



Student-Athlete Climate Study (SACS) Final Report

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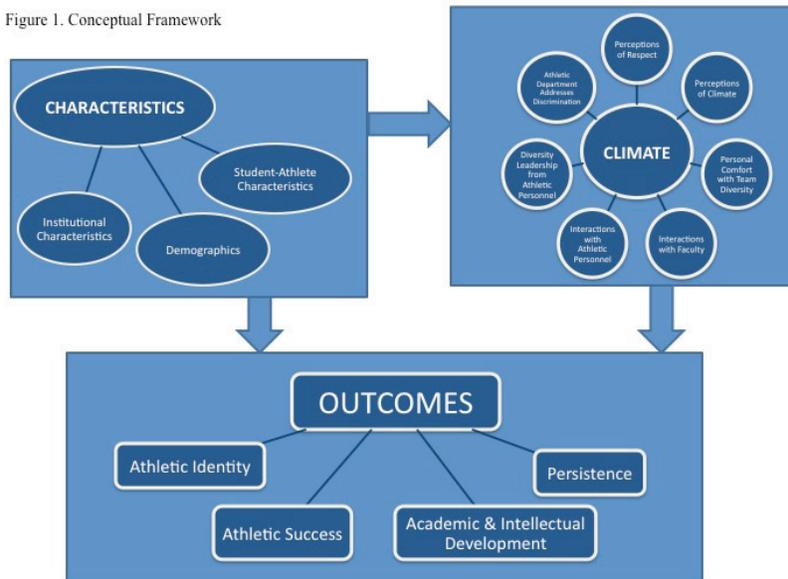
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Introduction¹ — Executive Summary

College campuses are complex social systems. They are defined by the relationships between faculty, staff, students, and alumni; institutional policies; structural frameworks; institutional missions, visions, and core values; institutional history and traditions; and larger social contexts (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). In the midst of this complexity and while acknowledging the unique demands faced by student-athletes, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has sought to ensure student-athlete well-being since the organization’s inception (Crowley, 2006).

The NCAA’s core purpose is to make the student-athlete’s athletic and educational experiences positive. The NCAA and its member institutions strive to meet these goals through the use of policies, procedures, and programs (initial eligibility standards, the Academic Performance Program, CHAMPS/Life Skills Program, etc.). In the same spirit, the NCAA has supported the Student-Athlete Climate Study (SACS), which aims to expand the knowledge base concerning student-athletes’ well-being through a comprehensive analysis of how student-athletes experience and perceive the climate on their campus, in intercollegiate athletics, and on their teams. Conducted by a team of researchers at The Pennsylvania State University’s Center for the Study of Higher Education, this study explores the relationship between student-athletes’ experiences and perceptions of climate with three outcomes: Academic Success, Athletic Success, and Athletic Identity. Climate is defined as the “current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential”(Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). Climate in this study was measured using seven scales: 1) Perceptions of respect, 2) Perceptions of climate, 3) Personal comfort with teammate diversity, 4) Interactions with faculty; 5) Interactions with athletic personnel, 6) Perceptions of diversity leadership from athletic personnel, and 7) Perception of one’s athletic department addressing discrimination. The conceptual model used as the foundation for the SACS framework was based on work by Smith et al. (1997), Rankin (2003), and Rankin and Reason (2008) and was expanded to include additional characteristics unique to student-athletes’ experiences.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



¹ For a copy of the full report, please contact Sue Rankin at sxr2@psu.edu.

The 2008 pilot survey used questions from Rankin's Campus Climate Survey (2003) as well as from the "It Takes a Team! Survey on Student-Athlete's Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Teammates and Coaches" developed by Pat Griffin (Griffin, Perrotti, Priest, & Muska, 2002). The research team piloted the survey at six institutions and garnered 1,332 respondents. Based on further review of the literature, consultation with experts in the fields of intercollegiate athletics and higher education, and analysis of pilot data (which included both quantitative and qualitative data), the research team modified the original instrument to include additional information about factors that relate to the climate for student-athletes, including more robust outcome measures. The modified survey instrument also included space for student-athletes to provide recommendations to improve the climate. The final survey, which was distributed on-line, included 68 questions that gauged a range of student-athlete characteristics, experiences, perceptions, and outcomes. All 1,281 member institutions of the NCAA were invited to participate in SACS. The results of this survey are captured in the full report, which includes descriptions of the following and may be obtained by contacting the lead author.

- the purposes of this study,
- the theoretical foundations that guided the research,
- the various methods employed,
- a detailed description of the sample,
- findings in regard to student-athletes' experiences of harassment,
- an exploration of how the three outcomes of academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity vary based on student demographics,
- the relationship between student-athletes' experiences of climate and the three outcomes, and
- a discussion of the findings and avenues for future research.

This report summarizes the findings from the project.

Sample Characteristics and Outcome Measures

A total of 8,481 surveys were submitted from student-athletes at 164 NCAA member institutions. After weighting the dataset so it accurately represents these institutions, the overall total is 8,018 respondents. The overall response rate for SACS was 15%².

- o **Gender:**
 - Women had a 21% response rate while the men’s response rate was 10%.
 - Three thousand four hundred eighty (43%) student-athletes in this study identify as women and 4,531 (57%) identify as men. Seven respondents identified as Transgender.
- o **Race:**
 - Student-Athletes of Color³ comprise 24% (n = 1,945) of the sample while White, non-Hispanic student-athletes comprise 76% (n = 6,073) of the sample.
- o **Division:**
 - Response rates by Division ranged from 13% to 19%. Student-athletes from each of the five NCAA Divisions were represented in the final sample.
 - 1,562 (20%) respondents compete in Division I – FBS,
 - 1,827 (23%) respondents compete in Division I – FCS,
 - 691 (9%) respondents compete in Division I – non-football,
 - 1,671 (21%) respondents compete in Division II, and
 - 2,267 (28%) respondents compete in Division III.
- o **Sexual Orientation:**
 - Ninety-five percent (n=7,625) of the sample identify as heterosexual student-athletes while 5% (n= 394) identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Questioning (LGBQ).
- o **Class Standing:**
 - Response rates by year in school ranged from 14% among first and second years to 17% among third years.
 - The sample includes 2,542 (32%) first-year student-athletes, 2,028 (25%) second-year student-athletes, 1,730 (22%) third-year student-athletes, and 1,719 (21%) student-athletes in their fourth year or more (“Fourth +”)
- o **Featured vs. non-Featured sports⁴:**
 - 27% of the respondents (n = 2,149) participate in featured sports at their respective institutions. The total sample includes respondents from each of the NCAA’s 23 Championship sports.

² This response rate parallels those of other national student surveys.

³ While the authors recognize the vastly different experiences of people of various racial identities (e.g., Chicano versus African American or Latino(a) versus Asian American), and those experiences within these identity categories, we collapsed these categories into Student-Athletes of Color and White, non-Hispanic for many of the analyses due to the small numbers in individual race and ethnicity categories.

⁴ In literature that explores the difference between sports teams, teams are most often categorized as “high-profile” and “low-profile” or “revenue-generating” and “non-revenue-generating.” With the aim of considering the unique characteristics of participating institutions’ respective programs, the research team asked each institutional contact to provide a list of its institution’s “featured” and “non-featured” sports teams.

- o **Disability Status:**
 - Less than 2% of the respondents (n = 119) report having a physical disability (hearing loss, vision loss, etc.). Close to 3% (n = 223) report having a learning disability (dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc.) and 4% of student-athletes in the sample (n = 312) report having a psychological condition (ADHD, depression, etc.).
- o **Religion/Spirituality**
 - About 75% of the respondents (n = 5,972) identify with a Christian religion.
 - Thirteen percent of the students in the sample (n = 1,058) report no religious affiliation and 4% (n=328) report being spiritual, but with no religious affiliation.
 - Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist student-athletes and those of other faiths each comprise less than 2.5% of the sample.
- o **Grade Point Average (GPA)**
 - Twenty-nine percent of respondents (n = 2,303) report having a GPA of 3.5 (A-) or higher while 12% (n = 960) indicate that they have a GPA less than 2.5 (C+ or lower).
- o **Financial Statistics**
 - Student-athletes rely on a variety of resources to pay for college including:
 - Family contributions (55%, n =4,386),
 - Athletic scholarships (47%, n = 3,749),
 - Loans (46%, n = 3,708),
 - Academic scholarships (43%, n =3,484)
 - Personal contributions/income from jobs (22%, n = 1,736).
 - Pell grants (16%, n = 1,266), and
 - Need-based institutional grants (14%, n =1,156).
- o **Geographic Location**
 - Respondents represent every geographic region of the United States, with the largest proportion attending institutions in the mid-east region of the country (23%, n = 1,874), followed by the Great Lakes region (19%, n = 1,521). The smallest proportion, 3% of the respondents (n = 271), are from the Rocky Mountains region.
- o **Organizational Involvement**
 - Forty-one percent of student-athletes indicate they are not involved in any student organizations besides their varsity athletic participation.
 - However, 59% of the respondents do report involvement in one or more student organization beyond their athletic participation.
Specifically,
 - 22% (n = 1,777) are involved in intramural or club sports,
 - 19% (n = 1,545) indicate they are involved in academic and honor societies,
 - 17% (n = 1,340) are involved with a Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC),
 - 12% (n = 942) are active in religious or spiritual organizations, and
 - 10% (n = 819) participate in service organizations.

Preliminary Differences in Academic Success, Athletic Success, and Athletic Identity Outcome Measures by Selected Demographic Characteristics

The three student outcomes examined in this study varied by selected demographics of interest.

- o Student-athletes from Divisions I showed statistically lower levels of academic success than those in Division III.
- o Student-athletes in Division I-FCS and Non-football reported the highest levels of athletic success, while those in Division III had the lowest.
- o Student-athletes in Division III exhibited a significantly lower level of athletic identity than those in the other divisions.
- o Women student-athletes reported higher levels of academic and athletic success but lower athletic identity than their male student-athlete peers.
- o Student-Athletes of Color reported lower scores on academic success while White Student-Athletes reported lower scores on athletic identity. There were no differences between Student-Athletes of Color or White Student-Athletes in their reported academic success.
- o Student-athletes in featured sports reported lower scores on academic and athletic success but higher scores on athletic identity relative to their peers in non-featured sports.

Student-Athlete Experiences with Harassment

Nine percent of respondents reported they had personally experienced offensive, hostile, exclusionary, or intimidating conduct that interfered unreasonably with their ability to work or learn on campus (hereafter referred to as *harassment*)⁵ within the past year.

- o Women, Student-Athletes of Color, sexual minorities⁶, and third- and fourth-year students reported such harassment more than their counterparts. There were no significant differences across NCAA division or sport.
- o Athletic performance (44%) was the most cited reason for harassment⁷. The bases for harassment were often related to the respondents' participation in sport. However, 30% of respondents reported they were unsure what the basis was for the harassment they experienced.
- o Women, Student-Athletes of Color, sexual minorities, and third- and fourth-year students perceived such harassment more often than their counterparts. Harassment tended to take the form of coaches playing favorites (43%), being deliberately ignored or excluded (42%), and being subjected to derogatory remarks (38%). This behavior occurred most frequently at practice or during a competition (64%).
- o Coaches and other student-athletes were most often the perpetrators of the reported harassing behavior.
- o Few student-athletes accessed university resources in the aftermath of the incident(s).
- o A number of the incidents described by respondents suggest that comments made "in passing" by coaches and teammates have lasting and profound effects on student-athletes' psychological, physical, and emotional well-being, as well as their commitment to their team or postsecondary education in general. Student-athletes' qualitative comments also suggested that action (or lack thereof) on the part of coaches and other members of the university community influenced the eventual institutional responses related to the incidents of harassment.

⁵ Under the United States Code Title 18 Subsection 1514(c)1 harassment is defined as "a course of conduct directed at a specific person that causes substantial emotional distress in such a person and serves no legitimate purpose" (<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/vii.html>). In higher education, legal issues discussions define harassment as any conduct that unreasonably interferes with one's ability to work or learn on campus. The questions used in this survey to uncover participants' personal and observed experiences with harassment were designed using these definitions.

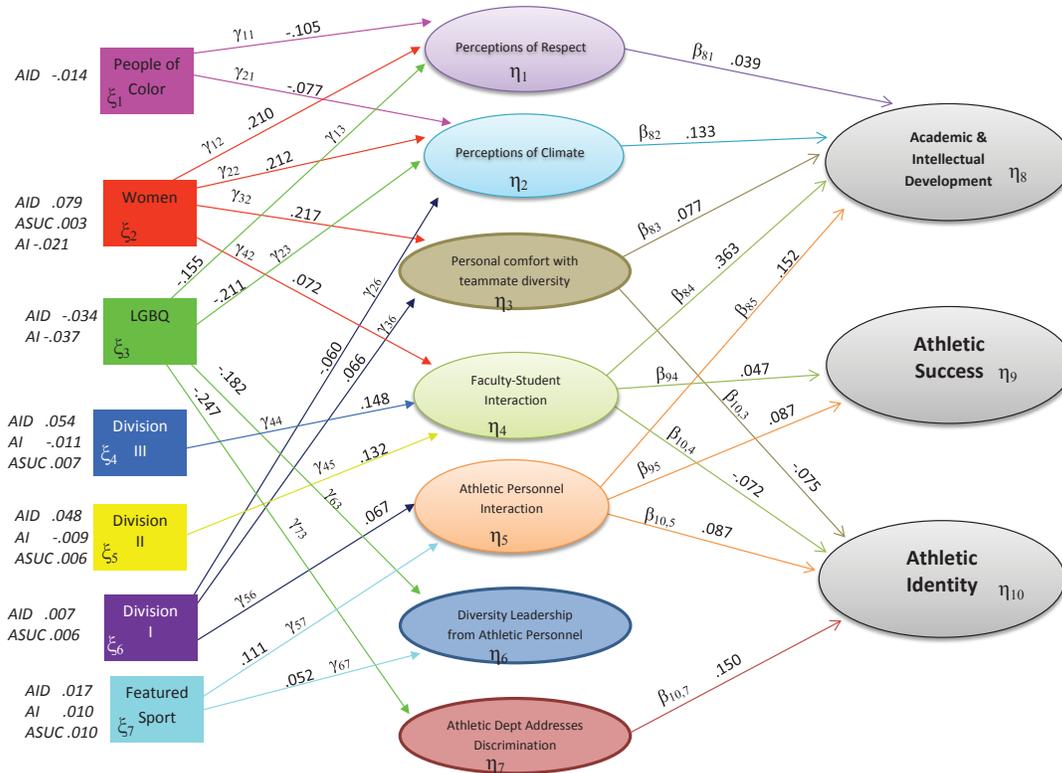
⁶ Sexual minorities are defined, for the purposes of this report, as people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Questioning (LGBQ).

⁷ Percentages do not sum to 100% because participants could mark more than one response item.

Climate and Its Influences on Educational and Sport-Related Outcomes

Drawn from a structural equation model testing the relationship between climate and the three outcomes of interest (Figure 2), the overall findings concerning student-athletes' experiences and perceptions of climate are offered in the points below.

SACS Path Diagram – Mediation Model



Major Outcome Findings

Overall, of the seven climate variables tested, two had an influence on all three outcomes: 1) faculty-student interaction and 2) interactions with athletic personnel. However, interactions with faculty and interactions with athletic personnel did not always work in concert. While both tended to have a positive influence on student-athletes' academic success ($\beta_{8,4} = 0.363$, $\beta_{8,5} = 0.152$, respectively) and athletic success ($\beta_{9,4} = 0.047$, $\beta_{9,5} = 0.087$, respectively), student-athletes that interacted with faculty tended to report lower levels of athletic identity ($\beta_{10,4} = -0.072$) while student-athletes that interacted with athletic personnel tended to report higher levels of athletic identity ($\beta_{10,5} = 0.087$). The extent to which student-athletes perceived diversity leadership from athletic personnel had no significant influence on any of the outcomes of interest.

Academic Success:

- o Five aspects of climate had an influence on student-athletes' academic success (in order of influence): faculty-student interaction ($\beta_{8,4} = 0.363$), athletic personnel interaction ($\beta_{8,5} = 0.152$), perceptions of climate ($\beta_{8,2} = 0.133$), personal comfort with teammate diversity ($\beta_{8,3} = 0.077$), and perceptions of respect

($\beta_{8,1}=0.039$).

o Of the 11 different significant relationships depicted in the model (i.e., mediating climate variables onto each outcomes), the strongest relationship is between faculty-student interaction and academic success, as indicated by the largest coefficient of 0.363.

- This suggests that if there is concern for student-athletes' academic success, interactions with faculty will yield the largest "pay-off."

o Similarly, interactions with athletic personnel and academic success have the second strongest relationship in the model ($\beta_{8,5} = 0.152$).

Academic Success

o Only two aspects of climate had an influence on student-athletes' athletic success: athletic personnel interaction ($\beta_{9,5} = 0.087$) and faculty-student interaction ($\beta_{9,4} = 0.047$).

Athletic Identity

o Four aspects of climate had an impact on student-athletes' athletic identity.

- The largest influence was the extent to which student-athletes perceived that the athletic department addressed discrimination ($\beta_{10,7} = 0.150$).
- Interactions with athletic personnel also had a positive influence on student-athletes' sense of athletic identity ($\beta_{10,5} = 0.087$).
- The more comfortable they were with teammate diversity, the less student-athletes' identified with being an athlete, as indicated by the negative coefficient of -0.075.
- Similarly, student-athletes who interacted more with faculty were less likely to have a strong athletic identity ($\beta_{10,4} = -0.072$).

Findings across subgroups. Other findings highlight the complexity of climate and the need to consider a range of student-athletes' experiences and perspectives. While some aspects of climate are salient for all student-athletes, when considered across a range of demographic and institutional characteristics (i.e., race, gender, sexual identity, Division, and sport), some aspects of climate are more salient than others.

Race. An examination of the relationship between climate and racial/ethnic identity for Student-Athletes of Color and White student-athletes revealed the following:

- In general, Student-Athletes of Color tended to report lower levels of academic success relative to their White student-athlete peers ($\gamma_{8,1} = -0.144$). However, there were no differences between White student-athletes and Student-Athletes of Color in regard to self-reports of athletic success or athletic identity.
- Student-Athletes of Color experienced a more negative climate than their White student-athlete peers on two of the seven climate variables tested, which compounds their already lower levels of academic success.
- Student-Athletes of Color reported more negative perceptions of respect ($\gamma_{1,1} = -0.105$) and more negative perceptions of climate ($\gamma_{2,1} = -0.077$). In turn, for Student-Athletes of Color, the mediation effect of perceptions of respect and perceptions of climate had a negative indirect influence on their academic success (indirect effect = -0.014).

Gender. In a review of women and men student-athletes' academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity, particularly in regard to the influence of climate on these outcomes, the findings suggest:

o In the entire model, compared to all other subgroups (i.e., Student-Athletes of Color, LGBTQ student-athletes, etc.), climate's influence on academic success was most profound for women student-athletes, as suggested by

the largest indirect effect of 0.079.

- o Women student-athletes tended to report greater levels of academic and athletic success ($\gamma_{8,2} = 0.082$ and $\gamma_{9,2} = 0.155$, respectively) and lower levels of athletic identity ($\gamma_{10,2} = -0.148$) compared to men student-athletes.
- o Climate influenced women-student athletes' scores on each of the outcomes investigated. • Women student-athletes tended to report greater personal comfort with teammate diversity ($\gamma_{3,2} = 0.217$), perceptions of climate ($\gamma_{2,2} = 0.212$), perceptions of respect ($\gamma_{1,2} = 0.210$), and faculty-student interaction ($\gamma_{4,2} = 0.072$). In turn, each of these four climate factors has a positive influence on academic success (indirect effect = 0.079).
 - The most influential aspect of climate on women's academic success was their perception of respect, followed by interactions with faculty.
 - Women student-athletes tended to have more positive perceptions of climate as compared to men student-athletes, which bolstered their academic success (total effect = 0.161).
 - In regard to athletic success, only one climate variable acted as a mediating influence: interactions with faculty members.
 - Women had higher scores on faculty-student interaction ($\gamma_{4,2} = 0.072$), which, in turn, had a positive influence on their sense of athletic success ($\beta_{9,4} = 0.047$; indirect effect = 0.003) and reinforced their overall sense of athletic success (total effect = 0.158).
 - The effects of climate on women student-athletes' sense of athletic identity tended to be negative (indirect effect = -0.021).
 - Women reported greater personal comfort with teammate diversity ($\gamma_{3,2} = 0.217$) and greater levels of interaction with faculty members ($\gamma_{4,2} = 0.072$), both of which were negatively related to athletic identity ($\beta_{10,3} = -0.075$ and $\beta_{10,4} = -0.072$, respectively) and contributed to a sense of athletic identity that, generally, tended to be less salient than men's (total effect = -0.169).

Sexual identity. An evaluation of the differential influence of climate on the outcomes for both LGBQ and heterosexual student-athletes revealed the following:

- o As suggested by the lack of direct effects of being LGBQ on the outcomes, sexual identity alone is not a significant predictor of academic success, athletic success, or athletic identity. However, LGBQ student-athletes generally experienced a more negative climate than their heterosexual peers, which adversely influenced their athletic identities and reports of academic success.
- o LGBQ student-athletes reported lower scores on four climate variables: Perceptions of Climate ($\gamma_{2,1} = -0.077$), Perceptions of Respect ($\gamma_{2,1} = -0.105$), Athletic Department Addresses Discrimination ($\gamma_{7,3} = -0.247$), and Diversity Leadership from Athletic Personnel ($\gamma_{6,3} = -0.182$).
- o In the entire model, compared to all other subgroups (Student-Athletes of Color, women student-athletes, etc.), climate's influence on athletic identity was most profound for LGBQ student-athletes, as suggested by the largest indirect effect on athletic identity of -0.037. o While visible diversity leadership from athletic personnel had no influence on the outcomes in the SACS study, athletic identity tended to be less salient for LGBQ student-athletes as a result of their lower tendency to report that the athletic department addresses discrimination (indirect effect = -0.037).
- o As a result of LGBQ Student-athletes' lower perceptions of respect and of climate, they tend to report lower levels of academic success (indirect effect = -0.034).

Divisional status. The influence of climate on student-athletes' academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity were compared across Divisions I, II, and III.

- o Without consideration given to climate, Division III student-athletes tended to have a less salient athletic identity

than their Division I and Division II peers ($\gamma_{10,4} = -0.132$). There were no other apparent differences, or direct effects, between Division I, II, or III student-athletes in regard to academic success and athletic success.

o Differences between the outcomes emerge when climate is taken into consideration.

- Division I student-athletes reported greater levels of personal comfort with teammate diversity ($\gamma_{3,6} = 0.066$) and athletic personnel interaction ($\gamma_{5,6} = 0.067$) than Division II and III student-athletes. However, they tended to have less positive perceptions of climate ($\gamma_{2,6} = -0.060$).
- Division I student-athletes' perceptions of climate have repercussions for each of the outcomes in the model.
- The effect of participation in Division I on academic success was mediated through all three of the significant climate variables (indirect effect = 0.007).
- The effect on athletic success was only mediated through athletic personnel interaction (indirect effect = 0.006).
- The effect on athletic identity, as mediated through both athletic personnel interaction and personal comfort with teammate diversity, was barely non-significant ($p = 0.003$).
- Significantly higher levels of interaction with faculty members influenced Division II and Division III student-athletes' academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity.
- The effect of participating in Division II is mediated through Faculty-Student Interaction and indirectly effects Division II student-athletes' academic success (indirect effect = 0.048), athletic success (indirect effect = 0.006), and athletic identity (indirect effect = -0.009).
- Also mediated by Faculty-Student Interaction, there were positive effects of participation in Division III on academic success (indirect effect = 0.054) and athletic success (indirect effect = 0.007). There was a small, negative indirect effect of being in Division III on athletic identity (indirect effect = -0.011).

Featured and non-featured sports. With the aim of considering the unique characteristics of participating institutions' respective programs, rather than categorize student-athletes' sports membership as either "revenue-generating" or "high profile," the research team asked each institutional contact to provide a list of the institution's "featured" and "non-featured" sports teams.

o Student-athletes who competed in featured sports tended to report a significantly greater sense of athletic identity ($\gamma_{10,7} = 0.081$), but a significantly lower sense of athletic success than student-athletes in non-featured sports ($\gamma_{9,7} = -0.113$). There were no significant differences in regard to their reports of academic success.

o Interaction with athletic personnel was the only aspect of climate that influenced the outcomes of interest.

- Featured sport student-athletes tended to have greater levels of interaction with athletic personnel ($\gamma_{5,7} = 0.111$), which in turn, yielded significantly greater levels of academic success ($\beta_{8,4} = 0.363$), athletic success ($\beta_{9,5} = 0.087$), and athletic identity ($\beta_{10,5} = 0.087$).
- While there was no difference between featured and non-featured sports team members' academic success in general (as indicated by the lack of a direct effect), when interaction with athletic personnel was considered, featured sport student-athletes had higher levels of academic success than their non-featured sport peers.
- Therefore, interaction with athletic personnel appears to be the only aspect of climate that might foster significantly greater levels of academic success for student-athletes in featured sports.

Summary of Qualitative Comments. 4,264 respondents provided more than 4,500 comments across six open-ended survey questions. In regard to the various influences of climate on academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity, qualitative comments certainly support the quantitative findings. However, these qualitative data capture the particular fine-grained experiences of individual student-athletes, rather than the general "big picture" (such as that offered by quantitative analyses). In turn, individuals' descriptions of climate as they have perceived and

experienced it varies, with some student-athletes offering descriptions of athletic department and campus climates that bolster their academic and athletic success and respect students and student-athletes alike regardless of athletic identity or other salient characteristics. On the other hand, some student-athletes described one or two particular instances (some positive and some negative) that had profound, lasting effects on their collegiate experiences. The qualitative findings suggest that student-athletes' experiences are dynamic and varied. Their perspectives are shaped by an intricate and dynamic web of relationships with peers, faculty, staff, coaches, and other athletic personnel, which are set against a larger backdrop of institutional characteristics and social contexts.

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Summary

The dataset collected for this project is comprehensive and diverse. It includes responses from student-athletes of each identity and from all geographic areas, sports, and NCAA divisions. Our analyses suggests that, consistently, Women, White, and Heterosexual student-athletes, as well as those in Divisions II and III report higher levels of academic success than their counterparts. Women student-athletes also show higher levels of athletic success. Finally, Men student-athletes, Student-Athletes of Color, and those in featured sports have higher levels of athletic identity.

In addition, it's clear that climate matters. Six of the seven climate scales influenced the outcomes, and differences in outcomes based on sexual orientation, Division, and featured sport participation appeared or became more salient when climate was taken into account. Positive perceptions of climate lead to increases in student-athlete outcomes in every relationship except for the influences of personal comfort with team diversity and faculty-student interaction on athletic identity. The strongest impact by far was the influence of student-athletes' interactions with faculty members on their academic success.

These results indicate that experiences and perceptions of climate affect student-athlete well-being. And student-athletes do experience harassment—women, under-represented minorities, LGBTQ, and upper-class student-athletes disproportionately so. Typically harassment is based on sport-related reasons and is usually perpetrated by coaches and other student-athletes, most frequently at practice or during competition. This “in-house” harassment, whether intentional or not, is the most prevalent kind experienced by our respondents. It follows, therefore, that athletic departments have the power to improve the collegiate experiences of the student-athletes in their charge through cooperation with athletic personnel, student-athletes, and faculty members at their institutions.



**The NCAA salutes more than
400,000 student-athletes
participating in 23 sports
at more than 1,100
colleges/universities**