculum. (Al-Fadhli and Singh, 2010, p.18-19)

Students Who Struggle to Succeed at The University of Mississippi

This university is not dissimilar to other universities in that many students on campus could be seen as struggling. First-year students may come to the University unprepared or have

circumstances in their lives creating roadblocks to their success. Either group is in danger of not succeeding. Although the university has a high number of students from areas outside the south, schools within the region to deal with what is perceived by some as a broken system of education on the secondary level. States like Mississippi have consistently ranked low nationally in many educational categories such as funding (Mississippi, 2012). While this University does actively recruit many high achieving students, like many schools they do have students who are not considered high achieving. As a public institution, the school draws many of its students from the southern United States Many of these students are not prepared when they arrive on campus and quickly fall behind (Rutherford, Hillmer, and Parker, 2011).

Like many schools, The University is taking steps to assist students who could struggle. First-year students, who are the main focus of this study, have several opportunities presented by the university. The website *The Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience* lists many campus resources for aid such as tutoring. In addition, that department also teaches a class called EDHE 105 where freshmen are taught different skills and given a crash course on how to succeed at the school ("Center for Student,' n.d.). Obviously, these steps cannot prevent personal or financial issues that cause students to struggle or drop out, but they can help ease a small portion of the academic and social issues that face many students.

First-year Students Who Struggle in Online Classes

Students who fall behind are searching for educational opportunities that meet their specific needs. Whether they are in this predicament from a purely academic shortcoming or from a situational cause such as being a single parent or work constraints, they all are looking for the type of instruction that fits them. In online instruction, they can choose between synchronous education where they attend virtual classrooms or asynchronous education where the work is

done on their own time with online materials. Still, others may be a mix of these methods (Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016). The key for these students is to choose the type of online class that is right for them or if any is right for their situation.

This study examined some of the possible positives of online education and first-year students such as flexibility of attendance, ability to complete assignments in a less stressful environment and opportunities to be creative (Potts & Potts, 2017). The other side of online education will also be explored with some of its criticisms such as non-interaction between students and instructors and between students and other classmates. The issues are important for all students including those in their first year.

Student-Athletes

Student-athletes are a unique segment of today's university students. They carry a full academic load but have many other responsibilities. As Johnson 2013 stated, "Student-athletes shoulder a tremendous amount of responsibility placed on them by coaches, administrators, and faculty members. They often devote more than 40 hours per week to athletic pursuits, including 2 to 4 hours of practice per day, travel, competition, film review, weight training, injury rehabilitation, media responsibilities, and community service" (p. 76). These added responsibilities can affect their academic performance.

One avenue to help student-athletes overcome these extra responsibilities as through academic support of the universities. Collegiate student-athletes in many schools similar to The University of Mississippi have access to academic assistance. Programs such as subject-specific tutoring and mentoring are often a factor in student-athlete academic performance. Another program often utilized by academic assistance departments are organized study halls or study groups. Every school, athletic department or team decides who, if anyone, is mandated to study

hall. In addition, academic support programs help student-athletes prepare for life after college with programs such as resume workshops and job fairs (Hart and Brooks, 2016).

First-year student-athletes also have a resource that is available to all students on campus. The first-year experience office, or similarly named depending on the campus, is an office that is set up to meet the needs of all first-year students. They help with the transition from high school to college and often present opportunities to interact on the college campus with activities such as volunteer opportunities and cultural events. One problem that student-athletes often have is because of their other responsibilities, they are not able to take full advantage of what the office of the first-year experience has to offer. In this way, student-athletes are somewhat missing out on a tremendous resource (Hart & Brooks, 2016).

Summary of Reviewed Literature

When the literature on online education and its impact on student success is examined, there are a few points that stand out. The main point is how these classes are taught is important. Do these students feel connected or do they feel isolated? Although there are barriers in many areas and some opinions need to be more informed, online education can be a positive experience for students and often compares favorably with face-to-face classes. The research here seems to bear that out. Online classes also have the potential to assist struggling students. While barriers may still exist in some instances, it could be said that reaching all types of learners is easier online because of the lack of time restraints that instructors in the classroom face. The issue now is taking the information in these studies and using it to help our students. Like all forms of education, if online education is not a positive experience for a student, what is the point?

The Problem of Practice and Issues of Equity, Ethics, and Social Justice

This project was completed in part to fulfill the requirements for a Doctor of Education with an emphasis in Higher Education at the University of Mississippi (U of M). This degree is affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED).

CPED Principles

CPED began in 2007 and is committed to a "critical examination of the doctorate in education (EdD) through dialogue, experimentation, critical feedback and evaluation" (CPED, n.d.). The three main principles of the CPED program are equity, ethics and social justice. This project of examining the relationship between taking online classes and the success of first-year students at the U of M fits into more than one of these CPED principles. One of the ways the study fits with the principles of social justice and equity and does so on several fronts. First, online education is sometimes criticized because some students are not always technologically prepared to undertake online classes. In many of these cases, the lack of preparedness is caused by either no computer/internet in the home or by underachieving school districts without adequate funding for technology (Spector &Yuen, 2016). The students this would most often affect are ones from lower socioeconomic homes. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage. Not only do they have to learn the actual subject matter, but they also have to fight harder to learn how to use the technology. It is another roadblock on their journey to success.

Another way the study follows the principle of social justice and equity concerns interaction in class. Studies have shown that many students who are from difficult backgrounds do not want to participate in class and express themselves. Online education offers them the opportunity to speak their mind freely without fear of judgment from others in the class. In this way, online education acts as an equalizer for many students (Yu, 2009).

The third principle, ethics, can also be applied to the study. First, it applies to instructors to be professional and do what is right by their students. Too many times the online instructor is not fully invested in the class and teaches the online course because it is required or the pay is not sufficient for their time demands (Arbaugh, 2010). However, they have an actual ethical obligation to find the best way to reach their students. Lack of commitment to the student in a class could lead to some of the issues to be examined in the study such as students dropping out of school or simply not doing as well as they could. The same principle can be applied to the administration of the schools. If online classes are used as a "money maker" without adequate training for instructors and proper software for the students, the student will be the ones who suffer.

Conceptual Framework

When examining the overall concept of online education and its impact on first-year football student-athletes (FYFSA), it was important to set a framework from which to view the issue. This issue was viewed through the lens of three different theories. The first and possibly the most important is through the lens of student success, and more directly the success of FYFSA. The study was examined the factors that can affect student success. Patterson (2014) reported:

> The reality is that academic achievement is not black and white but complex and multifaceted. Many internal and external factors affect a student's ability to achieve or not. Family dynamics, neighborhood/community dynamics, society's view on education, the school, teachers, peers, and the individual student all impact achievement. True resolution must address these multiple areas. (p.79)

While there may be many factors that have an impact on student success, online education as it relates to success of first-year students was the focus of this study.

The second phase of this study was an examination of online teaching and learning. The literature will show how much a part of the educational fabric online education has become. Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor (2017) stated, “Online college courses are a rapidly growing feature of higher education. One out of three students now takes at least one course online during their college career, and that share has increased threefold over the past decade” (p. 2855).

The current study examined how the types of instruction and policies of online programs can affect the success of students and whether these factors become even more important with first-year students. There are arguments on both sides as to the effectiveness of online education and if it is an adequate tool to use with first-year students. With the large increase in technology use and online education, it is important to know what, if any, role technology plays in the success of at-risk students. With the growth of online education ever-increasing, the time to know is now.

The final phase of the framework is based on the Social Class Theory. How do the social status and the effects of that status influence the ability of a student to succeed? A study at the University of Iowa claimed that social class is possibly the most meaningful cultural dimension in a person's life when combined with race and gender (Liu et al., 2004). Students from a lower socioeconomic status could potentially be behind other students regarding technology exposure before entering college. Although this aspect was not the overall focus of this study, it should be considered

Next Steps

First-year football student-athletes (FYFSA) face many battles when entering college and, in addition, make many decisions about which subject to take and what delivery method to choose. These decisions will affect their career and play a role in their success. One of the

decisions to be made is whether or not to take online classes. A qualitative analysis of the success and attitudes of these students at The University of Mississippi will help to assess how prepared these students were for online classes. Also, several subcategories can be explored as to what can be done to help these students succeed in the future.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative approach is determined to be the one most suited for the topic. Zhang and Wildenuth (2009) said that qualitative research "goes beyond merely counting words or extracting meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner" (p.318). This study examined more than grade-point averages or test scores. It reviewed the thoughts and feelings of FYFSA concerning online classes in general and what causes success or failure for them.

Research Questions

This research project identified the readiness for online classes for FYFSA at The University of Mississippi. The factors that cause these students to struggle in these classes and the skills they need to be successful were examined. Finally, the study explored what role the staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center (SASC) could play in the success of these students. The study was mindful that students take online classes for many reasons and that they may enter the university ill-prepared. The following research questions explore the readiness in online for FYFSA at the University of Mississippi:

1. To what extent do first-year football student-athletes perceive they are prepared to take online classes at the University of Mississippi?
2. What are the factors that are perceived to determine if first-year football student-athletes have the skills necessary to succeed in an online class?

3. What factors are perceived to contribute to first-year football student-athletes struggling in online classes?
4. What is the perception of the ways the support staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center help first-year football student-athletes negotiate online courses?

Interview Questions

1. Please explain the factors that caused you to choose an online course in your first year on campus.
2. Please describe an aspect of online courses you were the most apprehensive about before taking one? After taking this class, was this fear justified?
3. What do you believe are the advantages and disadvantages of taking an online class?
4. Tell me of an online class you took that you wish you had taken in a traditional classroom. Why?
5. What subject matter would you say an online class is best suited and which are not? Please explain.
6. What computer skills did you have when you enrolled and which have you increased since you have entered the University? What caused this increase?
7. How do you feel your particular strengths, weaknesses, and learning style as a student help or hurt you in an online class?
8. In what ways do you feel that the assistance of the Student-Athlete Support Center staff benefited you in the online course? What more could they have done to assist you?

Data Sources and Collection

Purposeful sampling was used in the study. Creswell & Poth (2016) explains this method saying that a purposeful sample "will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (p. 148). The interviews were conducted until a saturation level had been achieved. The participants for this study consisted of fourteen freshmen football players at the University of Mississippi. The participants were all freshman the previous year and in their first college matriculation at the university. Students must have been enrolled for their first class in college in either the previous summer, fall or spring. All of these student-athletes would have taken at least one online class during their freshman year.

For the purpose of this study, an online class is one where no face-to-face classroom interaction takes place and all instruction, activities, and evaluations take place online. The students were interviewed individually in sessions lasting approximately thirty minutes. The interview schedule consisted of eight semi-structured questions (See Appendix A). The questions were developed because of the experiences of the researcher and from a thorough evaluation of the review of the literature. Additional probing questions or clarifications were added, as needed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded by the researcher, and used to determine what themes emerged as having a tremendous impact on these students concerning online education.

Ethical and Logistical Issues

There are several issues, both ethical and logistical, that were considered during this research**.** One ethical issue that was addressed concerned the center staff. The intent was to find information that would help everyone better assist these students. We did not want to give the

impression that this is a condemnation of any work done by the staff. This was addressed by providing the student correct question phrasing and correct information before they were interviewed. Another ethical issue was concern about getting the students to open up about difficulties they have experienced in online classes. If the students were self-conscience about either their background or perceived IQ, they may not have given truthful answers. Also, since the researcher is a member of the academic staff, a concern of the student being forthright with responses must be addressed. However, their comfort level and trust with the staff is believed to be a strong enough factor to overcome this issue. We need to assure them of the utmost confidentiality to make them comfortable answering questions that may be difficult for them.

The students were interviewed in the Student-Athlete Success Center. A question of this student speaking freely in this location may be raised. However, this is a place the students are very comfortable and associate with all types of academic events. They were notified that their participation was purely voluntary and any responses was confidential. Logistically, the biggest obstacle was the problem of finding a time in the schedule of these FYFSAs. They have very little free time away from their school and team commitments. The use of this location alleviated some of this logistical problem since it is centrally located on campus and a place they frequent.

Conclusion

A second manuscript will follow detailing the results of the interviews with the participants. The results of manuscript two will lead to valuable information and possible recommendation of policies and practices. These recommendations will be outlined in the third and final manuscript.

The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at the University of Mississippi

Manuscript Two

Cliff McCain

The University of Mississippi

Introduction

Online education remains a topic of discussion at institutions of higher learning today. Many questions are being asked and answers offered on the best way to use a medium that was not available a generation ago. Most schools have accepted the challenge and are offering courses in different formats. Over ten years ago, Pank (2007) claimed that the method was a mainstay on campuses around the country when he stated, "The integration of technology into educational programs has resulted in most courses of study being offered in both traditional settings and online" (p. 74). While the truth in Pank's assertion has not changed over the years, some of the discussion has shifted to the question: Are online classes a good option? Radović-Marković (2010) stated, "… there are still doubts about what is considered e-learning, what the e-learning process is, and what has to be included in order to create a quality online study program" (p. 289). In reality, online education is a major factor on college campuses. The challenge is to determine who is best suited for this form of educational instruction.

Some that promote online education as the trend of the present and future would say it is a matter of how the instruction is done, not the method chosen. Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) concluded,

> Learning is a flexible and dynamic process that can be successfully accomplished across a wide range of settings, methods, and strategies. The quality of the learning experience is determined by the pedagogy used, not the medium through which the learning takes place. If designed properly, in a way that stresses interaction, clear structure, and strong content, online courses can offer a learning environment that is as equally effective and enjoyable as the traditional classroom. (p.326)

This is a traditional view that maintains that it still comes down to the effectiveness of an instructor. A good instructor is still more important than the type of delivery chosen.

When determining what classes or delivery students are best suited for, many factors are considered. Factors such as background, learning style, technical knowledge and skills, and access to technology are among the issues to be evaluated. Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) discussed some of these issues faced by students:

> Challenges include the need for computer literacy and navigation skills, greater electronic connection capabilities, and concerns over isolation. Within online classes, students must not only learn the course material but also the technology skills needed to participate in the class. The online learning format places the burden on students to initiate the learning process, and assume primary responsibility for the learning experience. Many students enjoy the convenience of the online experience, but some are ill prepared to initiate the basic tenets of the work. (p. 2)

Summary of the Problem of Practice and Dissertation in Practice

Many college students today have a packed academic, social or work schedule that can cause stress in their lives (Thibodeaux, Deutsch, Kitsantas, & Winsler, 2017). Student-athletes have different types of schedules that are in some cases even more stressful. In addition to the busy schedule, many student-athletes are not prepared for college for many reasons. Pritchard (2005) stated, “Many athletes find they are unprepared for academic life in college or falsely believe that they will be treated differently in the classroom because they are athletes” (p. 2). This un-readiness manifests itself in online courses, as well. As stated earlier, while online classes are available to student-athletes, it may not be the answer for all. Freshmen, particularly freshmen student-athletes, may struggle if they are not ready to engage in the online process. This problem, in general, led to the specific Problem of Practice (POP), which is first-year

football student-athletes at the University of Mississippi taking online courses before they are sufficiently prepared.

This dissertation in practice emerged in part from a desire to improve the assistance given to student-athletes, and more specifically first-year football student-athletes who were taking online courses. Discovering and assessing the thoughts of these students concerning online education could serve as a tremendous tool in assisting these young people as they begin their college careers. Stegers-Jager Themmen, Cohen-Schotanus, & Steyerberg (2015) states, "Several studies have confirmed the relationship between student performance during the first months at university and subsequent performance" (p. 934). As a professional educator, I would like to reduce any barriers that they may face in these online classes and help them get the start that is so important to the success of a college career.

As with any research study, an examination of a person's positionality while completing a dissertation in practice is vital. It can shade the results of the study because of biases we may not even know exist. When we face different situations, positionality becomes important and may come to the surface. Bourke (2014) discussed this issue stating, "Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (p. 5). My positionality is largely shaped by the fact that I have been in education in some form for many years. I am currently a learning specialist that works with at-risk student-athletes. In addition, I have and continue to be, a teacher. I have taught in the traditional brick and mortar classroom as well as in the virtual one as an online instructor. I have worked with a broad range of students including secondary, community college, and university level students. In addition to my professional positionality, my positionality is also shaped by the fact that I consider myself a lifelong learner who is attempting to earn a fourth degree with the completion of this program.

The dissertation in practice being undertaken to address the problem in this study was shaped by Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). Perry (2017) claimed that the CPED is centered around two basic questions, which are "What are the knowledge, skills, dispositions that professionals working in education should demonstrably have? And how do we prepare our students to have them?" (p. 56). This description fits in well with this CPED-based study. This program has given me the skills as an educator to better assist students. The findings will ideally lead to a better system of assistance in online classes for first-year football student-athletes.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do first-year football student-athletes perceive they are prepared to take online classes at a the University of Mississippi?
2. What are the factors that are perceived to determine if first-year football student-athletes have the skills necessary to succeed in an online class?
3. What factors are perceived to contribute to first-year football student-athletes struggling in online classes?
4. What is the perception of the ways the support staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center help first-year football student-athletes negotiate online courses?

Definition of Terms

Assumptions: The ideas and opinions of the author as the research was undertaken.

CPED: Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. The guiding principles of this initiative are framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice.

Dissertation in Practice: A scholarly work of literature that deals with the identified problem of practice.

Elearning: Refers to the use of technology to access online learning/teaching resources.

First-year Football Student-Athletes: Students must have enrolled for their first class in college in either the previous summer, fall or spring. All of these student-athletes would have taken at least one online class during their freshman year.

IRB: The Internal Review Board is the body established to protect the welfare and the rights of research subjects recruited for this and other studies.

Online classes: Classes in which there is no face-to-face instruction from an instructor and which the main form of interaction between student and instructor is electronic via email, learning platform or similar.

Positionality: How a person's identity can bias the results of a study or their view of a situation.

Power Five Conference: The five collegiate conferences consisting of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC).

Problem of Practice: A specific issue that is related to the work of a professional practitioner and which will hopefully be improved or solved by the study being conducted.

Student-Athlete Success Center: The on-campus facility where the subjects of this study received academic assistance such as tutoring. It is not dissimilar to other facilities throughout the country.

Student-athletes: Students who are a member of a university sponsored athletics team

Success: Reaching the personal level of achievement for a student such as a certain grade point average, a grade in a specific course, or graduation.

Technology: The hardware or software that students use in an online course.

Data Overview

The University Internal Review Board (IRB) approved the research project. The interviews were conducted by the researcher to gain an understanding of the student's online experience at the university (see Appendix A for interview schedule). A total of fourteen sophomores were interviewed. These students had enrolled at the university in either summer or Fall 2018 and had taken at least one online course through the university in the past year. Interviews were conducted at the Student-Athlete Success Center on the campus of the university. (See Appendix B for interview information sheet).

Interviews took place during the Fall 2019 academic period. Each interviewee was informed of the purpose of the interview and encouraged to speak freely when responding to the questions. Each interview was audio recorded. Also, notes were taken about the responses and other observations such as mannerisms or tone of the responder. Afterward, the interviews were transcribed, verbatim, with major points and themes identified and noted. A deductive coding system was used to take participants responses and develop various labels that were divided in to four major themes. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student in the study to protect their identity.

The pseudonyms for the students and the date of their interviews are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	**Date of Interview**
Alex	8/29/2019
Brad	8/29/2019

Clint	8/29/2019
Drew	9/4/2019
Eric	9/5/2019
Fred	9/5/2019
Greg	9/5/2019
Hal	9/5/2019
Ian	9/6/2013
Jeff	9/9/2019
Ken	9/11/2019
Les	9/13/2019
Mike	9/13/2019
Ned	9/16/2019

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. Interviews were only conducted for first-year football student-athletes. Findings were not intended to be generalized to student-athletes from other sports on campus. Different findings may have resulted from utilizing a different pool of students from different sports or even non-athletes.

Interviews were collected at the University of Mississippi during a specific academic term and year. The findings may not accurately depict accurate results from different semesters or different years. In addition, the results may not accurately represent results from other institutions' students within the Power Five group.

The interviewer was an employee of the Student-Athlete Success Center at the University of Mississippi. Also, the interviews took place within the academic center. The subjects being interviewed were regular visitors to that center and conducted a great deal of their academic endeavors within the building. The potential existed for the student-athletes to communicate information they may have thought the interviewer wanted to hear rather than their true thoughts and feelings about online education. In addition, the student-athletes may have been intimidated by speaking to someone who is seen as a possible authority figure in an interview setting. The students may not have been able to communicate their thoughts as clearly with this person as they would with an interviewer who had a more unbiased relationship. However, the interviewer did have a good relationship with students and this created a relaxed atmosphere with the student. The students knew that interviewer assisted them in the past and trusted him. This trust probably created a better atmosphere for truthful answers than using an unknown interviewer.

The questions used in the interview were developed by a professional with biases toward the value of online education in general and the benefits of the method for student-athletes. With a professional role as both an online educator and as an athletic department employee, the researcher has had many experiences with online education. Some experience were positive while others were negative. Every attempt was made to ensure the reliability of interview data. However, because of these experiences, potential for bias existed.

When selecting participants and conducting interviews, the subject matter of the class was not considered. While the question of subject matter was asked during the interview, the perceptions of online classes in general was the purpose. The type class and their success in that subject was a secondary consideration.

One ethical concern for this study deals with the issue of students enrolling in online courses because they assume these classes are the easier path to a good grade. Some students admitted this to be the case during interviews. This research study and more specifically, the interview question "how can the staff better assist the students?" can be misconstrued as promoting the "easy road". This is true for not only the interviewees, but also other student-athletes they might talk with about classes. The researcher does not want to appear to promote online courses. The goal was to study this delivery method only.

A second ethical concern is the fact that student-athletes sometimes do not socialize or "fit in" with mainstream students. Their schedule, notoriety, and, in some cases, attitude make blending in difficult for them. If this study is successful and creates a better online system for these students, they could become even more set apart from other students. If they have a program within the athletic department that enables them to succeed in online classes, more will want to enroll in them and less will enroll in face-to-face classes. The stigma of student-athletes being set apart could be increased even more.

Another ethical issue is that of online courses not adequately teaching materials to the students. The researcher only considered the student end of the system. If the instructor is not using good pedagogy, the student is not learning. We again do not want to promote this type of class if the student is not receiving a good education. The student can do well in a class and still not receive a quality education. With the study, we do not want to discount the benefits of an excellent instructor, even if the student scores slightly lower in the class.

A distinct challenge for this study was the lack of a pre-test of the technology abilities of the student. There was no statistical information relating to student knowledge of online courses and how to maneuver them beginning their college career. The students were asked about their

perceptions of their abilities. However, no test was available to measure their actual level. Because of this, some students may not have had the skills needed but assumed they did. In turn, some students may not have felt prepared but had actually acquired the skills somewhere before entering the university. The only type of instrument used by the university is the voluntary survey available to all students. Data of this type could have possibly enhanced the study but the qualitative nature of the study lends itself to the student's *perception* of their ability.

In addition to the technology skills of the students, there was no data concerning the academic history or ability of any of the students. It was not possible to determine if any of the comments, positive or negative, concerning online courses stemmed from their ability as a student in general. If a student has been successful in school, it is possible they had a positive perception of the online course because school in general has not been a struggle for them in the past. This format is just another way he learns. Since there was no numerical data provided and none was asked for during the interview process, it is hard to know if there is any correlation.

Presentation of Findings

The students in this study were all able to identify their perception of the skills they entered the university within the context of technology. They had varied opinions about topics such as the types of classes best suited and least suited for online delivery. These results showed a wide variety of opinions. Also, they were able to identify the aspects of online education they considered both advantages and disadvantages. These students also discussed the aspects of the university support center that assisted them in online courses and shared ideas about what the center could have done to help them more. These responses were labeled and led to a definite group of themes. The findings are labeled and presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Labels of Recorded Responses

#	Labels
1.	Level of Proficiency with Technology
2.	Improvement Status
3.	Reason for Improvement
4.	Category of Apprehension
5.	Apprehension before class better, worse or as expected after finishing class
6.	Reasons Choosing Online
7.	Advantages of Online Classes
8.	Disadvantages of Online Classes
9.	Class/Subject They would Rather have taken in a Regular Classroom
10.	Best Subject for an Online Class
11.	Worst Subject for an Online Class
12.	Type of Help Received by Staff
13.	Types of Additional Help that could have been Provided

Preparedness for First Online Class

In an effort to establish a baseline for the study, students were ask to classify their level of proficiency in computer/technology skills when they entered the university in the fall/summer of 2018. Table 3 represents the responses, which fell into three categories: good, average, or poor.

Table 3: Technology Proficiency Entering the University

Level of Proficiency with Technology	Number of Responses
Good	7
Average	4
Poor	3

As the above table shows, an overwhelming majority of students perceived their computer skills to be good or average when they entered the university. This may have given some of these freshmen confidence in taking online classes that may or may not have been accurate. Brad was an example of a student that had a lot of comfort with technology and his background went beyond even the high school experience as he says,

> I mean during my middle school I took a pre-engineering technology class, so I had pretty much a lot of the skills when it comes to computers and everything. So I was well known to technology when I got here.

Mike explained his skill level saying that he was "pretty average" and that although they did not have online classes in high school, the use of laptops and computers for different assignments created a nice level of comfort with technology when he first enrolled.

The other students who felt inadequate in the computer capabilities undertook an online course their freshman year without the necessary skills needed to do well in this type of class. These students began a class where they not only were seeing college material for the first time, but also seeing it in a format in which they were apprehensive. Fred claimed that his lack of

skills was a problem and he said it came from his actions in high school. These actions left him with a low set of technology skills when he entered the university. Fred stated,

> Well, I really wish I would have paid attention a lot in class because I was kind of like, I got behind. I caught up, but I was behind. I really didn't pay much attention in high school, but now I do.

An interesting note was that most of the participants who entered the university with at least adequate skills said their high school experience was the reason. None noted anything from their home life as a factor in good skills. Ned was passionate about how important it was for him having good skills when asked about his own proficiency when enrolling. He said,

> I'd say they were good because I used a good bit of computers in high school. I saw some of my friends and they didn't have quite the knowledge of how to work computers and stuff. I guess just because they had different types of computers and stuff in high school. But I think my high school did a good job of preparing me for that. So I was able to sort of understand how to work around the websites and submit assignments and stuff. But I think that is a big part of it. And if you don't know how to do that, you're going to be far behind. Even if you know all the information and everything, if you don't know how to work the computer, then you're going to be behind then.

Hal was another student who said that his high school was the main reason he felt prepared for online classes. When asked about his level of comfort in taking online classes his first year he said, "Yeah, I was extremely comfortable in school. They prepared me pretty well with the aspects of taking things online and doing online assignments in that nature. So it wasn't any new adjustment for me."

Each of the participants entered the university with their own level of proficiency in technology and their readiness for online courses. The students were asked if their skills had improved during the year since they began school. The responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Technology Efficiency Improvement During First Year

Improvement Status	**Number of Responses**
Yes	13
Remained the same	1

As can be seen above, students felt they improved their skills in the first year at the university. Les felt he had improved his skills but that he had not been challenged a great deal in the past year as far as technology. He had previously described his initial skills as “Average. Very average.” When asked if these average computer skills had improved he replied “Yeah, for sure. I would say I have, but I haven't really been asked to do a whole lot of super complicated stuff in any of my classes either. But I would say my skills have improved.”

Only one of the students interviewed did not agree that his skills had improved over the last year. Since he entered the university with a good set of skills and what he felt was quality preparedness for online courses, his answer was different from every other student. When asked if his skills had improved, he responded simply “I'd say still about the same.”

The reason for the improvement in skills during the year was another topic explored with the students. The responses to why their skills had improved were broken into three categories reflected in Table 5.

Table 5: Reasons Participants Improved During First Year

Reason for Improvement	Number of Responses
Experience	8
Help from others	3
Self-Taught	2

As reflected above, the main reason for the improvement in the skills of these students was the experience they had gained with technology throughout the year. Jeff explained his improvement and stated,

> Not only online classes but the in classes too. I mean, all, all our classes go through Blackboard, so you have to deal with the computer just about every day as well as checking your emails and things like that. You just had to become accustomed to that life.

Les, who had previously stated he was not challenged technology-wise his first year in school, explained his increase saying "Just being forced to use the computer more on a day to day basis. And in high school I didn't really have to use a computer unless we had to type a paper or something like that."

Other students, such as Eric, maintained that the reason for their improvement was through the help of others such as tutors, counselors, learning specialists or instructors. He said,

> I know for like I'm writing a paper, sometimes the writing teacher will kind of show you a little tricks or. . . I can't remember how, but I'm, or there's a control key on your computer where if you're in a big paper and you want to narrow down the search, you just

> type in key phrases, which I didn't know about until I got here. And you can kind of find like a little piece of art, like a little piece of a paragraph that supports your claim or things like that.

Clint initially said experience but then recanted and noted the help he had received to increase his skills saying, “Like everyone up at FedEx was so easy to help me, you know? No one was like if I asked someone to really sit me down and tried to talk to me and you know, really like break it down.”

A few of the participants talked about how they taught themselves to be better with online courses and courses that used systems like Blackboard. As Drew stated, “Yeah. Uh, just having to do it I guess, and having to adapt. I had to teach myself.” He did not mention that others would not help him. Just that this is how he had improved in the area.

While the participants entered the university with a variety of skill levels and experience with technology, they all expressed some measure of apprehension with their first online course. The students were asked reasons they were apprehensive about taking an online course. Their responses fell into three categories: instructor communication, unsure of required assignments, and structure or format of the class. Some students stated multiple reasons for their apprehension. As Table 6 shows, the results of their fears were somewhat evenly distributed.

Table 6: Reasons Students Were Apprehensive Starting Online Classes

Category of Apprehension	**Number of Responses**
Unsure of Required assignments	7
Instructor communication limitations	6
Structure or format of class	5

In the area of required assignments, the participants were concerned the most about the dates for turning in the assignments. Ian stated that he had a fear of missing due dates and recalls" Just, everything's online, so it's really totally up to you." This was opposed to seeing an instructor in the classroom multiple times a week and having the instructor remind students what is coming up. While most instructors would presumably have a listing of due dates on their Blackboard, this did not seem to be perceived as beneficial when compared to a face-to-face reminder. Eric stated,

> Well, one thing I was kinda worried about, I talked to my parents about it was the homework. It's just in a physical class, it seems like every single day they tell you the homework and everything and what's due that day or they just kind of remind you, but the online course is kind of all left up to you and you got to go through kind of PowerPoints yourself and got to basically learn all the material yourself.

Reminders would again be what the students expected from traditional classroom instructors.

Another issue of concern with assignments was simply falling behind. Reminded or not, the students had a fear of falling behind in the classes and not being able to catch up. Mike said that he was worried about falling behind because he procrastinates. He explained why he was worried:

> Me personally, I know I have a big procrastinating issue. So I was worried about what if I procrastinate, uh, on this assignment or on these couple of assignments because I won't be able to do it after the due date. Because it's not like I can go to the teacher and talk to them about it because it's an online class. So I really just have to be on my p's and q's. . . Just log on every day and see what is next.

This fear would seem to come more from a view of just too much opportunity to put things off since no one is putting pressure on the student face-to-face in class. The student did not say he did not know when something was due. Just the fact that he feared putting them off until it was too late.

The next set of reasons for apprehension dealt with the ability to communicate with the instructor. While email and telephone was an option, most participants were worried about the need for immediate communication with the instructor and the fact that it was not an option like it was in a face-to-face class. Ken worried he would not be able to communicate with the instructor when assignments were returned. He noted,

> Really, the only thing that I was worried about with taking the online class is like, you could go talk to a teacher like about the grades like right after. But with the online class you have to email it and set everything through online. That's a hard thing.

This participant was lamenting the fact that he likes to know immediately what he did wrong and he cannot do this in an online class. They worried about questions that they may have about assignments and the need to get clarification in a timely manner. Ned claimed he was very worried about the inability to communicate with the instructor face-to-face if there is a problem. He says having a problem when he was doing homework or other assignments and having to email instructors and that it may "be a little bit before they respond and where as if I were in class, I could just go up to him and raise my hand or something".

Other participants felt that the online class would keep them from developing a relationship with the instructor that would prove important to their success. Fred said, "I try to get close to the teacher." This had been important to him before he entered the university and he did not know how to gain this relationship online. Other students seem to want a close

relationship with the instructor in hopes of better success. Despite the fact that online instructors routinely set up meetings with students, Greg worried about that personal relationship and that "probably just you don't have that personal connection that you normally have with your professor." This particular apprehension grew from the general lack of knowledge concerning online courses and not knowing how the instructor-student interaction would take place.

The final area for concern for students taking an online class for the first time was the actual structure or format of the class itself. Since none of the students interviewed had ever taken an online class before entering the university, they were unsure just how the class would operate and how they would be taught in an online format. Some students worried that the method of delivery would not be one that they could learn from and comprehend. When asked what he was apprehensive about, Jeff stated that, "I mean, of course I'd never had a class where I wasn't sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher every day." He was extremely nervous about not having an instructor in front of him for a lecture. Drew also worried about not having a live instructor when under taking the course. He worried about "not having the teacher explain things and you don't get the visual examples and stuff."

Structure was also an issue for some students who worried how the companion programs that go with some courses are set up. Les said he was very worried about the platform Hawks and that "Blackboard was a little confusing too." While both of the mentioned programs are for all types of classes, the fear of the confusion seem to be heightened by the fact that he would be doing the work online without someone to ask in a classroom if he needed help.

Another issue that was not uncommon during the interview process was another reason for apprehension for first time online students. Some students feared that their time management skills would not be sufficient to meet the requirements of how the class was set up. Without

knowing how much time would be given to complete online assignments, students had a lack of confidence in managing these assignments. Greg explained this when he stated his biggest reason for worry:

> Yes. For me it was my own time management skills because I've always been person to postpone something to the last minute. And then you check up in an online class. If you don't keep ahead of what you're supposed to do, then you're gonna get behind them. When you get behind, you can't catch back up. So that's what I was most nervous about.

His was a common fear for the students participating in the study.

In the next portion of the interview, the participants were asked to reflect on their apprehension after they completed the class and assess if it was justified. They were asked if the experience concerning their apprehension was better, worse or as expected. The results are reflected in Table 7 and show that most had a better experience than expected when considering their aforementioned apprehension.

Table 7: Online Classes Apprehension Turned out Better/Worse

Apprehension before class better, worse or as expected after finishing class	**Number of responses**
Better than expected	9
Worse than expected	3
Met expectations	2

As shown above, most of the participants interviewed had a more positive experience with online classes than they expected. Greg explained his opinion and stated,

> I think I did better than I thought I would do, but I'm still probably not as good as I should have done. But I think it was more or less just you have to like choose to take a certain amount of time out of your day. Almost like having a regular class from, you know, six to eight on Tuesdays and Thursdays I'm going to do my class work and get it done.

Ian also believed the experience was better than he had thought it would be. His reason for an improved experience was due to the help he got with the classes saying, “It was actually better than I thought it was going to be. Thanks to the people at the Success Center, it was o.k.”

Some experiences of the students were more in line with what they expected. Jeff’s experience was not a shock to him. He felt his expectations were met by the challenges of online classes and said that it was,

> About what I expected. It was probably a little harder starting off in the first couple of weeks, stuff like that. But I mean, once you get accustomed to it, you know what you're doing with the schedule of the class, then it goes pretty smooth.

This statement could be said to be true for any type of class or school, but he was applying it specifically to an online class.

Not all students thought their apprehensions were too inflated. Ned actually thought the problems he feared were a little worse than he expected. He explained that in his view,

> I think, I think for me it was actually harder. Not because necessarily the class, but I just think for me it's just harder like getting myself to do it because I felt like I'd always like push the online work back. Just thinking I could do it whenever. And so I would get behind.

Ned's case is not unusual for students in online classes. Some students seemed to believe it was even more magnified in online classes.

Why Students Choose Online Classes

All of the students in the study took an online class in either the fall or spring of their first year enrolled in the university. They were asked to relate some of the reasons they decided on taking an online course so early in their academic careers. Many different responses were classified into four distinct areas: scheduling, success in the class, location of doing the work, and a miscellaneous category. These results were evenly distributed among the three main categories and are reflected in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Reasons Participants Chose Online Classes

Reasons for Choosing Online Class	Number of Responses
Scheduling	8
Success in Class	8
Location of Work	6
Miscellaneous	2

One of the two areas that were most mentioned as the reason students chose an online class their first semester was scheduling. The time commitments that student-athletes have to their team make the times for scheduling class very narrow in some instances. An online class can allow the student to take the class they need and meet the commitment they have made to their sport. Jeff claimed he chose an online class for scheduling purposes when he said,

> Well, I started off taking two in-class classes my first summer when I got here for football. And then going into the fall I knew I was going to be super busy with practice

> starting up and just not much time and I was going to have her in classes and I wanted to have a little bit of time so I could study and before practices and stuff like that. And so I thought online class would be a good opportunity to do that.

An equally popular reason given during the interviews for choosing an online class was the success they hoped to have in the class. For a variety of reasons, some students perceived they could make a better grade with a class in the online format. Brad felt like this type of delivery was easier for him to succeed because he could slow down and do some of the work on his own time. When asked why he chose this type of class he replied “I kind of work at my own pace. So I thought it'd be easier.”

A third reason that was a common answer when asked why they chose an online class dealt with the location of where they could do their classwork. Being able to do assignments in their home, library or other locations was deemed important to the students. Fred was one of the students who chose an online class for the location. He pointed out, “I can do the work on my time instead of like having to go to class every day. Like more convenient to do work online and it kinda just always right there instead of just going to class.” Ken also noted location as a main reason when he said, “So wouldn't have to be on campus all the time. That was one of the main reasons. I had a lot of classes that were on campus. I was trying to see what I could do from home.”

Some answers were given that did not fit into the most popular categories. One of the students had an interesting take on why he chose online classes, which fell into the location category. Les stated,

> Yeah, well the online class that I chose was BCAL 2 and I'd taken BCAL 1 the first semester and I had it at 8:00 AM like right after football workouts and I just wasn't really paying attention anyways. And I went to tutoring sessions and I was able to do well in that class just from the tutoring sessions. It seemed like and not really from the class time itself, so I thought if I'm not even gonna pay attention in class, why not just do it online and get tutoring anyways. So it saved me a lot of time in the long run and I was still able to come out with, I think even a better grade in the second class than in the first one.

In an effort to discover the advantages online classes can provide, the students were asked what they perceived as the advantages of online delivery. All of the students interviewed believed that there were some advantages to online classes. The responses were divided into three categories and displayed in Table 9.

Table 9: Participant Reported Online Class Advantages

Advantages of Online Classes		**Number of responses**
Convenience of class at home		10
Schedule		6
Success in Class		7

The convenience of where the student could do the required assignments of the class was the most frequently provided response when asked for an advantage of an online class. When asked his opinion on the advantages, Alex stated, “The advantages is just, be able to just sit at home and doing the work. Not setting the alarm and waking up and going to class.” An interesting take on the convenient advantages of online classes came from Eric. He reasoned the practical convenience for some people with this explanation:

> I don't have a car. So kind of commuting to a school at times on my roommate time, you know? If they have a class of eight then I'll go with them even if I don't have a class eight. So that's kind of one advantage I think that online class have is if people who don't have a car don't have means of transportation.

This was the only person to mention this type of convenience during the interviews but it made a good point that came from a different perspective.

Some of the participants interviewed also believed that taking an online class can lead to being academically successful and receiving a high grade. This advantage gave the impression that the students believed they could make a better grade online as opposed to face-to-face. Mike saw an interesting academic advantage to online courses. While some feared getting behind on assignments, he saw it as an opportunity. He noted,

> Probably somebody who likes to get their work done, they could go ahead and finish a lot of their work in probably the first couple of weeks. They could really finish all the just general work that the teacher has assigned. And that'll be a big advantage for them so they can go and get away, get it out the way. He won't have to worry about that class.

Clint saw another advantage that could lead to success. He observed, "When you've got an online class, you know like you can work at your own pace and I feel like you could like be more efficient with your work cause you're, doing it when you want to." While some people possible may not be efficient in that system, Clint saw it as an advantage.

Another group of students perceived that online courses were an advantage to students because of the way it made scheduling easier. Greg explained how his scheduling became easier saying "Primary reason is just, you know, easier schedule and just to kind of loosen up the

workload. I know it's still a class, but I feel like it's not nearly as complicated as you know, being there in person."

While online courses are a popular form of education and the students in the study found many advantages, they also perceived a number of disadvantages. The responses were put into three categories and are displayed in Table 10.

Table 10: Participant Reported Online Class Disadvantages

Disadvantages of Online Classes	Number of Responses
Instructor Contact	9
Instruction	7
Assignments	6

The most frequently discussed disadvantage mentioned during the interview dealt with a lack of or difficulty in contact with instructors. Clint was a student who believed in the value of online education but still worried about this issue. When asked for any disadvantages to taking a course online, he replied, "I really don't think there is one. But if I had to say one, it would just be you can't ask questions on the spot, you know, like to the teacher." Brad also talked about not being able to get quick help from the instructor and having to come to the Success Center with no instructor in class. "The downfall is if you need help, you're going to have to come up here and you know, ask somebody."

Another popular response concerning disadvantages of online classes dealt with the instruction received. The students who answered in this way were nervous about the methods they would be taught and if these methods met their specific academic learning needs.

Eric explained,

> I learned better and I learn the material better If I'm in the actual classroom taking notes and you're the professor talking while online class is just kinda, they post assignments and you just go ahead and just take them. Okay. So I feel like I kind of retain the material a lot better if it's a physical class.

Drew was another student who felt this was a disadvantage and said, “A disadvantage would probably be just not having the teacher explain things and you don't get the visual examples and stuff.”

Also perceived as a disadvantage when taking an online class was assignments. Students felt that completing and keeping up with the required assignments in an online course was more difficult than in a face-to-face course. Ian agreed with this view and asserted, “Just remembering dates. You have assignments due on certain days and no one's gonna remind me.” Ken also worried about online assignments and getting them done. He noted, “A disadvantage is that you have to remember to do it. Cause if you don't remember to do it and it’s past the due date, you're going to be out of luck.”

Perception of Types of Classes to take Online

All students involved in the study have attempted some type of online course. As with any form of class, the students in this study had varying degrees of approval with these classes. They were asked to consider their experience and relate a class, if any, that they took online that they wish they had not. In Table 11, the results of this question are recorded as to the class they would have rather taken in a traditional classroom.

Table 11: Class Participants Regretted Taking Online

Class/Subject They would Rather have taken in a Regular Classroom	Number of Responses
None	3
Economics	2
CSCI	2
Psychology	1
Biology	1
English	1
Political Science	1
Business	1

When responding to the question concerning a class they wished they had taken in a traditional format, there did not appear to be a particular class or subject that formed a pattern. The most frequent response was "none." These students felt that no class they had taken online would be better if they had taken it in a traditional classroom. Two subjects, computer science and economics, received two mentions each. The other subjects – psychology, biology, English, political science, and business- all garnered one mention each. It was interesting that mathematics was not mentioned. Mathematics in the online classroom was discussed in a later question.

The students had a number of reasons they wished they had taken these classes in the traditional mode. Ned believed he would have done better in the English class he took because he could not get the feedback needed to do well. When asked, he emphatically responded,

> So for me, my, the class I took this summer, it was online English and I think I definitely should have taken that in like the in-class setting because my teacher didn't actually submit any of my grades until after like until the end of the class. So I'd write a paper and I wouldn't have my grade back so I wouldn't know on the next paper what to do better because I mean when, when you're writing papers and stuff you like gotta learn from your mistakes. Looking back on your past papers and seeing what the teacher wants and stuff and me not knowing what she wanted. And I think that was a disadvantage because I didn't have anything to go off of.

One student, Alex, actually did take a class again in a traditional format and compared the experience. When asked of the class he wished he could take in a more traditional setting, Alex answered,

> Oh, my CSCI when I didn’t know the applications it was hard on online but you do it in person, that's easier. . . Just not knowing exactly what to do first time doing like office applications and then going into the actual class during the summer and having him talk you through each assignment.

After revealing details about classes they wished they had taken in a traditional way, they were asked which subjects they perceived as the best to take in an online format. As can be seen below in Table 12**,** there was no clear favorite subject with four areas having the same level of approval from the students.

Table 12: Subject Participants Felt was Appropriate for Online Delivery

Best Subject for an Online Class	Number of Responses
English	3
Math	3
Writing	3
History	3
Criminal Justice	1
Everything but Math	1
Depends on Student	1

The students had many different reasons they chose their particular subject as the best to take in the online form. Alex was a student that chose one of the popular selections, English, as his subject best suited for online education. He explained, “I’d say it would probably be like an English because all English classes I think you have to do is like read a whole bunch of, and that's what you do on your own.” This is probably not entirely true of English classes at the university, but is definitely the perception of them held by Alex. Ned selected one of the classes not in the majority as a good online class. He selected Criminal Justice “Because the way it was set up, it was just reading and answering questions and not necessarily a lot of lecture.”

With mathematics being a difficult subject for so many students in general, it was interesting that it was one of the four subjects selected as one of the best classes to take online. Drew was one of the students who chose mathematics in response to the question. His reasoning was simple. Since he had to do most of the work of the class on the computer anyway, he might

as well take it online. When asked about his selection, Drew responded, “I think math because I haven't taken math online, but it's basically an online, like we meet in the classroom, but everything we do is online.”

While no real favorite was apparent when the students were asked which subject area was the best to take online, the case was much different as to the one they would not take online. The responses to the question are displayed below in Table 13 with math being the overwhelming choice.

Table 13: Subject Participants Felt was not Appropriate for Online Delivery

Class Students would not like to take online	**Number of Responses**
Math	10
History	2
Science	2
Geology	1
CSCI	1
Accounting	1
Anything Discussion Based (ex Philosophy)	1

One of the students who selected math, Brad, responded,

> Math would be a definitely, I don't want to take it online…I mean I'm good at math, but I would say with somebody that is not good at math, you won't have as much help and you’d have to wait for your teacher to respond to email and all that stuff.

Alex agreed with the selection of math and felt like the inability to have contact with the instructor when help was needed was a reason for not taking math online. When asked about which class he would not want to take online he said, “I’d probably say math might be the hardest one because you just like, you don't understand something, it's kinda hard for you to talk to the teacher.” Another reason math would not be the best subject to take online was provided by Ian who felt the subject matter was too difficult to undertake online. He stated as his reason “Just having to learn the formulas and stuff like that on your own without the teacher to go over it and stuff like that”.

Mike selected a class that no one else chose but still had sound reasoning for his choice. When asked what class he did not want to take online, he quickly responded,

> I'm in accounting right now and I, I can't even imagine if I was going to take it online cause I have, uh, I asked the teacher so many questions in my accounting class and he has to write the, uh, not equations, but the, the stuff on the board for us to actually figure out what it is. So I would hate to have to take that online and not have that teacher in front of me doing the stuff in front of me and talk to me.

Perception of Assistance by Staff and Program Needs

The final segment of the interview process dealt with perceptions of the students concerning the assistance given to them at the Success Center while dealing with online courses. Without exception, all of the students expressed positive feelings about the assistance they received in their first year of school. As previously acknowledged, the students could have felt pressure to be positive about the abilities of the staff since the interviewer was a staff member. However, the students gave multiple examples of the assistance they received. The results are contained in Table 14.

Table 14: Help Participants Received from Success Center Staff

Type of Help Received from Staff	Number of Responses
StudyHall/Tutoring/Learning Specialist	10
Help with Actual Assignments	8
Miscellaneous	7
Technology Help	4

Although the students were very positive about their experiences and dealing with the Success Center when they were undertaking online courses, the students provided some ideas of how additional programming could assist future students in online classes. They were asked their thoughts about the issue in two ways: What could have assisted them more when they took the classes and what programs do you think could help future students? The responses fell into three categories and are shown in Table15 below.

Table 15: Additional Help Participants Would Like to have Received from the Staff

Types of Additional Help that could have been Provided	Number of Responses
Nothing more needed/ Keep as is	7
None – It's up to the student	1
Hands on instruction with programs like Blackboard	6

The final part of the interview with the students involved the assistance they had received from the Success Center staff in the area of online classes and some thoughts about programs that may be beneficial. All fourteen students interviewed had positive comments when discussing assistance from the center.

Hal was one student that had a great deal to say concerning the help he received. He talked about both the help from the staff and access to the center itself. When asked if the staff at the Success Center was helpful to him in undertaking online course he said,

> Definitely when I first got here. . . learning specialists, the tutors, they try to help you get acclimated to the college workload. And then, once you're familiar with it, it's kind of you know, move at your own pace type thing. It's great to have all the resources here if you need them and have access to the computers and all of those things. It is literally everything's here that you need.

Alex also claimed to have greatly benefited from help in his online class from the staff. His help came mostly in the form of the staff helping him understand the assignments that he had to do online. He said the type of help he received was "Just like making sure you make sure you're doing everything on time and help you figure out what to do with weekly and then when you have anything upcoming." These are services the staff provide for all student-athletes but students like Alex rely heavily on this type of help to navigate online courses. In addition, the students were asked what type of changes or programs they feel would be beneficial in helping students who enroll in online classes their first year at the university. While the students seemed to be pleased with the help in the past, they offered some insightful comments concerning where the center could help more.

When asked, a large number of students who mentioned additional programs suggested that an initial training for new students on how the actual online programs such as Blackboard worked would be helpful. Drew said, "Maybe some more like initial guidance and the beginning of how to start the class so that way once you get into it, you know what you're doing rather than

getting behind on the first week." Les concurred that something like this would be beneficial as he said,

> Probably like the first day that the classes, like the online classes open up, just having everyone that has online class or needs help logging in and finding like where all the assignments are going to be, like where all the tests are. And just being able to operate on the platform they use.

The staff annually provides training on how to log into all the programs and applications the students regularly need. However, there has been no instruction on issues about how to navigate programs like Blackboard. Issues such as where assignments may be located were important to the students.

Discussion and Implications

A review of the student responses yielded several interesting observations. First, students who felt they were at least adequately prepared with technology identified the reason as being from a quality high school more so than anything that was done in their home. Furthermore, the students claim that increases in technological practical understanding came from immersion into the technology used in all types of classrooms as the reason. There was very little mention of sponsored programs that informed them on how to operate in the online world. This includes the university and the Student Success Center on which they heavily rely.

The students who are enrolled in an online course their freshman year chose the format for logistical and success reasons. There was a little mention of the idea that online courses are the best way to learn. In fact, they identified issues like instructor communication and instructor feedback as being difficult in an online course, but they chose to enroll in that type class anyway. This would seem to mean that a majority of the students viewed online classes as "easier".

Whether it was easier to make a good grade or easier to complete their schedule and have time for other activities, they were looking for the path of least resistance.

There was not a clear current favorite subject that students believed would be best to take online. The students chose several different subjects. These opinions were probably based on either personal experience of classes or knowledge of how they learn best. After the responses were examined. there was not a subject that stood out. However, mathematics was by far the one subject students did not want to take online. This may stem from the fact that mathematics seems to be a class that is frightening to many students, regardless of the method of instruction. This aspect of math was not considered in the study.

When considering their own strengths and weaknesses, the students believed aspects that may be classified as self-discipline are significantly important in dealing with online classes. The students who responded that they had the strength of self-discipline, believed it is what makes an online course a good option for them. In contrast, those students who believed that they lack self-discipline said it was what makes online courses so difficult for them. It would seem that for this group of students, the skills needed to succeed in online classes have more to do with their abilities and strengths or weaknesses as a student than with actual computer skills.

While the Student-Athlete Success Center seems to be beneficial in providing students with assistance with online courses and technology, an observed deficiency would be the initial preparation of students in the actual operations of online classes. The aspect that came up frequently was for the Student-Athlete Success Center staff to provide more introductory training on teaching platforms and instructional software used in online classes. The students felt like they were adequately prepared to login to programs like Blackboard, but the actual “how to” move within the system was not adequate. The staff traditionally does a technology session

where instruction is given about how to initiate entry into Blackboard and how to download the applications onto their phones. The students felt instruction should go one step further.

There is much potential for future research in regards to this topic. One area that needs to be explored is the correlation of socioeconomic status to the preparedness of these students to undertake online classes in their first year. This study did not consider factors that cause the student to have the perception of readiness for online classes, only the perception was considered. It would be worthy to investigate how socioeconomic status changed these perceptions. Several students mentioned how a quality high school led to them being confident in their computer skills entering the university. These "quality schools" could also fit into the conversation about socioeconomics and confidence. It is possible the schools that are better preparing the student have better resources. This information could possibly help universities be better prepared for their first-year football student-athletes to take online classes.

Another area worthy of future investigation would be a comparison between the successes of first-year football student-athletes in online courses versus traditional classrooms. This qualitative study dealt with the perceptions of these students in online classes. A further study could be more quantitative in nature and see how these students actually fared in both types of classes. With the completion of that study, students could see how close their perception of online classes is to the reality of how they actually perform.

Summary

This study was conducted to research the preparedness for taking online courses of first-year football student-athletes at the University of Mississippi. The practitioner identified a Problem of Practice (POP) of First-Year Football Student-Athletes at the University of Mississippi taking online courses before they are sufficiently prepared. The dissertation in practice study originated

from the practitioner's interest in evaluating the factors, perceptions, skills, and assistance these students experienced in their first year of school while taking online classes. The following research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent do first-year football student-athletes perceive they are prepared to take online classes at the University of Mississippi?
2. What are the factors that are perceived to determine if first-year football student-athletes have the skills necessary to succeed in an online class?
3. What factors are perceived to contribute to first-year football student-athletes struggling in online classes?
4. What is the perception of the ways the support staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center help first-year football student-athletes negotiate online courses?

The perceived preparedness of first-year football student-athletes at the University of Mississippi was a driving question of this study. The level of technological preparedness of the subjects in the study was varied. The majority of the students entered the university with what they believed to be good or at least average skills with a computer. Most of their confidence came from what they believed was a good high school background.

There are several factors that are perceived as determining if first-year football student-athletes have the skills necessary to succeed in online classes. While most believed they had a decent foundation, the majority again felt their skills increase through the daily use of systems such as Blackboard and various software programs. This would lead to the conclusion that while a decent high school background that involved the use of computers is not enough. The students perceive that proficiency with actual learning platforms and software packages are the skills that are needed to be successful in online classes. The skill that was important that did not deal

specifically with technology was that of self-discipline. Those who perceived themselves as self-disciplined were confident they had the skills to succeed.

There were multiple factors that contributed to first-year football student-athletes struggling in online classes. These can be broken down into three classifications. Many students felt the lack of contact with the instructor was a factor that inhibited their success. This contact could be with either in-class questions or the need for assistance on homework or assignments. Some students also lamented the method of instruction in online courses. Depending on the way each student learns best, online instruction methods was a factor. Finally, not being able to keep up with assignments and due dates was perceived as a contributing factor if the student lacked self-discipline.

From the responses of the first-year football student-athletes, the perception of the work done by the staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center is a positive one. The students identified several ways they were assisted as they undertook online courses as freshmen. There were no negative perceptions present according to the student's responses. However, some students did offer opinions about how the staff could help future students based on their own first-year experience. Most suggestions were improvements or continuations of programs already in place. The suggestion most given concerned offering actual hands-on example and instructions in learning platforms such as Blackboard. The perception was that these types of programs were covered, and the staff was willing to help, but hands-on supervised experience was lacking. Overall, the perception of these students was extremely positive.

With the research questions now addressed, several themes emerged when the responses were recorded and examined. These themes are displayed below in Table 16.

Table 16: Major Themes that Emerged from Responses

#	**Theme**
1.	Communication with the Instructor
2.	Method of Instruction was Secondary to Scheduling when Deciding to take an Online Course
3.	Technology Skill Improvement Due to Experiences
4.	Absence of Programming that was Hands-On in Learning Platforms

The first theme that became apparent was that communication with the instructor is essential to the student's perception of a quality class. The concept was repeated continually and was both a reason for apprehension and a distinctly perceived disadvantage of online courses. It also appeared in discussions about courses they wished they had taken in a traditional classroom and in answers concerning the worst type of classes to take online. The students worried both about understanding what an instructor wanted on an assignment and the inability to communicate easily with an online instructor. All of these references make "instructor communication" a major theme in the findings.

Another notable theme that became apparent involved something the students did not say in their interviews. During the interview process, no student provided a response indicating that they perceived online education as a better way to learn the material. There was an abundance of advantages mentioned. Most of these involved scheduling and convenience reasons. They perceived that an online class could make the rest of their life easier because they would not have to go to class. This convenience was freeing up time for them in a schedule that was filled with many commitments outside of academics. There was an indication that some thought the class

may be an easier way to make a better grade, but not a better way to learn. This theme span across several questions.

A third theme that became apparent is that improvement students made during their first year of school in the area of technology was, for the most part, due to the experiences they had on their own. There was very little perceived improvement that was due to a concerted effort of the university to help them improve. The students felt that they improved and that classes became more manageable because of hands-on experiences and an effort to improve themselves as a student. These observations appeared in up to five of the questions asked.

A final theme is closely related to the previous theme and is at the heart of what this study hopes to accomplish. While the students were pleased with the efforts of the Student-Athlete Success Center Staff to assist them in online classes, there was an absence of programming that helped them navigate learning platforms such as Blackboard and Hawks. This theme is significant because it is one that can be dealt with directly by the staff in an effort to address the Problem of Practice. If the students perceive that there is not enough being done to help them in this area, a change should be considered.

The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at the University of Mississippi

Manuscript Three

Cliff McCain

The University of Mississippi

Problem of Practice

Online courses in the world of higher education have become increasingly more prevalent in a variety of disciplines and institutions. These courses are attractive to both existing and potential students. The nature of the instruction makes the reach of higher education more extensive than it has ever been. Scagnoli, Choo and Tian (2019) described the increase that has occurred within the last several years stating online education has been "in constant growth since its beginnings, with a steep increase in a decade, going from 11.7% in 2003 to 33.5% in 2013. That same year, research showed that about 45% of college students were taking at least one online class" (p. 399). In addition, Lederman (2018) referenced the rate of online courses taken had grown between the Fall of 2016 and 2017, compared to a slight decrease in overall higher education enrollment in the same time frame. This demand is also seen with student-athletes as they pursue a degree and represent their university in their chosen sport.

Colleges have decided to offer more online courses for many reasons. Sun and Chen (2016) studied these reasons stating that the main factors influencing higher-education institutions to offer online courses included "meeting students' demands for flexible schedules (68%), providing access to college for students who would otherwise not have access (67%), making more courses available (46%), and seeking to increase student enrollments (45%)" (p. 158).

Another study by Ilgaz and Gulbahar (2017) examined the reasons students enrolled in online classes. Convenience and expense were at the top of their list when discussing the reasons for enrollment in online classes. They also discovered that additional responsibilities

such as a job or other commitments made the online option more attractive. Bettinger and Loeb (2017) conducted a further study where they examined why these classes could benefit students and stated,

> Online courses offer the promise of access regardless of where students live or what time they can participate, potentially redefining educational opportunities for those least well-served in traditional classrooms. Moreover, online platforms offer the promise, through artificial intelligence, of providing the optimal course pacing and content to fit each student's needs and thereby improve educational quality and learning. (p. 2)

This structure could be an obvious advantage to students who are somewhat academically at-risk.

Student-athletes desire these same advantages in their world of athletic commitments (practice, meetings, etc.) that leave them with even less time for academics than the mainstream students. These classes can provide them with more downtime necessary for studying, socializing, or getting adequate rest. All students, athletes or not, need this available time to succeed in college. Along with the daily rigors, game travel creates an entirely new set of hurdles for student-athletes. Gayles and Baker (2015) conducted a study that explored the topic and stated,

> During the first year of college, student-athletes will be challenged by demands on their time and energy in three important domains—academic, athletic, and social. In the academic domain, student-athletes, particularly at the Division I level, are expected to take a full load of classes and make sufficient progress toward degree completion each year. Failure to make satisfactory academic progress and maintain a minimum grade

> point average will result in loss of eligibility for sports participation. Student-athletes are also expected to practice 20 hours per week and compete during competition season, which often involves hours of travel time for away games. (pp. 46-47)

Situations like these are a justification why online courses can be, when used correctly, a valuable tool to student-athletes and mainstream students as well. Gilbert (2015) promoted some of these by stating, that, online learning environments allow "for learning to occur in a setting that is not restricted by place or time. Online learning can disassemble barriers that have been constructed by poverty, location, disability, as well as other factors" (p.28).

Even with the popularity of these types of classes growing, there are varieties of reasons that students fear taking a class online. Alsaaty, Carter, Abrahams, and Alshameri (2016) explained that one reason that some students are reticent to take online classes is the type and clarity of instruction they may receive. They are not alone in this fear as many students, athletes or not, fear the method of instruction of an online course. Another common fear of online education is the lack of engagement and interaction with the instructor. Jackson (2019) stated, "Student engagement and connectivity are often gauged by written responses to discussions and to other students in online discussion forums with little attention given to direct interactions between instructor and student, particularly regarding student questions" (p.2).

The types of classes students prefer to take in an online format are extremely varied and schools offer a wide variety of choices to be taken through online delivery. McPherson and & Bacow (2015) elaborated on this selection and stated,

> Although it may seem natural to assume that online course delivery is best-suited to subjects where there are objectively right and wrong answers, in fact, the range of online

> courses and even fully online degrees available is quite wide. Penn State University, for example, offers fully online introductory courses in subjects that include anthropology, comparative literature, economics, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. (p. 138)

One study examined which type of subject students preferred to take in an online setting and which they preferred to avoid, Xu and Jaggers (2014) explained,

> Regardless of students' characteristics, the challenge of an online course (vis-à-vis a face-to-face course) may be stronger in some subject areas than in others. For example, it may be more difficult to create effective online materials, activities, or assignments in fields that require a high degree of hands-on demonstration and practice, intensive instructor-student interaction, or immediate personalized feedback. (p. 636)

It would appear that no single answer on the student's favorite and least favorite classes could be achieved easily. This was evident in the responses of the students involved in this study.

Collegiate student-athletes often are fortunate enough to have academic centers with staff to assist them with online courses. This assistance is a distinct advantage to someone in an online course and almost a necessity with the scheduled commitments made by student-athletes to their university. The majority of schools that participate on the Division I level in athletics will use some type of support system. Rubin and Moses (2017) described the process when they stated, “Academic counselors, learning assistants, tutors, and class checkers play an integral service for student-athletes These academic professionals are necessary because of the increasing number of student-athletes that are academically unprepared" (p. 317).

Many Power Five conferences schools have a dedicated facility for this type of support for their student-athletes. An example is the new Jerry and Gene Jones Family Student-Athlete Success Center at the University of Arkansas. According to the University website, the 55,000 square foot facility will have three computer labs along with study spaces and dedicated areas for tutoring and mentoring. This type of facility is but one example of the type of assistance available to student-athletes. These centers play a major role in the student-athletes who are taking online classes.

This study was undertaken by using three different frameworks to examine and understand the literature reviewed and responses of the students. The initial framework foremost in the researcher's mind was that of student success. The subjects interviewed were all students with a goal of success however they may view the term. The researchers' goal was to better understand and eventually make recommendations to help students better succeed in online classes. A student success framework is at the core of the reasons for this study. Bawa (2016) related the results of a study that examined why students do not succeed in online classes and why there tends to be a higher attrition rate in these classes when compared to face-to-face classes. The reasons found included social and family factors, motivational factors, lack of technology availability and skill, poorly designed courses, lack of technical skills and software by faculty, and lack of institutional training of faculty in proper online teaching methods. All of these reasons are issues that are faced by student-athletes and need to be addressed.

The second framework addressed online teaching and learning. Few would argue that online is not a delivery method that will be going away any time soon. The current challenge is to improve the ways institutions teach online classes and to help students better prepare to take them. Tobin, Taylor, and Mandemach (2015) stated, "The growth of online learning has created

an opportunity to reexamine teaching practices through a scholarly lens" (p.3). The students interviewed all had perceptions of the methods of instruction they experienced in online classes. Teaching methods and learning styles both figured prominently in this that dealt with online education.

The third framework was that of the Social Class Theory. Bates (2017) explained the basis for the theory when he stated,

> Social class is constructed in social arrangements wherein some go without while others have more than enough—a fundamental injustice of modernity where there is otherwise enough to sustain the lives of all. Hunger is caused by poverty and inequality, not scarcity Class, thereby, is a concept steeped in conflict and economic injustice. (p. 4)

This "hunger" applies to many aspects of people's lives. In the case of this study, it applies to the lack of funding in some schools and how this affects the student's abilities to prepare for college. Also, some students do not have the financial means to have adequate technology in their homes, which puts them a step behind when they get to college. Social Class Theory appeared to have roots because of comments made by students concerning the quality of their high school in relation to their preparedness for an online course in college. While no statistical data was explored as to what constituted quality, the lack of technology some students described in their high schools has some relationship to the Social Class Theory.

The Problem of Practice inquiry emerged from the perception of the university's Student-Athlete Success Center staff of the struggles of first-year football student-athletes taking online courses. Final grades, dropped courses and an overall feeling that the students were at times overwhelmed seemed to demonstrate that students, in some cases, were not in the best situation

to succeed as first –time college students. The fear that taking an online class too early would hinder their chances of graduation was discussed. While the main component of the inquiry was to assess the perceptions of students concerning online education and how prepared they were their first year in school, there was also an underlying question about how well the university and specifically the Student-Athlete Success Center was assisting these students. From this analysis, the Problem of Practice question evolved: To what extent are first-year football student-athletes ready to take an online class upon the beginning of their collegiate studies? The examination of the perceptions of these student-athletes on online courses as well as the level of assistance provided to them by the success center and athletic department could potentially justify additional institutional support. Not only could student-athlete online experiences at the university be enhanced, but other southern Power Five conference institutions could also be influenced by this research.

Summary of Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the perceptions of first-year football student-athletes at the University of Mississippi. Fourteen football student-athletes who entered the university in either Summer or Fall 2018 and had taken at least one online course in the Fall of 2018 or Spring of 2019 were selected and agreed to participate in the interviews. Students that were interviewed were selected because they had never taken a college course before entering the university. Interviews were conducted at the Student-Athlete Success Center on the campus of the university. Students were prompted to reflect on their experience in online classes during the first year of their matriculation at the university. They were asked to describe what prompted them to take an online course and the issues that they were apprehensive about before doing so. After relating their fears, they were asked to describe if their fears were

warranted and to what degree. Students were asked to share their views on both the advantages and disadvantages of online classes and how their particular strengths and weaknesses with respect to engaging in online delivered classes played a factor in their success. Each student was asked to relate what subject area they perceived to be a good fit for online classes and the subject they thought might not be the right choice for this form of delivery. In addition, they were asked to recall an online class previously taken that, in hindsight, should have been taken in a traditional setting and why they believed it would have been better. Finally, the students were asked their opinion on the assistance given to them in online classes by the staff at the Student-Athlete Success Center and what programs could be implemented to help students in the future.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of each student who participated in the interviews. The pseudonym for the student and the date of his interview is listed in Table 17.

Table 17. Participant Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	**Date of Interview**
Alex	8/29/2019
Brad	8/29/2019
Clint	8/29/2019
Drew	9/4/2019
Eric	9/5/2019
Fred	9/5/2019
Greg	9/5/2019
Hal	9/5/2019
Ian	9/6/2013

Jeff	9/9/2019
Ken	9/11/2019
Les	9/13/2019
Mike	9/13/2019
Ned	9/16/2019

The preparedness or readiness of first-year football student-athletes was the major issue considered when conducting the interviews. While an overwhelming majority of the students responded that they perceived themselves as ready for an online class during their first year at the university, there were a variety of reasons they were apprehensive and why they felt this way before entering the university. They also related how they felt about these issues after their first year. The preparedness of the students and how to improve it was a reason for the study. As this issue was investigated, different themes began to emerge from the responses during the interviews.

The responses to the interview questions were categorized into four themes that appeared throughout the interviews. These themes are presented in Table 18.

Table 18: Major Themes that Emerged from Responses

#	**Theme**
1.	Communication with the Instructor
2.	Method of Instruction was Secondary to Scheduling when Deciding to take an Online Course
3.	Technology Skill Improvement Due to Experiences

4.	Absence of Programming that was Hands-On in Learning Platforms

The first theme that became known because of the interviews was the importance of communication with the instructor. The idea of a lack of communication was identified as one of the major reasons for apprehension before taking their first online class. Instructor communication was mentioned six times as a response to this question. Without knowing the course setup, students feared they would not have access to the instructor they felt was needed to succeed. Hal quickly responded to this question as he stated, “If I had to pick one thing, I'd say just the inability to communicate with a teacher face to face or a professor face to face and ask questions one on one if I need some extra help.” This was not an uncommon fear. Another area within the theme of “communication with the instructor” was identified when the students were asked, “What are the disadvantages of online classes?” The instructor was the most common named disadvantage of taking an online class. Communication with the instructor also figured prominently in students’ decisions on what types of class to take online. Students felt that instructor communication would make a significant difference in certain subjects. An example would be math, selected as the least popular class to take online by many students. Some students explained that it was the type of class where waiting on an email answer to a question about an assignment would be a distinct disadvantage.

The second theme that came from the gathering of data was that method of instruction was secondary to scheduling when deciding to take an online course. While they may have been concerned about making good grades, the actual acquisition of knowledge was not a consideration when selecting an online course. Research concerning online classes was discussed in several different ways and was labeled in a variety of terms. Reasons such as convenience,

schedule, and ease of workload were all mentioned as reasons for selecting online classes. One student, Alex, reported he chose the online class because of the "just the laid-back feel of college." Here again, the student did not allude to the fact that he thought his choice of delivery method would be a better way for him to learn. Also within the theme, the students discussed the advantages of online classes. Again, their responses dealt more with convenience than the quality of learning. Convenience and ease of schedule were mentioned sixteen times as an advantage to online classes. Another seven responses dealt with making a higher grade with an online class. Not a single student mentioned a better way to learn when addressing the advantages of online education.

The third theme that emerged included the reasons that students improved their technology skills during their first year of school. Eleven of the fourteen students believed they came to school with at least an average skill level of technology. However, they all reported there was room for improvement to succeed in college. The majority of the students interviewed reported much more comfort with online classes after one year in school with all but one saying he had improved. Nevertheless, this improvement was rarely based on a structured program. Most interviewees claimed they had improved their skills simply through necessity. Because so much technology was required in all classes, they were forced to improve to survive. As Len stated when asked why his skills improved, "just being forced to use the computer more on a day to day basis." Some students attributed their improvement as just becoming better students overall with a willingness to learn. When asked about the reasons for his improvements Fred said, "I just want to learn. I don't want to be going out in the world not knowing anything." He believed his maturing as a student was a factor for the improvement in technology skills in the past year. The students did report that individuals such as instructors and tutors did help them

along the way with tips or suggestions, but not in an organized workshop setting. A couple of students alluded to certain classes helping them improve. Classes such as computer science increased their technology skills. However, if they were behind when they matriculated to the university, this type of class would have been quite difficult, even if their skills improved throughout the course.

The final theme was the perception by the students of the assistance given them by the Student-Athlete Success Center staff. Most students agreed that the staff was a benefit for the student-athletes trying to take an online class. In reality, there were no negative responses as to the benefits of the center in assisting students with online classes. Eric stated,

> "That really helped out a lot, especially for online classes. Like I said, I tend to forget like I had all my classes a little bit and they also kind of helped me out. If I did have an online class at that time, then I would get a tutor or things like that if I'm struggling in the class."

While the students unanimously had a positive review on the Student-Athlete Success Center and its staff, several times it was discussed there was a need for hands-on programming dealing directly with students navigating learning platforms such as Blackboard and Hawks. They perceived the programming in place was a solid first step. However, they felt that it should go to a deeper level. It was reported students knew how to access programs such as Blackboard, but were lost about how to navigate. Questions about how to find and submit assignments were reported as common. The students who perceived this as a need believed that when the students arrive, some type of orientation would be beneficial. It was important to get access to such help before the class begins. As Drew stated, "Maybe some more like initial guidance and the beginning of how to start the class so that way once you get into it, you know what you're doing

rather than getting behind on the first week." It was not that the material was difficult; rather some simply could not find where the instructor had placed the assignment or how they wanted it submitted. The students thought this initial program could alleviate some confusion.

Improving practices

The interviews conducted with these students addressing the Problem of Practice led to an examination of the use of online classes by first-year football student-athletes. To address concerns revealed through this data, several recommendations are offered to improve the online experiences of student-athletes at the university and possibly reach other institutions. The value and importance of the readiness of first-year football student-athletes to take online courses their freshman year could be better emphasized at all levels of the institution. The following recommendations outline efforts that could initiate a sustained institutional commitment to this issue. A graphic representation of the recommendations is depicted in Table 19, with a more thorough explanation following.

Table 19: Proposed Improvements

University Implementation Plan	
Proposed Action	**Implementation Strategies**
I. Implement additional technical assistance in the summer bridge program	• Bring recommendations to summer bridge planning committee • Create a list of all online programs to be used and research information about each • Suggest that this implementation be a part of the yearly departmental assessment of the summer bridge program
II. Create online handbook	• Form an online committee of advisors within the success center

		• Get feedback from student advisory committee about concerns to be addressed in the handbook • Get feedback from success center staff about issues they have encountered and need to be addressed in the handbook
III.	Provide a mentor for all students in an online class	• Meet with tutor coordinator and staff to discuss the availability of mentors • Provide a list of students that will be taking an online class at least a month before the beginning of the semester • Evaluate which students could be put into small groups of two or three based on the type class they are taking
IV.	Use mentors dedicated to technology issues	• Meet with the online committee to discuss possible mentors for this position • Research training options such as online or conferences • Train mentors specifically assist students with online issues
V.	Use a study hall dedicated to online classes	• Meet with the online committee to discuss possible tutors for this position • Meet with the online committee to discuss structure and rules for online study hall • Meet with counselors to set benchmarks for reduction of study hall time • Develop training for tutors designed specifically for an online study hall
VI.	More detailed policy involving student-athletes in online classes	• Meet with the athletic department and building administration to discuss what the compliance aspects are. • Develop a policy that states how athletic department staff deals with online course registration. Emphasize that students choose courses themselves. Recommend a maximum number of online courses the

	department would recommend a student take during a semester • Place any developed policy on the department website and the student-athlete handbook
VII. Provide laptops for students during the semester they are taking online courses	• Develop a list of students taking online classes in the upcoming semester • Meet with success center leadership to discuss implementation • Evaluate the current supply of laptops • Estimate the number of additional laptops (if any) needed to service the online students and maintain normal activities with all students • Create a form for students to indicate if they already have access to technology without being provided a laptop
VIII. Utilize an online tutoring service	• Meet with the online committee to discuss the possible use of outside online tutoring service • Have the committee investigate possible options of these services • Present athletic department and success center leadership with estimates of tutoring cost • Ask the committee to consider other options within the success center or university that provide similar services
IX. Appoint an office liaison to deal with online issues	• Meet with the online committee to discuss the duties of an online liaison • Research other Power-Five conference schools to see if a similar position is employed • Appoint one staff member to serve as the liaison • Provide training with staff members through face-to-face or online means • Consider visiting other schools to gain knowledge of the position

The first recommendation resulting from the data analysis involved the implementation of additional technical assistance in the summer bridge program in the Student-Athlete Success Center that is offered to all incoming student-athletes. During this month-long summer program, students are exposed to numerous items they will face during their time as students and the majority of the programming is academic-based. Topics such as improving study skills and time management help the students prepare for the workload they will face. Also, a variety of instructors and administrators speak with the students concerning "out of the classroom" hurdles they will face such as dealing with the media and representing the university. Slade, Eatmon, Staley, and Dixon (2015) analyzed the emergence of summer bridge programs and their benefits and stated,

> Transition programs in their various forms are nothing new to higher education and are recognized as one of the oldest forms of channeling at-risk, under-prepared, and under-represented students toward college success. Also referred to as "pipeline programs," summer bridge programs range in form from early intervention models to comprehensive summer programs designed to bridge the high school to college gap. (p. 125)

The summer bridge program at this university is less than ten years old but has grown and evolved each year. An extremely important aspect of the program is the technology segment. During this time, students learn a variety of technological tips such as logging in to campus email, downloading required applications to their phone and logging into their Blackboard interface. If there are issues, this is the time the staff will try to correct them and make sure the students have their appropriate passwords. Based on student responses, this is one area I believe important changes could be made that will improve the students' experience in online classes. These improvements would be adjustments to an already successful program for student-athletes.

Some students responded that the technology piece of the summer bridge program was good but stopped a step short. The staff needs to go further and make sure all students go into their programs like Blackboard and Hawkes and find all pertinent pieces such as assignments on announcements. In addition, the summer bridge program goes through a yearly assessment to make sure it meets the needs of the students. That yearly assessment should include technology pieces in general and an examination of the suggested increases specifically.

The second recommendation based on analysis of the data is one that could be initially employed during the summer bridge program and carried on throughout the year. Interview data revealed that the success center needs to create an online handbook for student-athletes. It would contain information such as how to log-in to the variety of programs, how to get into assignments on each, and how to submit assignments. The handbook could be distributed to all student-athletes since most classes have an online component. The handbook would be regularly updated as new programs emerge and new issues arise. Within the handbook, the staff could also provide recommendations on success such as time management in an online class. A committee within the office would meet throughout the year to update the handbook.

The third recommendation for improvement based on analysis of the data involves another program that is already in place within the institution's athletic department. The recommendation is for all students, regardless of perceived ability, to be assigned a mentor during their first year if they are attempting an online class. The Student-Athlete Success Center already employs a group of part-time individuals who serve in the capacity of a Mentor. The 2019-2020 Tutorial Services Manual defines the role of the mentor as,

> A mentor meets with students who have demonstrated the knowledge and consistent use of successful college skills but may be inconsistent with time management, organization,

> or academic retainment. Mentors meet once or twice a week with their students to reinforce the importance of the student's personal education management. (p.6)

For this recommendation, these mentors could assist with some of the issues mentioned by the interviewed students such as not knowing which assignments were due and the exact date it should be submitted. Also, they could find alternative methods of instructing the students if the method used by the instructor is not suited to their students. An alternative to an individual mentor would be to conduct an online student study hall. Twice a week, mentors could conduct a study hall to assist any students who are in online courses. Similar to a one on one session, these students would be able to ask questions that come up concerning online classes.

The fourth recommendation for improvement based on analysis of the data also involves the mentor program. While the mentors serve as an important tool for student success, they are not assigned to specifically assist with online courses. To go along with these broad scope mentors, there needs to be a group that is trained specifically to deal with online issues. They need to be trained to be the building experts in the workings of programs such as Blackboard, Hawkes, Mindtap, and others. Also, to serve in this capacity they would need to be proficient in both software and hardware that is used within the lab. They would be placed in the computer lab two nights a week and would assist students with online classes and other classes that use programs such as Mindtap and Hawks. It would be the responsibility of the student-athletes academic counselor to assign them to this study hall whenever there was a need.

The fifth recommendation based on analysis of the data is to utilize an online class study hall at the Student-Athlete Success Center. The study hall would operate a few times a week at times that are most beneficial to the students. Any student who is taking an online class would be in the study hall. To begin the semester, anyone enrolled in the class would be required to

attend. As the semester continued, each student would be evaluated and could have their required study hall time reduced. This concept has a double purpose. First, as students reported during the interviews, one of the difficult parts of online classes is getting started and finding out how the system works. Therefore, most assistance is probably needed in the first half of a semester. Secondly, it could serve as motivation to the students to figure the process out, work hard, and possibly gain the freedom that students enjoy. The study hall would be staffed by tutors who have knowledge of the online systems and theoretically have a background in software packages like Microsoft Word and Excel. The tutors would not be expected to assist in a variety of subjects. Their goal is to make sure any technology roadblocks are removed for the students so that they have the best chance to succeed.

The sixth recommendation for improvement based on analysis of the data would be to construct a more detailed athletic department policy concerning online classes and students. While there would be no authority to tell students what classes they could or could not take, a policy would be in place that states what would take place once a student enrolled in an online class. This policy should be put in the student-athlete handbook that is updated each year. The athlete department needs to make a statement about first-year student-athletes in online classes such as the one from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas (2018), which stated,

> Online education is prevalent at UNLV, with numerous class options being offered in a web-based format. Given the self-paced nature of most online classes, student-athletes must possess self-discipline and scholastic aptitude to be registered for these courses. Student-athletes who are freshmen or considered at-risk academically are not recommended to enroll in online courses, while all student-athletes should avoid

> enrolling in multiple online courses, unless advised otherwise by academic eligibility specialist or major academic advisor. (p. 41)

While the above example and a potential policy I am recommending would not tell students what classes they can or cannot enroll in, it would make a statement about how difficult these classes may be for a freshman. If a student begins to struggle and wants to blame the school, the athletic department would have documentation to show that this decision is not one to be entered into lightly.

The seventh recommendation based on analysis of the data is to provide laptops for the student-athletes to use during the semester if they are in an online class. An important piece of succeeding in online classes is having access to computers and many of the athletes interviewed depended on coming to the success center to work on assignments in their online classes. Because the center is not open twenty-four hours a day and is closed on Saturdays, a great deal of pressure could be taken off the students if laptops were provided. At present, students can check out laptop computers on a short-term basis for travel or special assignments. However, if the students are going to have every opportunity to succeed in online classes, they should have ready access to laptop computers. Many students interviewed and other students who frequent the Center do not have laptop computers of their own. Supplying laptop computers to student-athletes will contribute to evening the playing field for those unable to financially afford a laptop purchase. If the department and or university is going to allow them to take online classes, expect them to pass a minimum number of hours, and commit the time necessary to play a collegiate sport, a means should be identified to provide them with a laptop during the semester that they are enrolled in an online course.

Another Power-Five conference school within the region does allow for semester-long check out of laptops for student-athletes. According to the academic page of the athletic department website, Mississippi State University allows for a semester-long loan of technology products like laptops for student-athletes. The policy (Mississippi State University, 2018) stated,

> Athletic Academic Support Services has laptops, calculators, cameras, and other materials available for student-athlete checkout during a given semester. All materials are to be used for academic purposes only and are not intended for recreational use. To check out any of these materials the student-athlete must first visit with their Athletic Academic Counselor to discuss their need for the item(s). The student-athlete is responsible for all items checked out from Athletic Academics if they are lost, damaged or stolen. All materials must be returned to the Athletic Academic office by the end of the semester in which they were checked out. (para.11)

A similar policy would ensure that student-athletes had the technology accessibility needed to read the material, listen to lectures or other videos, and submit an assignment at all times.

The eighth recommendation based on analysis of the data is to employ around the clock online tutoring services. One of the negatives of online classes emerging from the data is the perception that lack of timely replies or assistance by instructors was extremely frustrating and made the courses even harder. Jeff discussed this frustration when he stated, “it is harder because you can't just walk up to the teacher and ask them. You have to manage your time with their office hours and things like that." This is a common problem for all online students and even more so with student-athletes. Often, their schedule is set in a way that it is difficult for them to make instructor office hours and if they do make an appointment, it may be too late to get help

with a particular assignment. An example is used by Valdosta State University (2018). On their athletics website, they promote this service where they stated,

> Online Tutoring for VSU students through BlazeVIEW**.** If you are an online student, need help in courses for which the ASC does not offer tutoring, during hours in which we are not open, or if we have no face to face appointments available in time, consider making an online tutoring appointment. We have partnered with ThinkingStorm, a leader in online tutoring resources for college students, and will be offering 24/7 access to online tutoring through ThinkingStorm. (para.2)

At Valdosta State University, this service is available to all students but for Power Five conference student-athletes, it can be an invaluable tool. At a larger institution such as the one involved in this study, a program like ThinkingStorm could be a valuable tool to assist students and drive up both retention and graduation rates for all students. With so many student-athletes taking online courses, a dedicated online tutoring service could give students the assistance they need at the hours they are available. An increase in support could result in a rise in grade point averages and graduation rates for student-athletes. For these student-athletes, there would be assistance available in the Student-Athlete Success Center for the majority of their needs and an online program to assist them later at night or when they are traveling to competitions.

Programs such as ThinkingStorm have varying costs, depending on options selected by the institution. Because programs are costly, the athletic department must be frugal with its use. Some schools limit the amount of time each student can use the service each semester. A smaller college in Massachusetts limited its students to five hours a semester. This would seem to be an adequate number for the student-athletes in this study because they also have the option of using the success center. However, if students can get online assistance at a crucial time when needed

and can succeed in the class, a reasonable cost increase for the athletic department may be worthwhile.

A ninth and final recommendation based on analysis of the data is to have a liaison between the Student-Athlete Success Center, instructors, and departments who offer online classes. Also, this position can deal with the online components of face-to-face classes. The concerns were that students did not know where assignments were located in programs such as Blackboard, Hawks, and MindTap. This designated liaison could be a go-between to speak with the department to know what concerns students may have. Instructors may not know that some students are having difficulty with the setup of the class. This liaison would be the only staff person from the success center to contact the actual departments and instructors about these issues. This would assist in two ways. First, the instructors and departments would not be inundated by questions and issues from students and staff members in the center. The liaison could put together a concise list of concerns and questions to discuss with the instructor instead of several calls that would waste the instructor's time. Another benefit of naming an online liaison would be that this person would become much more knowledgeable about online classes than the common staff member would. As they grew into their role, they would have a much higher level of understanding and be able to discuss issues more intelligently than other staff members when it comes to online components. This would assist the instructor by not having to teach the staff member that is going to relay the information back to the students. This liaison could also possibly help with any negative feelings instructors may have about student-athletes. A study by Tucker, et al,, (2016) stated, "A less recognized but still influential burden faced by athletes is the negative perceptions and expectations by faculty and other students. " (p.28). This liaison could help build a relationship and help educate those outside the athletic department both

what the goals of the success center are and the challenges of the student-athletes. There may be issues on both sides in this instance that need to be discussed. The liaison could bring issues to the athletic administration that the instructor has related. Hopefully, education and adjustment on both sides can be beneficial. In addition to staying in contact with instructors and academic departments, this staff member would be charged with meeting with the online education department of the university. They could express the overall concerns, inform them of the needs of student-athletes in online classes, and listen to the possible concerns of the online department.

Practitioner Reflection

The doctoral process has opened my eyes to many different perspectives and has motivated me to pursue knowledge in areas I previously did not even know about. It has encouraged me to create a wider knowledge base to better assist students I will have the opportunity to work with in the future. It has encouraged me to increase my skills and knowledge as an educator to be ready for this challenge.

When I contemplated the decision to begin the doctoral program, I did not know which direction I wanted to take my career. Then, as now, I enjoyed my role as a learning specialist working with at-risk student-athletes did. I knew that this was something I could potentially do for the remainder of my career and feel very fulfilled doing so. If I did so, I felt that the knowledge I had acquired from instructors, research and fellow students would benefit my students enormously. However, if a quality career challenge came, I wanted to be prepared. As I have gone through the program, other areas have intrigued me. Opportunities such as a community college administrator, a higher education instructor or an administrator with programs such as online education have become areas of interest for me. I believe the terminal degree I am pursuing would be valuable for any of these options. The knowledge and experience

gained in this program would give me the start I would need if I changed my career path to one of these directions.

The Doctor of Education program has helped me be a better-prepared leader in my current position and prepared me for potential roles in the future. I have learned to look at different perspectives and use different lenses to view the problems in higher education. The exposure to the different viewpoints gave me insight into perspectives I had never been exposed to before. This awakening was a result of both structured class time and insightful discussions with classmates who brought a wide variety of perspectives from all forms of higher education. Together we were able to educate each other and prepare ourselves to meet the challenges posed by a diverse and ever-evolving world of higher education.

The experience in the doctoral program has most importantly given me a new perspective when working with my at-risk students. The ideas of ethics, equity, and social justice are issues that many of my students have dealt with in their young lives. While I have always done my best to understand them as both a student and a person, my background is vastly different from many of theirs. The issues we have discussed in this program have helped me be a better educator and mentor.

An interesting revelation occurred while researching the concept of online education in general during the study. When I became interested in researching online education, my approach was "online education is broken and I will find out how to fix it." This mindset quickly dissipated as I did the research. There may be institutions and systems where they administer online classes in a way that appears broken. However, the concept is not broken. It is a valuable tool for some students who need it to succeed. Along with non-traditional students who have job or family responsibilities, student-athletes can greatly benefit from this method of

delivery. Their schedules create a situation where they sometimes cannot take the required class at the time it is offered. In addition, their travel requirements could put them in great academic peril if not for the occasional online class. Although not the focus of the study, I learned how valuable online classes could be to someone with a learning disability. Advantages such as being able to complete work at an individual pace or completing them in an environment without distractions are extremely important to some at-risk students. In short, online education is valuable if the instruction method matches the learning style of the student.

Dissemination of Findings

A primary focus of the dissemination of the findings will be within the confines of the Student-Athletes Success Center. The first step will be a meeting with the leadership of the Student-Athletes Success Center and go over recommendations based on the comments of the students. With the leadership approval, I will present the results of the study and the possible recommendations to the staff of the Student-Athlete Success Center. This will no doubt create a dialogue.

From this meeting, the next step will be to present my findings to the leadership of the athletic department. This is an important part of the dissemination because all budgetary issues for improvements in programming will be approved here. I would take both the findings of the study and comments and suggestions from the success center staff to this meeting. My main goal would be to simply present the thoughts and feelings of our student-athletes concerning online classes. After this presentation, I could reveal my suggestions on how to better assist them.

Also, I will ask that the results and recommendations from the study be put in the Student-Athlete Success Center End of the Year Report the following spring. This report is a compilation of all the statistics and accomplishments from the center during the school year. It

includes team grade point averages, graduation rates, and other information concerning the student-athletes. Along with this information, a summary of the work of the staff throughout the year is provided. It includes tutor requests filled rate, programs offered and personal staff achievements. This is a permanent record of the year and the information in this study should be placed into this record.

The National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) is the official organization of professionals in the student-athlete academic assistance realm. As a member of this organization, I can connect with other professionals and disseminate the findings of this study in several ways. The first is through the annual national convention in which professionals gather for programming dedicated to assisting student-athletes. There are opportunities for presentations during the annual convention. Also, there are various regional conferences held each year. Finally, N4A encourages its members to share pertinent information like this with colleagues through teleconferences throughout the year. This opportunity is available at any time and the leadership of the organization is always willing to promote these teleconferences for the members. The N4A opportunity is relevant in part because much of the principles of equity, ethics and social justice that are the basis of the CPED Project on the Education Doctorate can be seen in the guiding principles of the N4A. According to their website, the N4A (2019) guiding principles are:

- Ethics and Integrity: Conduct work in an ethical manner with academic integrity, transparency, and in alignment with all governing rules.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Promote the highest standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion as indispensable elements of success.

- Professional Development and Retention: Engage members through education, networking, idea sharing, and support of scholarly research.
- Student-Athlete Success: Educate, prepare, and advocate for student-athletes through, transition, retention, graduation, and beyond.
- Service: Champion community engagement and service-learning initiatives to have a positive impact on the industry and broader community. (para. 3)

Summary of Manuscript

The Problem of Practice inquiry emerged from the interviewer's belief that freshman football players were taking online courses their first year at the university without consideration of their level of preparedness. While some were prepared, it was believed that some did not possess the tools necessary when entering an already intimidating situation. With no data on the readiness of these students for online classes being available, this study was undertaken to determine the perception of these students as to their readiness for online courses and the assistance they received from the Student-Athlete Success Center in completing these classes. The garnered information from this study could be used to better prepare future students for their first attempt at an online class at the university.

Interviews of sophomore football student-athletes at the university demonstrated that their experiences as first-time college students were filled with a variety of experiences when encountering online classes. They each had perceptions of how prepared they were and different opinions as to why they took the class online instead of in a traditional setting. The students also related what subjects they perceived as the best to take in an online setting and which were not the best choice. For each of these, the students shared their reasoning for classifying these classes as a good or bad choice for an online class.

These fourteen students shared a variety of reasons they were apprehensive before they took the class and shared if these fears were founded. In addition, the students revealed what each thought were the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online education. They described how their strengths and weaknesses as a student fit in with these advantages and disadvantages of online education. Finally, the students discussed the assistance they had received from the Student-Athlete Success Center and some recommendations on how future student-athletes could benefit from additional programming.

Recommendations to improve the experience of first-year football student-athletes in online classes were provided at the departmental and divisional level. Also, a commitment from the university level may be necessary to make the improvements needed for the students. The suggested recommendations were a result of the needs expressed by the students during interviews. The implementation of these plans will take a commitment from the university, athletic department, Student-Athlete Success Center and the students themselves. This commitment can result in a positive experience in online classes for all students that benefits all areas of the university.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Please explain the factors that caused you to choose an online course your first year on campus.
2. Could you describe an aspect of online courses you were the most apprehensive about before taking one? After taking this class, was this fear justified?
3. What do you believe are the advantages and disadvantages of taking an online class?
4. Tell me of an online class you took that you wish you had taken in a traditional classroom. Why?
5. What subject matter would you say an online class is best suited and which are not? Please explain.
6. What computer skills did you have when you enrolled and which have you increased since you have entered the University? What caused this increase?
7. How do you feel your particular strengths, weaknesses, and learning style as a student help or hurt you in an online class?
8. In what ways do you feel that the assistance of the Student-Athlete Support Center staff benefited you in the online course? What more could they have done to assist you

Appendix B

Title: The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at a Southern Power Five Conference University

Investigator
Cliff McCain
Department of Athletics
155 Fedex Building
University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677
(662) 816-8926
rmccain@olemiss.edu

Faculty Sponsor
John A. Holleman, Ed.D.
Department of Education
106 Guyton Hall
University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677
(662) 915-7198
holleman@olemiss.edu

☐ *By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.*

Description
The purpose of this research project is to determine how first-year football student-athletes feel about their preparedness in online classes. We would like to ask you a few questions about online education. During the interview, you will not be asked your name or any other identifying information.

Cost and Payments
There is no cost to you to participate in the study. Because you are an NCAA student-athlete, no incentives will be offered for your voluntary participation. However, helping others by answering these questions could be seen as an incentive in itself.

Risks and Benefits
There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study. However, be aware that the Confidentiality section has information on how we minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality and do our best to protect your answers.

When answering these questions, should not expect specific benefits from participating in the study. However, there is a possibility of experiencing satisfaction from contributing to a study that could benefit in the education of students. In addition, responding to the interview questions might make you more aware of some habits as a student you'd like to change.

In addition, this interview can bring to light some policies within the Fedex Student-Athlete Success Center that you as a student may benefit from. By engaging in this study, you may find some areas that will be modified for the benefit of all students

Confidentiality
There will be no notation on the transcription or on the audio recording as to who is answering the questions. Any notes or schedules with a participants names will be destroyed as soon as the transcription process has ended. Only researcher team and faculty sponsor will have access to the notes, transcription and audio recording of your interview. No unauthorized entities will have any access to your records.

Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) will have authority to access all of the records in this interview. This group is responsible for reviewing, approving, and monitoring all interviews and other studies that involve humans A request to view records by the IRB is only made when absolutely necessary. Your written consent is necessary to release results of the study.

All paperwork and audio recordings from the process will be kept in my private office within the FedEx student-Athlete Success Center in a locked filing cabinet in an unmarked folder.

Right to Withdraw
You do not have to volunteer for this interview. You will not be penalized if you do not participate. If you begin the interview and decide that you do not want to finish, just inform Cliff McCain of your decision. A decision to not participate or to withdraw will have no impact on your future relationship with the Department of Education or with the University.

The interviewer may stop your participation in the interview without your consent and for any reason. Possible reasons to stop the interview include protecting your safety or protecting the integrity of the research data. If the researcher terminates your participation, your incentives will be provided as agreed upon in the Incentives section.

IRB Approval
This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent
I have read and understand the above information. By completing the survey/interview I consent to participate in the study.

Appendix C

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, “The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at a Southern Power Five University" (Protocol #20x-018), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2ii,iii).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi’s human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

• You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.

• Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.

• You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

• If research is to be conducted during class, the PI must email the instructor and ask if they wish to see the protocol materials (surveys, interview questions, etc) prior to research beginning.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at irb@olemiss.edu.

Miranda L. Core & Mary K. Jourdan

Research Compliance Specialists, Research Integrity and Compliance

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

The University of Mississippi

100 Barr Hall

University, MS 38677-1848

+1-662-915-7482

irb@olemiss.edu | www.olemiss.edu

Vita

Cliff McCain

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

- Accomplished career demonstrating consistent success as an Administrator and Educator at the secondary and higher education levels
- Extensive background of developing and implementing special programs for at-risk and special needs students, racially and ethnically diverse populations
- Effective communicator with excellent planning, organizational, and negotiation strengths as well as the ability to lead, reach consensus, establish goals, and attain results with both students and staff

EDUCATION

- **Ed. D. in Higher Education** University of Mississippi May 2020

  Dissertation Title: "The Preparedness of First-Year Football Student-Athletes in Online Classes at the University of Mississippi"

- **M.Ed. in Educational Administration** Delta State University May 1997

- **M.Ed. in History** Delta State University May 1996

- **BBA in Insurance and Real Estate** Delta State University Dec. 1991

ACADEMIC HONORS AND AWARDS

- Member Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
- Member Golden Key Society
- Who's Who Among Students at the University of Mississippi.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Learning Specialist University of Mississippi 2014-Present

- Oversee the Academic Strategist and Mentor Program
- Work with a case load of students teaching them study skills and other academic assistance
- Teach a freshman first-year experience class on campus

- Assesses the needs of at-risk students and develops a plan for their success
- Interview potential tutors and recommend for hire
- Actively recruits tutors by reaching out to other departments on campus and other potential resources such as high schools and businesses
- Helps develop topics for tutor training sessions and assists in planning and organization of training
- Counsels tutors as to best methods/practices for assisting students
- Participates in on-campus recruiting of student-athletes with other members of Academic Enrichment
- Meets with athletic teams at start of each semester and other designated times to go over policies and procedures of Academic Enrichment and answer any questions they may have
- Serves on various hiring committees for open vacancies within the department as well as leading committees when needed
- Evaluates tutor performance by observing live sessions with students
- Attends and participates in all tutor training dealing with various subjects such as departmental policies and NCAA compliance issues
- Assists with the scheduling and cancellation of mentor and tutor sessions
- Have participated in the administration and scoring of the GMRT screening test for incoming student-athletes
- Maintains open communication and professional relationships with all Fed Ex staff
- Actively participates in University community events such as Friends of the Library Coffee and Campus Academic Advisors Luncheon

Adjunct History Instructor Holmes Community College 2013-Present

- Teach online classes based through the main campus in Goodman
- Previously taught in the classroom at the Attala Center in Kosciusko MS
- Previously taught in the classroom on the Ridgeland Campus
- Developed instructional plans and developed methods of instruction to help our at-risk students succeed

Academic Strategist / Mentor University of Mississippi 2012-2014

- Worked closely with Learning Specialists and Counselors to make sure the student needs were being met by setting objectives and helping them complete their goals
- Met with each student and determined their academic strengths and weaknesses and how I could best help them

- Helped each student set weekly academic objectives and developed a plan to help them to meet those objectives
- Used academic planning and assignment-specific support to give the student the best chance for success
- Worked with student as a history Tutor prior to becoming an Academic Strategist

Administrator and Instructor Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas 2000-2012

- Served as an educator at several secondary schools throughout the region
- Involved in all areas of school administration including discipline, budgets, staff selection and supervision
- Served as an academic leader of the school meeting frequently with parents, teachers and students about all areas of the students' academic program
- Supervised students, faculty and staff in all grades K-12.
- Helped implement programs to monitor students' progress using academic tools such as *Information Now*
- Designed and taught a senior course: *U.S. History-WWII to Present*
- Coached a variety of sports including football, basketball, track and baseball
- Implemented the first school remediation program for at-risk students, using models from other schools and adapting it for our needs
- Developed an entrance exam that helped determine academic placement, and created Individual Education Plans for the students that were at-risk

G.A. Academic Coordinator/ Administrative Asst. Delta State University 1995-2000

- Oversaw academics for football team to ensure that student athletes registered for appropriate classes and monitored the success of those students toward eligibility and graduation
- Developed relationships with University instructors and Registrar's Office to help ensure student success
- Coordinated team travel arrangements including negotiations for meals and lodging.
- Coordinated on-campus recruiting weekends and assisted with recruiting of student athletes off campus
- Coached on the field for a year before assuming administrative duties

Secondary Instructor North Sunflower 1991-1995

- Taught a variety of secondary courses
- Sponsored the school's Quiz Bowl Team
- Served as a coach in football, basketball and track

COURSES TAUGHT

Post-Secondary
Western Civilization
American History
American History Duel Enrollment
First-Year Student Experience

Secondary
American History
World History
American Government
Economics
U.S. History WWII - Present
Beginning Computer

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CERTIFICATIONS

- Over 30 hours of Educational Leadership coursework from Delta State beyond the two Masters Degrees.
- Coursework through the University of North Dakota in American History as part of licensure recertification
- Completion of short course from Trinity University in Dublin, Ireland on concerning the history and meaning of the Book of Kells
- Current AA Teaching Certificate from State of Mississippi

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Member of The National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A)
- Member National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity
- Member University of Mississippi Academic Advisor's Network
- Member Learning Concerns and Enhancement Committee through N4A
- Served on the MAIS Teacher Certification Committee
- Served on the MAIS Activities Commission

COMMUNITY SERVICE

- Volunteer for Campus "Groove in at the Move In"
- Multiyear Special Olympics Volunteer
- Volunteer for Oxford "Night to Shine" event with students
- Animal Rescue Transpor