



# Examining the Development of Graduate School Aspirations Among Latinx College Athletes

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## Abstract

The percentage of Latinx college athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) continues to grow, yet research remains scarce on their experiences. In this qualitative study, we used Yosso's (Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8(1), 69-91, 2005) Community Cultural Wealth model to explore the experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to attend graduate school. This study utilized one-on-one interviews with seven different Latinx college athletes from over the United States. The themes that emerged included: (1) *family influence and support*, (2) *athletic department's encouragement*, and (3) *Latinx faculty representation*. First, participants reflected how their family members reminded them that they are setting an example and to value their education. Second, participants shared how athletic department personnel encouraged them to pursue graduate school. Lastly, Latinx faculty representation played a critical role in the participants' decisions to pursue graduate school. The findings can provide insight for academic and athletic stakeholders on how Latinx college athletes can develop skills to excel beyond athletics.

**Keywords** Latinx · College athletes · Graduate school · Intercollegiate athletics

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## Introduction

College sports in the United States have created an inequitable educational system for underrepresented ethnic and racial groups. For example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a White-controlled institution that limits the inclusion of college athletes of color (Hextrum, 2020). According to the NCAA, approximately 89% of coaches and 86% of athletic directors identify as White, but over 60% of college athletes identify as athletes of color (NCAA, 2020b). Moreover, research on college athletes of color often examines how they are subject to racism, negative stereotypes, academic disengagement, and neglect from White faculty, peers, and athletic staff (Bimper, 2016; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Unfortunately, many institutions have not provided a support system that considers these challenges and helps the academic achievement of college athletes of color (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). These issues are especially true for Latinx college athletes.

Current research on college athletes' experiences has provided narratives that challenge the White-dominated educational and athletic systems (Cooper, 2018). However, Oseguera et al. (2018) argued that research on college athletes has largely focused on African American male athletes from the NCAA Division I and has excluded experiences of other racial groups. We focus specifically on NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes from men's and women's sports, because they are the third-largest demographic in the NCAA next to Black and White college athletes (NCAA, 2020b). Furthermore, the participation of Latinx college athletes has increased by approximately 30% in the last 7 years and is expected to grow (NCAA, 2020b). While the number of Latinx college athletes continues to increase, research on their collegiate experiences remains limited.

As of 2017, Latinxs made up over 18% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and 24% of all undergraduate college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Vargas et al., 2020). While the percentage of Latinxs pursuing graduate degrees has more than doubled, Latinxs still comprise only 8.3% of all graduate school enrollments (McFarland et al., 2017). Although scholars have examined Latinx students' college experiences and their post-baccalaureate degree aspirations (Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2021), little research exists on past experiences of Latinxs who are former college athletes and who are enrolled in graduate programs.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to attend graduate school. We used Yosso's (2005) model because the literature on Latinx students and college athletes of color tends to focus on their underachievement and barriers faced in higher education and overlooks their strengths, talents, and experiences that enhance their educational experiences. The CCW model challenges deficit-minded perspectives that scholars and practitioners have on communities of color (Yosso, 2005) and can shed light on what contributed to the success of former Latinx college athletes who enrolled in graduate school. This study is guided by the following research question: *What were the educational and athletic experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who enrolled in graduate school?*

## Literature Review

In this section, we highlight the experiences of Latinx students in graduate school. We also provide a brief overview of college athletes' experiences in graduate school. Lastly, we summarize the scholarship surrounding Latinx college athletes.

### Latinx Students and Graduate School

According to Yosso and Solórzano (2006), Latinx students have the lowest educational attainment of any major racial or ethnic group in the U.S. For every 100 Latinx students who start elementary school, only 11 Latinos and 13 Latinas receive a bachelor's degree, 3 Latino and 4 Latinas complete graduate school, and 0.3 graduate with doctorates (Huber et al., 2015). As of today, it is not known how many Latinxs who participated in intercollegiate athletics at the NCAA Division I level decided to pursue and graduate with advanced degrees.

Multiple studies suggest that one way to improve Latinx students' graduate school aspirations is to increase their interactions with faculty (Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2021; Fernandez, 2019; Ramirez, 2011). For example, faculty support and mentorship can have a direct link to graduate school access (Ramirez, 2011). According to Stebleton and Aleixo (2015), faculty-student relationships can be a driving motivation for underrepresented students to succeed in college. Specifically, for Latinx students, faculty-student relationships can encourage graduate school enrollment by engaging in research opportunities and professional development (Pèrez & Sàenz, 2017). Engagement in undergraduate research experiences and professional development opportunities helps students develop researcher identities and aspirations for graduate study (Fernandez, 2019). According to Garcia (2016), faculty from similar cultures and backgrounds can enhance students' college experience. Lastly, Cuellar and Gonzalez (2021) found that Latinx faculty representation can positively affect Latinx students' graduate degree aspirations.

More studies are needed to expand on the knowledge about Latinx graduate and doctoral students' past experiences that contributed to them to enrolling in graduate school. In particular, focus is needed on Latinxs who are former college athletes. According to Terenzini and Reason (2005), participating in intercollegiate athletics can contribute to Latinx students finishing their bachelor's degrees. However, research has not examined if the experiences surrounding athletic involvement have any influence Latinxs' enrollment in graduate school.

### College Athletes in Graduate School

There has been an increase in the number of athletes who earn a bachelor's degree with athletic eligibility remaining and who continue their athletic involvement while in graduate school (NCAA, 2020a); the NCAA refers to them as *postgraduate athletes*. The majority of them, 81% respectively, remain at the same institution while 19% become graduate transfers (NCAA, 2020a). The two-year graduation rates by

graduate transfers are lower than for those who remain at their alma mater (50% vs. 70%, respectively) (NCAA, 2020a). Notably, postgraduate athletes from men's revenue-generating sports are more likely to be graduate transfers but are less likely to graduate than athletes from all other sports (NCAA, 2020a, c). It is important to note that men's revenue-generating sports include football and basketball; all other men's sports are considered non-revenue-generating sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The increase in postgraduate athletes and transfers is likely to generate further attention from the NCAA and scholars.

Nonetheless, research on former athletes' undergraduate experiences and what cultivated their graduate degree aspirations remains underexamined. The existing studies (e.g., Feterl, 2019; Guillaume & Trujillo, 2018; Haslerig, 2020; Navarro & McCormick, 2017) highlight the importance of mentors and support networks for athletes' to gain knowledge about and access to graduate program opportunities. In fact, many NCAA Division I institutions offer college athletes with developmental programs devoted to preparing them for life after graduation (National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics, 2015; Navarro et al., 2020). These programs tend to focus on career development (e.g., Menke, 2015; Navarro & Malvaso, 2016; Navarro & McCormick, 2017); however, they lack the incorporation of graduate education opportunities (Feterl, 2019). In such programming efforts, a collaboration between athletic and academic units on campus is ideal (Navarro et al., 2020), particularly when career development opportunities on campus are emphasized to college athletes (Navarro & McCormick, 2017).

### Latinx College Athletes

While limited, studies on the experiences of Latinx college athletes find athletic involvement to be an important factor for their persistence to undergraduate degree attainment (Bendick, 2017; Guillaume & Trujillo, 2018; Ortega, 2021). Latinx college athletes who are first-generation college students benefit greatly by having access to a support network consisting of teammates, athletic advisors, and coaches (Grafnetterova & Banda, 2021). Guillaume and Trujillo (2018) also found that participation in college athletics provided Latina athletes with the opportunity to further discover and develop their ethnic identity. The athletes in their study recognized that they were one of few Latinas on their teams. As they reflected on their cultural backgrounds, they attributed their athletic and academic accomplishments to their heritage. The participants from Guillaume and Trujillo's (2018) study, who were former Latina college athletes pursuing graduate education, attributed their persistence through undergraduate and graduate studies to both their cultural heritage and their skills gained from participating in athletics (Guillaume & Trujillo, 2018).

Guillaume and Trujillo's (2018) study is the only scholarly work that focuses on former Latinx athletes who decided to enroll in graduate school. The few existing studies on Latinx athletes focus on their undergraduate college choice (Martinez, 2018), athletic recruitment (Darvin et al., 2017), and undergraduate athletic and academic experiences (Bendick, 2017; Grafnetterova & Banda, 2021; Ortega, 2021; Ramos, 2018) but not undergraduate to graduate school pipeline. Thus, research on

past experiences of former Latinx college athletes who enroll in graduate programs needs a significant expansion. Therefore, our study seeks to contribute to the current literature on past experiences of Latinx athletes by focusing on those who finished their athletic careers and decided to enroll in graduate programs.

## Conceptual Framework

With limited frameworks on Latinx college athletes, we draw upon Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model. According to Yosso (2005), the CCW model offers an asset-based lens in understanding the success of students of color in the U.S. educational system despite them facing various challenges. The CCW model is grounded from the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and describes the experiences of students of color and identifies effective strategies to enhance their academic achievements (Yosso, 2005). Yosso's (2005) model highlights six forms of cultural wealth, which include: a) aspirational, b) linguistic, c) familial, d) social, e) navigational and f) resistant. While the model was developed to explore the educational achievements of students of color, we expand the model to be used to examine the academic achievement of Latinx college athletes.

We draw upon Yosso's (2005) model to explore the educational and athletic experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who enrolled in graduate school. First, aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams, despite real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital refers to the ability of students to develop communication skills through various experiences (Yosso, 2005). Next, familial capital acknowledges that extended family carries a sense of community that helps students leverage positive experiences in college (Yosso, 2005). In Latinx culture, *familismo* refers to the importance of family connection, support, and pride that influences Latinxs' educational trajectories (Patrón, 2020; Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). Social capital refers to the social networks of people and community resources that serve as a source of support (Yosso, 2005). NCAA Division I institutions are required to provide specialized academic support services and staff to help mitigate the educational challenges their college athletes face (Huml et al., 2014). Along with support from these advisors, athletes also have access to a large number of other athletic personnel including coaches, administrators, and medical staff (NCAA, 2020b). Navigational capital acknowledges students' skills and abilities to navigate educational spaces (Yosso, 2005). For college athletes, these educational spaces can include athletic department which tends to largely influence their collegiate experiences (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016) and contribute to their persistence towards undergraduate degree attainment (e.g., Bendick, 2017; Grafnetterova & Banda, 2021; Guillaume & Trujillo, 2018; Martinez, 2018; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ramos, 2018). Lastly, resistance capital has its foundations on securing equal rights and collective freedom for communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Thus, we wanted to use this model to provide a strength-based approach when exploring experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to attend graduate school.

## Methods

In this study, we conducted the generic exploratory qualitative inquiry (Caelli et al., 2003) to explore the experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to attend graduate school. Generic qualitative studies do not follow a strict set of philosophical assumptions associated with qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory or ethnography (Caelli et al., 2003). Rather, generic qualitative studies “simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). As Kahlke (2014) noted, generic qualitative researchers “make advances by deviating from methodological prescriptions, remaking existing methodologies and building approaches that may or may not become new methodologies” (p. 38). The goal of generic qualitative studies is rich description of the phenomenon under investigation, which is typically accomplished via thematic analysis and the use of open codes and categories (Lim, 2011).

This study utilized one-on-one interviews as the primary method for data collection. Interviews were used to gather detailed information about the lived experiences of individuals familiar with the research phenomenon (Lincoln et al., 2005). All questions were open-ended to better engage the interviewee in the conversation and provide a richer understanding of participants’ experiences and perspectives (Yin, 2017). The interviews focused on Latinx college athletes’ academic and athletic backgrounds as well as their undergraduate experiences that contributed to their decision to enroll in graduate school. On average, each interview lasted approximately 30–45 min. The researchers worked together to develop the interview protocol, complete interviews, transcribe data, and identify themes. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

## Participants

We recruited participants using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling helps inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Additionally, purposeful sampling provides an accurate representation of the issue being examined (Bhattacharya, 2017). Participants were eligible based on the following criteria: (1) self-identify as Latinx, (2) participated in NCAA Division I sport, and (3) currently enrolled in graduate school. Some of the participants were recruited by other participants to take part in the study, also known as *snowball sampling* (Glesne, 2016).

We recruited participants through social media posts. The researchers posted on social media and asked for volunteers to privately message them if they were interested in participating in the study. A total of seven ( $n=7$ ) participants replied to the social media post. Of the seven, four identified as Latino, and three identified as Latina. All the athletes participated in non-revenue-generating sports throughout their undergraduate careers. Five of the athletes were athletically recruited, while two were walk-on athletes. Additionally, three of the participants were pursuing

doctoral degrees, while four were pursuing their masters. The majority of participants ( $n=5$ ) were attending Carnegie Research I public four-year institutions. The other participants ( $n=2$ ) were attending Carnegie Research I private four-year institutions. The participants came from all over the United States including the West Coast, Midwest, and the South. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given the option to choose their pseudonym. Table 1 provides the participants’ pseudonym, gender, degree, major, institution, geographic location, sport, and if they were a recruited athlete or a walk-on.

**Data Analysis**

After gaining participants’ consent, interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim using an online transcription company. To ensure trustworthiness and validity of the study, transcriptions were returned to participants for their review and approval. Once the participants approved their transcription, we employed open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2009). During the open coding process, the research team analyzed each transcript line-by-line to familiarize themselves with the data. In addition, the open coding process allowed the research team to read and reread participants’ responses to identify themes or patterns (Saldaña, 2009). Next, axial coding was used to connect major themes across the participants’ responses (Saldaña, 2009). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), axial coding is needed to investigate the relationships between themes that have been developed in the open-coding process. Thus, we used axial coding to obtain recurring patterns and themes within the data. Lastly, we used selected coding to account for final themes that aligned with the research question (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research team came to a consensus on the major themes.

**Researchers’ Positionalities**

The investigators of this study want to acknowledge their experiences of working with Latinx college athletes. The first author is a first-generation Latino male who

**Table 1** Demographic Information of Participants

*Name	Gender	Degree	Major	Public/Private	Sport	Recruited/Walk-On
Ana	Female	Doctorate	Psychology	Public	Track and Field	Walk-On
Claudia	Female	Doctorate	Physical Therapy	Private	Soccer	Recruited
Cristiano	Male	Masters	Business	Public	Soccer	Recruited
Felix	Male	Masters	Education	Public	Track and Field	Recruited
Gabriel	Male	Doctorate	Spanish	Public	Baseball	Walk-On
Javier	Male	Masters	Education	Public	Baseball	Recruited
Selena	Female	Masters	Human Resources	Private	Soccer	Recruited

\*Pseudonym used for participants

is a former college athlete. Through his personal experience, he has a vested interest in empowering his Latinx community through sports and education. The second author is a White female who is a former college athlete and who currently works as athletic academic advisor at an NCAA Division I institution. In this role, she serves many Latinx college athletes and has seen their success stories in the classroom as well as their sports. Both authors self-identify as critical researchers. Critical researchers posit that social, political, economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender values shape people's lives and result in privilege for some groups while oppressing others (Lincoln et al., 2018). We wanted to declare our philosophical stance as researchers based on recommendations of Caelli et al. (2003) to increase the credibility of our qualitative study.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, none of the participants in this study competed in revenue-generating sports. Revenue-generating athletes tend to have a different college experience than non-revenue generating athletes (Paule & Gilson, 2010). For example, NCAA Division I revenue-generating sports often have television and media coverage which pressures college athletes to commit more time to athletic responsibilities over academic obligations (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Second, this study only focused on NCAA Division I. There are three divisions (I, II, and III) within the NCAA; in each division, college athletes tend to have different interactions with professors, peers, and athletic personnel (Rankin et al., 2016). Third, while our study included Latinxs from men's and women's sports, our data analysis did not center on exploring differences based on gender. Lastly, most of the participants identified as Mexican or Mexican American, which does not represent the diversity within the Latinx community.

### Findings

The CCW model allowed researchers to identify themes based on individual, family, cultural, and communal resources that help underrepresented students succeed. The themes that emerged from this study included: (1) *family influence and support*, (2) *athletic department's encouragement*, and (3) *Latinx faculty representation*.

### Family Influence and Support

Throughout the interviews, all of the study's participants addressed in some way how their family provided support and motivation throughout their academic and athletic careers. Participants reflected how their family members reminded them that they are setting an example and to value their education. The concept of familial capital was evident throughout the interviews. Cristiano stated:

Neither of my parents went to college, they were both immigrants, and they always talked to me about going to college...athletics was what hooked me



into going to college. When I was little, my parents always went to my soccer games so I wanted to make sure they saw me play in college....One of my biggest motivations was when my parents went to my first college game because it was their first time on a college campus in the U.S....Now that I think about it, I am the first in family to finish a degree, apply to graduate school, and compete in the D1 level...Personally, I think it is important for families to see the representation of Latinos in graduate school and athletics, because it can benefit the Latino community as a whole because I have my younger relatives saying, “Oh, he did that. Why can’t I?”

Cristiano’s response highlights how he wanted to be a success story for his family in athletics and education. Similarly, Selena also shared how her family served as an inspiration to persist to undergraduate and graduate degree attainment. She stated:

As a first-generation Latina, I am always thinking how I am representing myself and my family. When I graduated with my undergraduate degree, my family was proud and now that I am getting my master’s, they are even prouder...There have been many obstacles, but it is important to pick yourself back up. It’s like soccer, when you lose, you don’t just stay at the bottom, you pick yourself up. I think a lot of what my family has taught me is, “Get up. It’s okay to fail. Yes, you might be prideful, but it’s okay to fail. Practice makes perfect, and you always have tomorrow to do better.”

Selena’s account depicts the important role of family in inspiring her to persist to undergraduate degree attainment and then pursue graduate school.

On a similar note, Javier described how his family was influential in his decision to go to college and that athletics contributed to the ability to enroll as an undergraduate student. Javier said:

I grew up in a low-income area, and the only reason I played in college was because I asked my parents to not get me anything for Christmas, except a college camp tryout. Usually camps are really expensive, so I went to the cheapest one for a week and it paid off because I was able to win a spot on the team...My parents always wanted me to go to college and not be a picker in my hometown, so paying for that camp was what helped me get into college, but I knew it was up to me to use all my school’s resources to get accepted into a competitive graduate school program.

In other words, the combination of familial support and athletic participation opened Javier’s doors to eventual graduate school enrollment given he was accepted to college and then had access to many campus resources preparing him for applying and becoming admitted to graduate school. This finding was consistent across all of the interviews with participants. While athletics was a motivation for students to attend college, their families encouraged them to be successful in higher education and supported them to undergraduate and then graduate degree attainment.

## Athletic Department's Encouragement

In the participants' responses, social and navigational capital was evident as their athletic department created a supportive environment for their success as undergraduate students that converted to eventual enrollment in graduate programs. For example, Felix discussed:

I had a serious back injury, and was out for a year, I did not know what to do with my life in school or athletics. My life revolved around track and field, and this injury was really hard on me. I knew I was not going to run so I talked to my head coach about how I wanted to stay in fitness, and he talked to me about working at my institution's campus recreation center...In this job, I was able to discover my passion and this led me to go into graduate school because I wanted to continue working in campus recreation. To be honest, the injury was a blessing in disguise because it led to me becoming a graduate student. Before the injury, I didn't really have any desires of going to graduate school.

Felix's athletic injury was a life-changing experience, but his coach encouraged him to find a job and it was the professional work that led to his graduate school aspiration. In this case, the head coach acted as a positive influence in encouraging Felix to pursue his academic and professional path, regardless of his athletic capability.

In comparison, Claudia described how her physical therapists working at the university were instrumental for her decision to pursue graduate school:

Playing intercollegiate athletics introduced me to the world of physical rehabilitation because of my own experience with various injuries, so in a sense it did have an influence in my decision to pursue graduate school... The physical therapist I worked with allowed me to intern and work with the team, and their mentoring certainly inspired me to pursue a graduate school in physical therapy.

Claudia's physical therapists provided social and navigational capital because they served as mentors that influenced her decision to pursue a career in physical therapy and subsequent enrollment in graduate school.

Some participants shared how their athletic departments also encouraged opportunities for career development and exploration of identities outside of athletics. For example, Cristiano discussed career-focused programming that educated athletes about major and career choice alignment. He shared:

The program made me think about my future, not just the sport in front of me. Our coach had workshops, professional development events...and what was really helpful was having former athletes of the program come talk to us about how they navigated to get their job after graduating.

As participants described, their athletic department had supportive and knowledgeable staff who encouraged athletes to think about themselves as more than

just athletes. Through informal talks and formal programming initiatives, the participants got the opportunity to reflect about their career aspirations outside of their sport participation and planned for their future by enrolling in graduate programs.

### **Latinx Faculty Representation**

Lastly, Latinx faculty representation played a critical role in the participants' decisions to pursue graduate school. Faculty members used navigational capital to acknowledge the importance of student support and used resistance capital by providing students with opportunities inside and outside the classroom. Gabriel explained:

Having a Latinx faculty member made a huge impact on my life...In my school, athletes are required to attend other sporting events, and at a half-time show, they introduced an incoming Latinx professor. They shared his bio and research, and I was surprised to see a faculty member that looked like me...I sent him an email and was the first student in my institution to meet with him. He asked me to join his research team and told me to take his class called Critical Consciousness in Education. That class and his mentorship definitely influenced my decision to go to graduate school.

Gabriel's experience with a Latinx faculty member proved to be a critical source of encouragement towards him thinking about graduate school. Gabriel developed a positive faculty-student relationship when a Latinx professor showed interest in his overall academic achievement.

Similarly, Ana described how a Latinx faculty member helped her in pursuing graduate school. When Ana saw a Latinx faculty member in her Predominately White Institution (PWI), she finally received support to continue her education. Ana stated:

I went to a really White undergraduate school, but I grew up with all Latinos, so it was a transition. In school, I was always used to talking in Spanish with my teachers and classmates, but college was definitely an experience where I didn't see any help or anyone guiding the Latino community. It wasn't until my junior and senior year where thankfully there was finally a Latino professor, and he started a Latinx culture club... that's when someone that looked like me started talking to me about graduate school and wanted to see me be successful.

Ana had a professor who engaged and cultivated a relationship with her and other Latinx students. Specifically, at Ana's PWI, a Latinx faculty member helped support Latinx students' transition to college and promoted graduate school. Thus, Latinx faculty had a positive influence on several of the participants' furthering their academic achievements and decisions to continue studies as graduate students.

## Discussion

The findings from this study have the potential to reframe how scholars think about Latinx graduate students and college athletes. Although prior research has discussed how intercollegiate athletics can contribute to positive educational experiences for Black college athletes (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014), limited research has specifically examined the experiences of Latinx college athletes. This study contributes to the literature by examining the experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to attend graduate school. In addition, these findings can provide insight for academic and athletic stakeholders on how Latinx college athletes can develop skills to excel beyond athletics.

Our findings highlighted how the family was motivational for Latinx college athletes' athletic and academic journeys. The study is aligned with Yosso's (2005) model as familial capital was important in the academic achievement of our participants and resulted in their enrollment in undergraduate programs and subsequent pursuits of graduate school. Prior research has stated how family members can shape the academic and athletic aspirations of Latinx college athletes (Osanloo et al., 2018). In addition, studies have stated that maintaining family support is positively associated with Latinx students' college adjustment and success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2013; Pérez & Taylor, 2016; Sàenz & Ponjuan, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Our study found that Latinx college athletes' families were a huge source of motivation. Latinx former athletes were aware of the profound impact a graduate degree can have on their lives and those of their families. Thus, they wanted to succeed to make their families proud.

Moreover, participants shared how their athletic departments and staff provided meaningful resources for their college achievement through different professional development workshops and informal mentoring opportunities. As Yosso's (2005) model suggests, students must navigate through educational structures and cultures with different campus communities for their educational success. The literature explains how athletic departments and their staff tend to provide a supportive presence that is knowledgeable of the issues facing their college athletes (Rankin et al., 2016). By engaging in intercollegiate athletics, participants were able to interact with athletic department stakeholders that motivated them to pursue internships and work experiences. Thus, the athletic departments created a positive academic experience for college athletes to ensure they are academically successful as undergraduate students (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). In turn, this supportive environment indirectly contributed to Latinx athletes' decisions to enroll in graduate school.

Lastly, we found that Latinx faculty representation can lead to the development of graduate school aspirations among Latinx college athletes. This is consistent with Yosso's (2005) model that emphasizes how interactions with faculty and peers are pivotal for students' persistence and academic success. Our findings revealed that Latinx faculty can help Latinx college athletes navigate the academic, cultural, and social challenges they experience in college. For example, participants acknowledged that Latinx faculty served as mentors for their overall

achievement and learning. Gonzalez and colleagues (2020) suggested that representation matters and students who see themselves reflected within faculty ranks are more likely to be academically successful. In addition, participants (e.g., Ana) explained how Latinx faculty members provided a sense of community during their adjustment at PWIs. At PWIs, faculty of color can help raise racial awareness to motivate students of color to achieve their goals beyond college (Duran & Pérez, 2019). Latinx faculty can validate Latinx students' culture and cultivate a sense of community that can improve their academic experience (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). In our study, Latinx faculty provided advice and attention to Latinx college athletes to excel beyond their undergraduate careers.

## Implications

Findings from the current study offer important implications for future policy and practice. First, during the college athletic recruitment stage, incoming Latinx college athletes should be paired with Latinx faculty members to create mentorship opportunities. Mentoring has been evidenced to lead to successful completion of graduate education, especially for underrepresented students (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; McCoy et al., 2015). For Latinx students, faculty mentoring programs can also act as gateways to other academic resources offered at the institution (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). It is, therefore, suggested to have faculty members throughout the recruitment process to facilitate Latinx college athletes' academic success.

Second, athletic departments need to continue incorporating intentional professional development programming for college athletes. This is particularly important for Latinx college athletes given the high number of Latinxs who are first in their families to pursue higher education, also known as first-generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Such workshops will provide Latinx college athletes with potential opportunities to navigate the job market, internships, research opportunities, and graduate school opportunities. As found in our study, athletic departments should host workshops before, during, and after athletic seasons to better enhance the college athletes' skills and knowledge that they will need after they earn their undergraduate degrees (Cooper, 2018).

Third, institutions must be committed to helping Latinx college athletes persist through college. Colleges/universities and their athletic departments need to be mindful of the increase of Latinx college athletes in the NCAA and create programs to address their unique needs. For instance, academic departments and student affairs professionals can collaborate and provide classes on addressing social justice issues and inequities to increase the number of Latinx college athletes in graduate and professional degrees. Cooper (2018) explains how classes that address social justice and inequities can help create advocacy groups to overcome intersecting identities, including identifying as a college athlete, to help empower students to enroll in graduate school. Thus, institutions can and must play a critical role when considering Latinx college athletes' pursuits of graduate education.

## Future Research

Future research should focus on exploring undergraduate experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes from revenue-generating sports who decided to enroll in graduate programs. For example, compared to non-revenue generating sports, revenue-generating athletes tend to overemphasize their athletic demands over academics (Bimper, 2016). Moreover, revenue-generating athletes are more likely to suffer serious injuries or illnesses that requires them to reconsider their educational and career paths (Paule-Koba & Rohrs-Cordes, 2019). Second, future studies should explore experiences of Latinxs who are not participating in NCAA Division I sports. In contrast to Division I, athletes from the NCAA Divisions II and III have access to fewer resources to support their athletic programs (Sweitzer, 2009). NCAA Division II and III college athletes are more likely to participate in internships, study abroad, and research projects activities than those in Division I (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006).

Furthermore, future research should examine if Latinx representation in athletic departments’ staff can lead to positive academic outcomes for Latinx college athletes. Lastly, more studies should be conducted to learn about the experiences of postgraduate athletes who continue to compete while pursuing a graduate degree. The experiences of graduate transfers should be compared to athletes who remained at their alma mater, given that disparities exist between their respective 2-year graduation rates (NCAA, 2020a).

## Conclusion

Latinx students are significantly underrepresented in the ranks of graduate and doctoral degree recipients (Fernandez, 2020; Huber et al., 2015). For this reason, it is imperative that higher education institutions and the NCAA lead efforts for Latinx students to pursue advanced degrees. Institutions should promote resources within the campus, like career centers and academic advising, to better develop Latinx college athletes’ knowledge of graduate programs (Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2021). Additionally, the NCAA must invest in and develop new programs that help expose graduate degree pathways for Latinx college athletes.

Overall, to understand the needs of Latinxs, it is important to incorporate their stories by conducting empirical studies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We achieved that through our study, which explored past experiences of former NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes who decided to enroll in graduate school. We discovered that athletic participation and the access to supportive athletic staff positively contributed to Latinx students’ pursuits of graduate degrees. Additionally, familial support and access to Latinx faculty within the institution were also influential in cultivating the graduate degree aspirations of Latinx college athletes. The combination of these elements empowered former Latinx college athletes to enroll in graduate school.

**Authors' Contribution** This article included Dr. Guillermo Ortega and Dr. Nikola Grafnetterova. Both authors developed the research, questions, and theory. Additionally, both authors investigated the methods, data, and findings. The results from this study can provide insight on the academic and athletic experiences of NCAA Division I Latinx college athletes.

**Data Availability** This is a qualitative study and data was conducted through one-on-one interviews. In the study, pseudonyms were given to each participant to contain confidentiality of the research participants.

**Code Availability** Interviews were used in this study. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** This study was reviewed and approved by IRB. All results are presented clearly, honestly, and without fabrication, falsification, or inappropriate data manipulation.

**Consent to Participate** As part of IRB approval, all participants were provided a consent to participate and were aware of all risks and benefits of their participation in the study. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym.

**Consent for Publication** I give the Publisher the permission to publish the work.

**Conflict of Interest** Not applicable.

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