



# Tutor Perceptions of Division I College Athletes

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Research regarding athletics stakeholders' (e.g., faculty, non-athlete peers) perceptions of Division I college athletes is abundant and demonstrates that most stakeholders hold negative and stereotypical views of athletes. However, despite their time spent with athletes, little is known about the perceptions academic tutors have toward the athletes they are brought in to assist. Thus, through the lens of stereotype threat, this study explored graduate(d) and undergraduate tutors' ( $n = 67$ ) perceptions of athletes from three academically and athletically elite Division I institutions. Tutors' perceptions were examined and compared based on their responses to an adapted situational attitude scale survey using correlations, t-tests, and Fisher's Z tests. In general, results suggested tutors did not maintain stereotypical perceptions of the athletes they worked with, a key difference from previous scholarship in this area. Still, graduate(d) tutors generally held athletes to higher academic standards compared to undergraduate tutors. Implications for sport practitioners in academic support programs for athletes include hiring more graduate(d) tutors to work with athletes and fostering stronger relationships between tutors and athletes. Ultimately, this study expands upon the previous research on perceptions and stereotypes of athletes and the findings may demonstrate a shift toward more positive and strengths-based perceptions of Division I athletes.

*Key words:* intercollegiate athletics, stereotype threat, academic support

The integrity of academic support programs for athletes across the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been called into question due to a recent plethora of academic misconduct cases at Division I institutions. Perhaps the most egregious example of challenges to academic integrity occurred at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where thousands of athletes were shuffled by academic support staff and enrolled in paper courses, or classes that did not meet and only required a paper submission at the end of the semester. Such courses were strategically designed to maintain athletes' sport eligibility, rather than offering a true educational experience (Smith & Willingham, 2019). Other examples of academic misconduct involving academic support staff include the University of Missouri and Mississippi



State University (James, 2019; Lederman, 2019). With these and other past academic scandals, Division I institutions are often seen as the most academically contentious area of college sports.

At the heart of these and other academic misconduct cases are tutors, brought in to assist athletes with coursework (James, 2019; Lederman, 2019; Smith & Willingham, 2019). However, these tutors over-assisted either by partially or fully completing assignments, enabling some athletes to cheat the system and together, committing academic fraud. Despite the potential tutors have to greatly influence the academic experiences of athletes, little is known about their perceptions toward the population they are hired to help. An enhanced understanding about the tutor-athlete relationship may be important in explaining more about athletes' academic experiences.

One common component in athlete academic experiences and performance is the "dumb jock" stereotype. This perception maintains that athletes are only enrolled in college to play their sport and they are intellectually inferior to their non-athlete peers (Simons et al., 2007). These incidents of academic misconduct further the dumb jock stereotype and may limit athletes' identity development through stereotype threat, or risk of confirming, by performance or behavior, negative stereotypes about oneself or one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Negative perceptions of athletes by those outside of athletics can lead athletes to over identify as athletes, stunting their abilities to grow as students (Stone et al., 2012; Wininger & White, 2008). Athletes experiencing these negative perceptions are more vulnerable to stereotype threat. In fact, research by Stone and colleagues (2012) found that when athletes are primed with their athlete identity rather than their student identity, they perform at lower levels academically, thus confirming the dumb jock narrative.

Research on perceptions and stereotypes of Division I athletes has focused primarily on faculty and non-athlete attitudes, noting these groups tend to hold more negative and prejudicial attitudes toward athletes (Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). Despite the fact that many athletes spend a significant amount of time with tutors, there is minimal research exploring tutors' perceptions of athletes. While positive perceptions of athletes' capabilities may facilitate success (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), negative attitudes will likely impede achievement (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Harry, 2021; Stone et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to examine how tutors view athletes as perceptions from others have shown to be impactful in athletes' identity development and academic success (Smith & Martiny, 2018; Wininger & White, 2015).

Tutors are in a unique position by being specifically hired for athletic academic support. It is assumed by many academic support staff and programs that tutors have positive attitudes toward the athletes they assist. However, cases of academic fraud contradict this notion and hint that tutors involved in academic misconduct may subscribe to the dumb jock narrative. Thus, they may not believe athletes are capable of completing the assigned work successfully (Smith & Willingham, 2019). Exploring the perceptions tutors have toward Division I athletes will enable academic support programs and athletic departments to make better decisions regarding tutor initiatives, therefore improving academic experience of athletes. It is important

to examine such perceptions at NCAA Division I institutions as academic-athletic misalignment is strongest at this level. Negative stereotypes of athletics and athletes emerge as academic values, like teaching, research, and service, conflict with athletic values, such as commercialization, revenue-generation, and winning (Clotfelter, 2019; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Critics and scholars of intercollegiate athletics have noted that athletic values tend to supersede academic objectives, resulting in issues of educational integrity in academic support areas (Gurney et al., 2017).

While this study does not look at causal relationships between perceptions and athlete outcomes, this research is significant because it provides the foundation for understanding tutors' perceptions of athletes and extends the literature regarding influencers on athletes' academic experience. As such, through the lens of stereotype threat, this study examined tutor perceptions of college athletes at three Division I institutions and the following research questions were addressed:

1. What perceptions do tutors have toward athletes in different contexts (i.e., academic, athletic, and social)?
2. Are tutors' perceptions of athletes in various situations related to one another?
3. Does tutor graduation status influence their perceptions of athletes?

## Theoretical Framework

### Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes are prevalent in athletics and academics, particularly at Division I institutions (Comeaux, 2011b, 2012; Smith & Martiny, 2018). Stereotypes are beliefs or assumptions that associate a group of people with particular characteristics or traits (Kassin et al., 2011) and their foundations are based on generalizations that link a group, such as athletes, to traits or outcomes, such as low grade point averages. Research on negative stereotypes toward athletes has shown that these attitudes hinder performance in achievement contexts (Smith & Martiny, 2018; Stone et al., 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). This negative influence of stereotypes on performance in achievement situations is stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Stereotype threat is the perceived risk of confirming, through one's behaviors or outcomes, a negative stereotype about one's group or social identity (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The underpinning of this concept is that being viewed by others through a negative stereotype elicits anxiety and fear that disturbs one's performance, altering behavior and/or outcomes. Studies of stereotype threat began by focusing on African Americans and women in intellectual performance situations, such as cognitive evaluation (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This research demonstrated that when the negative stereotypes of these groups were made salient to the test-takers (i.e., being told that African Americans and women are not as intelligent as whites and males, respectively), they performed at significantly lower levels than control groups who did not experience the stereotype.

Additionally, other scholars have extended stereotype threat theory to explore how differentiating between the target and the source of a threat influence one's con-

firmation of a stereotype (Pennington et al., 2018; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). The target of a stereotype threat can be ascribed to an individual (e.g., an athlete as the target) or a social group (e.g., all athletes as the target). An athlete might perceive themselves as the target of stereotype threat when they see a task, such as an exam, as an indication of their personal ability. Alternatively, athletes may encounter social group stereotype threat when they see their collective performance as something that could reinforce a negative stereotype (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). Some student groups with higher levels of identity in certain categories (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) are more susceptible to social group stereotype threat. College athletes, who are known to generally have strong feelings of athlete identity (Lu et al., 2018), are likely susceptible to social group stereotype threat. Additionally, the source of a stereotype threat pertains to who is seen as evaluating one's performance and potentially ascribing the stereotype (Pennington et al., 2018). In previous studies, the source of stereotype threat has been faculty and non-athlete peers (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Wininger & White, 2008, 2015). In this research the source is tutors.

More recently, stereotype threat theory has been applied to athletes' performances, particularly in academic environments (Dee, 2014; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017; Smith & Martiny, 2018; Stone et al., 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Overall, this research has demonstrated that manipulating and increasing an athlete's athlete identity salience through stereotypical perceptions, heightened their vulnerability to experience stereotype threat, thus, negatively influencing academic performance. For example, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) provided athletes with pre-test questionnaires that primed either their athlete ("write about your last athletic performance"), student ("write about your last academic success"), or no identity ("write directions to get from your dorm to the library"), along with a self-esteem measure (p. 331). Following the questionnaires, participants had five minutes to complete a 10-question math exam. The authors found that athletes primed with their athlete identity had lower self-esteem ratings and performed at lower levels than those receiving the student priming (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Merely writing about their last athletic event prior to the exam was enough to succumb to stereotype threat and decrease performance. Those not primed with either identity had self-esteem ratings similar to the athlete-primed group, but scores matching those in the student-identity group. This aligns with the individual as the target of stereotype threat (Pennington et al., 2018).

Dee (2014) conducted a similar study using stereotype threat comparing athletes to a control group of non-athletes. Non-athletes answered a pre-test questionnaire pertaining to dining services on campus, while athletes were questioned about the sport they played and conflicts that arose from being an athlete. Post-questionnaire, the groups completed a 39-question exam in 30 minutes. Results of study indicated a negative and statistically significant difference between scores of the control group and athletes, with the latter group performing 8.1-9.4 points lower than the former.

Additionally, three other points of stereotype threat are important to understand when it comes to applying this theoretical framework to tutor perceptions of athletes. First, the more important the performance or situation is to the athlete, the more likely they are to succumb to stereotype threat (Riciputi & Erdal, 2017). For example, if an athlete experiences a negative stereotype from her tutor prior to a test that she

needs to pass to remain eligible, it is more likely that she will experience stereotype threat and perform poorly. Second, even subtle reminders of a negative stereotype are sufficient to weaken or sabotage outcomes (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). A tutor's comment in passing, such as "you don't seem as motivated as my non-athlete students" is enough to derail an athlete's academic performance. Such commentary would likely prompt the athlete to perceive their athlete social group as the target (Pennington et al., 2018). Third, stereotype threat has both short and long-term effects on athletes' performance and identity development (Smith & Martiny, 2018). Thus, the influence of a negative stereotype from a tutor can be detrimental to the athlete immediately (i.e., poor grade on an assignment) or down the road (i.e., failure to cultivate interests outside of sports leading to confusion or sense of helplessness post-graduation).

As applied in this study, stereotype threat theory holds that tutor perceptions of athletes—as a source of stereotype threat—may influence academic outcomes. However, this study is strictly descriptive and could provide the groundwork for future studies examining more causal relationships between tutor perceptions and athlete outcomes. It is probable that if a tutor has positive perceptions of athletes, they are more likely to succeed academically, while negative attitudes toward athletes may lead them to succumb to the threat and not reach their full potential. In formulation of a theoretical perspective for studying tutor perceptions of athletes, stereotype threat theory offers an appropriate and beneficial lens through which to examine this phenomenon.

## Literature Review

The following literature review sheds light on three areas that aid in exploring the importance of tutor perceptions of athletes. The first section provides a concise review of the athlete identity literature to explain the importance of identity development in academic success or failure, and the influence perceptions have with this performance. Next, previous research on perceptions of athletes from faculty and non-athletes is discussed. The final section offers a brief history of academic support programs for athletes and the role of tutors in these programs.

### Athlete Identity Development

It is important to understand how athletes develop their intersecting and sometimes conflicting student and athlete identities because the ways in which these two identities develop and work in harmony/disharmony influence academic performance (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Lu et al., 2018). Student identity and athletic identity are comprised of the social, behavioral, and cognitive concomitants of identifying with the student role and/or athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). Research shows that athletes experience moderately high friction between their two identities, often due to the disequilibrium between achieving success in the classroom and in their sport (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Lu et al., 2018). Despite being instructed by authority figures on the importance of balancing their student and athlete identities, Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) found athletes perceived their environment, par-

ticularly athletics and institutional cultures, still emphasized athletic identity. Many scholars have noted that relationships with coaches and administrators, and the hyper-commercialization of Division I athletics, played a critical role in athletes' identity development and often result in an overemphasis of the athlete role (Clotfelter, 2019; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Weight et al., 2020).

With this in mind, some athletes experience identity foreclosure, or the failure to engage in exploratory behavior regarding identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). This foreclosure may be the result of institutional or athletic department culture. Negative perceptions of the culture—including racial exclusion, lack of respect from others, and stereotypes—hinder educational outcomes of athletes (Harry, 2021, 2023; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Rankin et al., 2016). Therefore, athletes experiencing a negative culture are more likely to foreclose their student identity and rely on their athletic identity (Beamon, 2012). Athletes who perceive climate as supportive are more likely to achieve positive educational outcomes (Gayles et al., 2018b; Rankin et al., 2016). Other important factors in student identity foreclosure include type of sport (i.e., revenue versus non-revenue generating), pressure from teammates and coaches, professional aspirations, and previous experiences with academic achievement (Lu et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2016). Identity foreclosure is more prevalent for athletes in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball, those with professional aspirations, and those with poor previous experiences with academic success (Shropshire & Williams, 2017).

Compared to those who are less focused on academics, athletes dedicated to academics tend to have higher academic identity salience (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Lu et al., 2018; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Similarly, research shows that maintaining a high student identity is crucial for academic success (Lu et al., 2018; Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000). Thus, student identity development may be cyclical: student identity salience leads to academic success/focus and academic success/focus leads to heightened student identity salience.

The aforementioned research expands upon factors influencing the athlete experience and identity development, however, none of the studies examined the role that tutors might play in influencing culture or athletes' identity growth or foreclosure. Still, some of the most influential factors of identity conflict stem from institutional contexts, such as interactions with those outside of athletics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

## **Previous Research on Perceptions of Athletes**

### ***Faculty Perceptions***

Many faculty believe that athletics are a distraction from the mission of higher education (Clotfelter, 2019; Gurney et al., 2017). As a result, this negative attitude toward athletics is frequently passed along to athletes and can foster the tenuous relationship between athletes and faculty (Comeaux, 2011a; Harry, 2021). Literature supports the notion that faculty are often a source of stereotype threat and hold more prejudicial views of athletes than their non-athlete counterparts (Comeaux, 2011a; Engstrom et al., 1995; Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). Using a modified version of

the situation attitude scale (SAS), Engstrom and colleagues (1995) explored faculty perceptions of non-athletes versus athletes given certain speculative situations (e.g., student or athlete receives an A in class). Faculty demonstrated feelings of suspicion, embarrassment, and disappointment when an athlete received an A in class, drove an expensive car, and received extra assistance through a tutorial program. Additionally, faculty showed higher levels of anger and disapproval when athletes were admitted with lower test scores and received a scholarship to attend college. Faculty held less negative perceptions across the same situations with non-athletes, indicating prejudice against athletes (Engstrom et al., 1995).

Comeaux (2011b) conducted a follow-up study to Engstrom et al.'s (1995) SAS research, but rather than focusing on athletes' characteristics, he focused on characteristics of faculty, such as gender, race, and field of study. Female faculty held more positive views of athletes in the SAS situations than their male counterparts (Comeaux, 2011b). Additionally, Black faculty members responded more positively to athletes who drove an expensive car, received an A in their class, had extra tutoring assistance, and were admitted with lower test scores. The attitudes from white and Asian/Pacific Islander faculty were less favorable toward athletes in these situations. Faculty in education were most positive toward athletes, while those in management, health sciences, and humanities held more negative perceptions (Comeaux, 2011b).

Athletes are aware of these negative perceptions and such awareness makes them susceptible to stereotype threat (Winger & White, 2008, 2015). For example, Stone and colleagues (2012) investigated stereotype threat and priming of male athletes using verbal assessment booklets. Participants were assigned booklets with covers designated for athletics participants, scholar-athletes, or general research participants (control group). When compared to the control group, athletes primed with their athlete identity and scholar-athlete identity generally performed worse on the assessment. Stereotype threat was particularly prominent and influential for Black athletes (Stone et al., 2012). Thus, the way faculty refer to athletes, such as "scholar-athletes" or just students, may influence their academic performance. Stone et al. (2012) also concluded that stereotype threat created a cognitive imbalance between student and athlete identities. Thus, the dumb jock stereotype threatened the academic potential of this sample of athletes by foreclosing their student identity (Stone et al., 2012). This study demonstrates the importance in further understanding stereotype threat, identity, and academic performance of college athletes.

When faculty hold high and positive standards for their students, they are more likely to succeed (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). However, when faculty hold lower standards for athletes' academic abilities, this population can struggle (Winger & White, 2015). In fact, Kuhn and Rubin (2022) found that their sample of faculty members perceived that athletes in football and men's basketball were more likely to cheat compared to other athletes. Additionally, the faculty noted that football players were more likely to rely on others—potentially non-athlete peers, teammates, advisors, or even tutors—to help them cheat (Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). Faculty perceptions of cheating likely contribute to athletes feeling they are a target of stereotype threat and may lead them to cheat and confirm the "dumb jock" stereotype



(Pennington et al., 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995). So, while faculty are supposed to be positive agents for growth and academic achievement for all students (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011), some faculty interactions are detrimental to athletes' identity and educational outcomes. This study expands the literature on perceptions of athletes by applying the above research and principles to a new population: athletic tutors.

### ***Student Perceptions***

Just as faculty perceptions play a role in athletes' experiences, so too do interactions and perceptions from non-athlete students (Wininger & White, 2015). Thus, non-athlete peers are also a potential source for stereotype threat for college athletes. Using an adapted SAS, research by Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) measured non-athlete students' attitudes toward athletes, and situations where prejudice was most likely to occur. Students held more negative views when athletes received A's in a class, were assigned to be their lab partners, and when athletes received tutoring and other academic services. Students held more positive views when other non-athletes received A's, were assigned to be their lab partners, or received additional academic support (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991).

Similarly, Wininger and White (2015) used surveys to explore how non-athletes perceived athletes' academic abilities and treatment from faculty. They also surveyed athletes to see how they understood faculty perceptions and treatment factors. Findings demonstrated that non-athletes held lower educational expectations of athlete peers and that they felt faculty also held athletes to lower expectations. However, athletes perceived that faculty held higher academic expectations of athletes, while non-athletes had lower academic expectations of them. Another study by Tucker and colleagues (2016) echoed similar findings: non-athletes concluded athletes do provide a certain public image for their school, but they also noted that athletes were undeservingly privileged and lacked academic motivation.

The aforementioned studies offer foundational evidence that prejudicial views of athletes may be prevalent amongst non-athlete students (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Knapp et al., 2001 Tucker et al, 2016; Wininger & White, 2015). However, more research is needed to further unpack the relationship between non-athlete perceptions and athletes. This study expands upon this as some tutors for athletes are also peers, an experience that may influence attitudes.

As the literature demonstrates, athletes encounter negative perceptions from their student peers and faculty. These perceptions influence their identity development, and many athletes suffer from stereotype threat and can succumb to the dumb jock narrative (Stone et al., 2012). When this occurs, athletes' academic self-actualization is limited, impacting academic outcomes. However, little is understood about the ways in which tutor perceptions of athletes may be influential in their collegiate experiences.

### **The Athlete-Tutor Relationship**

In 1991, to lessen the disconnect between academics and athletics and improve athletes' educational opportunities, the NCAA mandated that institutions competing



in Division I athletics establish academic support programs, including tutoring, for athletes (Meyer, 2005). The objective behind the mandate was to ensure athletes were given proper resources to succeed academically. With the adoption of athlete support services, institutions had to submit academic eligibility, retention, and graduation rates for their athletes to the NCAA (Banbel & Chen, 2014). Additionally, the NCAA initiated punitive actions for schools that did not meet minimum thresholds in the previous categories (Banbel & Chen, 2014). The potential for negative repercussions for athlete academic under-performance led to increased budgets for academic support. However, this also resulted in higher stakes and the need for athletes to remain eligible in the classroom in order to compete on the field. Some scholars believe this increased pressure has resulted in more cases of academic misconduct (Ridpath, 2010; Smith & Willingham, 2019). Indeed, recent cases of academic deviance have brought negative attention to these once positive programs, and have caused apprehensions, primarily regarding the education of athletes in revenue-generating sports (Kuhn & Rubin, 2022; Ridpath, 2010). Many researchers, media outlets, and former athletes are voicing concerns about the lack of education athletes receive in college (Gurney et al., 2017; Smith & Willingham, 2019).

In a survey completed by Division I athletes, participants expressed preferences of discussing academics with a faculty or academic advisor rather than their athletic advisor (Huml et al., 2014). Additionally, other athletes noted a lack of resources available to them through the academic support provided through their athletic department and the isolating effects of having athlete-only academic advising. On the other hand, research by Harry (2021) using departing athletes' exit interviews and surveys noted that 90% of athletes rated their academic advising and resources as "good" or "excellent."

Regardless of whether athletes express satisfaction/dissatisfaction with support programs, tutors play an important role in these systems and help this population succeed in the classroom. Some athletes receive special admittance to their universities, based on their athletic talent, despite having lower test scores or grade point averages (Huml et al., 2014; Ridpath, 2010). However, it is the responsibility of the institution to admit students who have a reasonable chance of academic success including graduating (Clotfelter, 2019). If athletes are struggling, it is also the responsibility of the institution to assist them in improving their academic success. This is where academic support services come in.

Athletes often require their own support services because the challenges they face are separate from those faced by their non-athlete peers (Harry, 2021, 2023; Jolly, 2008; Rubin & Moses, 2017). For example, while tutoring and support services are usually available to all students on campuses, the hours these services are available and location are often not conducive to athletes' practice, competition, and travel schedules. Thus, support systems that are available for them need to accommodate their hectic and unusual schedules (Rubin & Moses, 2017). An essential part of this support system are the tutorial services (Banbel & Chen, 2014; Ridpath, 2010; Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Tutors for athletes are trained by the academic support staff on best practices, the life of a college athlete, and institution and NCAA policies and compliance regulations (Banbel & Chen, 2014). Tutors usually meet certain requirements, dictated by the institution or department. Some institutions require tutors to be graduate students or out of college, while others take undergraduate peer tutors. Similarly, some institutions require tutors to maintain a certain grade in the subject they wish tutor or require a recommendation letter (Banbel & Chen, 2014). Usually an academic counselor or tutor coordinator oversees the tutor enterprise to ensure compliance with institutional and NCAA policies.

Tutoring for athletes tends to be limited to the academic support center or building where tutors have access to computers, white boards, and other resources to enhance athletes' learning. Tutor sessions are free for the athletes and are scheduled by the athlete's academic counselor or tutor coordinator. These sessions tend to last about one hour and can be one-on-one, group sessions, or lecture style. Tutoring has been demonstrated as an effective avenue to improve athletes' academic performance (Gill & Farrington, 2014).

While research demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of tutoring practices (Cooper, 2010; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011), little is known about the perceptions tutors have toward athletes. As previous studies have shown, negative perceptions from those outside of athletics influence athletes' identity development and academic outcomes. Thus, it may be increasingly important that tutors hold positive, strengths-based, or neutral perceptions of the athletes they are hired to help.

## Method

### Sites, Participants, and Collection

Scholars and critics note that much of the negative attention and academic issues stem from institutions with big-time athletics programs within Division I of the NCAA (Clotfelter, 2019; Gurney et al., 2017; Huml et al., 2014; Smith & Willingham, 2019). These schools and their sports programs are perceived to be the most athletically elite due to large budgets and revenue streams and overall media publicity and commercialization (Clotfelter, 2019). As a result of the above factors, sport and education on these campuses are often described as divided and academics are perceived to take a back seat to athletics (Hirko & Sweitzer, 2015). Thus, these institutions offer an important context to draw from to better understand tutors' perceptions of athletes.

With this in mind, this study used purposeful, non-random sampling to select the three institutions from which tutors were selected. These institutions, two private and one public, are considered academically and athletically elite institutions based on *U.S. News and World Report* and Learfield Directors' Cup rankings (Clotfelter, 2019). All three institutions were ranked in the top 50 of both the Best National University rankings from the *U.S. News and World Report* and the Learfield Directors' Cup standings. Because these institutions are considered both academically and athletically prestigious, further understanding the perceptions of athletes within these

environments is important given that much of the literature highlights the struggles of many athletes to find academic success (Gurney et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2018).

Tutor coordinator emails for the three schools were gathered from online athletics staff directories and coordinators received an email asking if their department would participate in this study. Two athletics tutor coordinators provided the email addresses for their tutors directly to the researchers, while the third opted to send the survey themselves to further maintain the privacy of the tutors in their support program. While only three athletic programs participated, the response rate for tutors was high: Of the 140 potential respondents, 67 participated, generating a 48% response rate. Demographic data revealed that most athletic tutors who participated identified as white women with less than three years of working with college athletes ( $n = 26, 39\%$ ), which limited our ability to compare groups based on race and/or gender. Additionally, the tutors were almost evenly split with those who were current undergraduate peer tutors at one of the three institutions ( $n = 33, 49\%$ ) and those who had completed undergraduate coursework either at one of the institutions or elsewhere ( $n = 34, 51\%$ ).

Tutors were split into the aforementioned two groups as some academic support programs require tutors for athletes to be graduate(d), while others do not. The thought process behind this delineation is often that graduate(d) tutors, compared to undergraduate peer tutors, are potentially better qualified in the subject matter, more mature, and able to distance themselves from the athletes because they are older (Banbel & Chen, 2014; Smith & Willingham, 2019). Thus, understanding if there is potential to further differentiate these two sets of tutors based on perceptions of athletes could offer valuable information for athletic departments and their academic support programs.

More demographic data is in Table 1.

Finally this sample of tutors worked with athletes across a host of NCAA sponsored sports and most respondents tutored athletes from multiple teams. Tutors worked with athletes from the following teams the most: football ( $n = 39, 58\%$ ), baseball ( $n = 22, 33\%$ ), men's basketball ( $n = 20, 30\%$ ), and men's cross country and track and field ( $n = 20, 30\%$ ). Tutors working more with athletes on men's teams than women's teams aligns with previous research noting athletes on women's teams may need less academic support due to stronger student identity salience (Lu et al., 2018). Additionally, the aforementioned men's teams tend to have athletes from historically disadvantaged communities in which educational resources are less available; thus, they may need enhanced academic support in college (Coakley, 2021; Gurney et al., 2017).

## **Instrument**

Sedlacek and Brooks (1967) created an original 10-item Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) to examine racial attitudes of whites toward African Americans. Later, Engstrom and colleagues (1995) modified this 10-item Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) to examine faculty prejudices toward athletes which was also later adjusted by Comeaux (2011). Given previous scholars' work in modifying the SAS, we did not

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information*

Gender Identification	<i>n</i>	%
Female	47	70
Male	19	28
Prefer not to answer	1	2
Racial Identification		
White	41	61
Mixed Race	9	13.5
Black/African American	7	10.5
Asian	5	7.5
Hispanic/Latinx	5	7.5
Years of Experience		
0-1 years	44	65.5
2-3 years	16	24
4-5 years	5	7.5
6+ years	2	3

request permission to adjust the scale given its adaptability in previous studies. For the purpose of this study, the SAS for athletes was adapted to reflect tutor perceptions of athletes using a 10-item instrument. The situations offered hypothetical scenarios between a tutor and athlete (see Figure 1), and responses to these situations served as tutors' perception indicators. The new instrument employed six of Engstrom et al.'s (1995) original situations (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) and one situation from a modified SAS from Comeaux's (2011b) more recent research on faculty attitudes toward athletes (situation 9). The remaining three situations were created by the researchers to more specifically address tutors' perceptions of athletes (7, 8, and 10).

The 10 situations were followed by 10 semantic differential scales that measured the participants' perceptions of the athlete in that particular scenario. The word pairings on the semantic scales were the same pairings as those previously created by Engstrom et al. (1995) and used by Comeaux (2011b). Consistent with prior usage of the modified SAS for athletes, the differential scales will produce scores between 10 and 50, with 10 being the most negative and 50 the most positive.

Successful implementation of the SAS in previous studies indicates this is a reliable measure to examine perceptions of athletes (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom et al., 1995). Reliability analysis was conducted on each situation separately, using the 10 semantic scales used to respond to each question. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) ranged from .73 to .95. The final questions contained demographic items, such as race, gender identification, and

years tutoring athletes. Demographic questions were placed last to limit priming participants prior to answering the situational or experiential questions. These survey items, in conjunction with the SAS scenarios, offer a unique avenue to examine if tutors may hold stereotypical views of athletes.

**Figure 1**

1	The university announces the creation of an expanded advising and tutoring program for athletes.
2	An athlete you tutor was admitted with College Board scores significantly lower than those of the general student population.
3	An athlete you tutor is featured in the school newspaper for an out-of-class achievement.
4	An athlete you tutor received a 2.2 GPA last semester.
5	An athlete you tutor decides to pursue their major at a slower pace.
6	An athlete you tutor is caught cheating.
7	An athlete receives an A in a class you are tutoring them in.
8	An athlete fails a course in which you are tutoring them in.
9	An athlete you tutor receives a full scholarship to attend this university.
10	An athlete you tutor is a member of a national championship team.

### Data Analyses

From a sample of tutors for athletes from three athletic academic support programs, inferences about tutors' perceptions of athletes can be made. Correlational analysis and independent t-tests were used to understand group differences based on tutor graduation status (peer/student tutors or graduate(d) tutors). Correlations were computed between the favorability scores for the 10 situations both for the overall sample and the groups individually. Correlation coefficients were tested using a Fisher's Z test to determine if there were significant group differences, which deviates from previous research done with similar data (Comeaux, 2011b). T-tests demonstrated differences (or lack thereof) between the groups regarding their perceptions of each situation. These analyses assist in answering RQ1 and RQ2. Such statistical analyses are appropriate as these tests were performed by researchers who conducted previous studies exploring faculty perceptions of athletes using similar SAS (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Engstrom et al., 1995).

## Results

### Correlations

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and the correlations of the favorability scores. The diagonal provides reliability coefficients for each situation, for both the peer and graduate(d) tutor groups. The lower triangle of the table and horizontal list of means and standard deviations represent the results for the peer tutor group. The upper triangle of the table and vertical list of means and standard

**Table 2**  
*Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Situation 1	4.15	0.6	(.92, .94)	0.08	.46*	-0.31	-0.24	0.08	0.33	-0.14	0.34	0.14
Situation 2	2.94	0.45	.40*	(.83, .88)	0.27	0.33	0.03	-0.06	0.12	0.08	.38*	0.09
Situation 3	4.31	0.49	.43*	0.34	(.85, .88)	-0.04	0.35	-0.34	.65***	0.05	.60***	.60***
Situation 4	2.56	0.47	0.25	.46***	0.18	(.77, .82)	0.25	0.27	0.01	.52**	.40*	0.01
Situation 5	3.7	0.62	0.35	-0.01	0.21	0.18	(.88, .90)	-0.39	0.28	.42*	0.11	0.23
Situation 6	1.92	0.45	0.14	0.12	0.04	.47***	0.10	(.78, .83)	-0.32	0.27	-0.08	-0.31
Situation 7	4.58	0.41	0.33	0.12	.56***	0.08	0.22	-0.21	(.84, .81)	-0.03	.50***	.44*
Situation 8	2.68	0.34	.40*	0.26	0.30	.63***	0.22	.46*	0.22	(.76, .81)	0.08	-0.09
Situation 9	4.14	0.72	.66***	.61***	.56**	0.27	0.30	-0.09	.54**	0.23	(.94, .95)	0.43
Situation 10	3.93	0.41	0.30	0.22	.56**	0.04	0.30	-.45*	.52**	-0.05	.54**	(.91, .91)
<i>M</i>			4.22	3.1	4.4	2.53	3.6	1.91	4.65	2.89	4.14	4.08
<i>SD</i>			0.66	0.68	0.46	0.44	0.6	0.4	0.34	0.56	0.75	0.25

deviations represent the results for the graduate(d) tutor group.

There were various significant correlations for both the peer and graduate(d) tutors. For peer tutors, there were moderate positive correlations between situation one and situations two,  $r(29) = .40, p < .05$ , situation three,  $r(29) = .43, p < .05$ , and situation eight,  $r = .40, p < .05$ . There was a stronger positive correlation between situation one and situation nine,  $r = .66, p < .001$ . Situation two was moderately positively correlated to situation four,  $r(29) = .46, p < .01$ , though more strongly correlated to situation nine,  $r(29) = .61, p < .001$ . Situation three was moderately, positively correlated to situations seven, nine, and 10, all  $r(29) = .56, p < .01$ . Situation four was moderately correlated with situation six,  $r(29) = .47, p < .01$ , while more strongly related to situation eight,  $r(29) = .63, p < .001$ . Situation six is moderately, positively related to eight,  $r(29) = .46, p < .05$ , but moderately, negatively related to situation 10,  $r(29) = -.45, p < .05$ . Situation seven is positively related to both situations nine and 10,  $r(29) = .52$  and  $.54, p < .01$ , respectively. Finally, situations nine and 10 are significantly correlated,  $r(29) = .54, p < .01$ .

The relationships between situations were not as significant in the graduate(d) group. Situation one is moderately related to situation three,  $r(29) = .46, p < .05$ . Similarly, situation two is moderately, positively correlated with situation nine,  $r(29) = .38, p < .05$ . Situation three is more strongly related to situations seven,  $r(29) = .65, p < .001$ , and situations nine and 10, both  $r(29) = .60, p < .001$ . Situation four is related to both situations eight,  $r(29) = .52, p < .01$  and nine,  $r(29) = .40, p < .05$ . Situation five is significantly correlated with situation eight,  $r(29) = .42, p < .05$ . Finally, situation seven is significantly correlated to both situations nine,  $r(29) = .50, p < .01$  and 10,  $r(29) = .44, p < .05$ . All significant correlations were positive in nature. In other words, when tutors were more favorable about one situation they were also more favorable about the other situation. This could indicate that overall, tutors felt positively toward college athletes, for both their academic and out-of-classroom achievements.

### Group Comparisons

Results of a Fisher's Z test, comparing the correlations between groups is in Table 3 below.

There were significant differences in the correlations between situations one and four,  $z = -2.15, p < .05$ , five,  $z = -2.28, p < .05$ , and eight,  $z = -2.11, p < .05$ . Additionally, there was a significant difference in the correlations between situations five and six,  $z = -1.92, p < .05$ . In these cases, the relationship for peer tutors was positive, while the relationships for the graduate(d) tutors was negative.



**Table 3***Fisher's Z Tests*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Situation 1									
Situation 2	-1.28								
Situation 3	0.14	-0.29							
Situation 4	-2.15*	-0.58	-0.83						
Situation 5	-2.28*	0.15	0.57	0.28					
Situation 6	-0.23	-0.68	-1.48	-0.87	-1.92*				
Situation 7	0	0	0.53	-0.26	0.24	-0.44			
Situation 8	-2.11*	-0.70	-0.97	-0.62	0.84	-0.82	-0.95		
Situation 9	1.64	-1.16	0.23	0.55	-0.74	0.04	-0.20	-0.58	
Situation 10	0.63	-0.50	0.23	-0.11	-0.28	0.61	-0.39	-0.15	-0.54

Table 4 displays the results of the t-tests, along with the Cohen's d, for the mean comparisons of each situation between peer and graduate(d) tutors. There were no statistically significant differences in favorability of the situations between the two groups. Even so, there were two situations that showed an interesting effect size. Both situations eight and 10 ( $d = .45$ ) showed a rather large effect, with the peer tutors having higher favorability scores for both situations.

**Table 4***Mean Comparisons*

Variable	<i>t</i>	Cohen's d
Situation 1	0.46	0.12
Situation 2	1.10	0.28
Situation 3	0.77	0.20
Situation 4	-0.28	0.07
Situation 5	0.65	0.16
Situation 6	-0.06	0.02
Situation 7	0.81	0.20
Situation 8	1.76	0.45
Situation 9	-0.03	0.01
Situation 10	1.78	0.45

## Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

Results from this study indicate that tutors, particularly graduate(d) tutors, generally held the athletes they worked with to high academic standards. These results counter previous research on stakeholders' negative perceptions of college athletes (Comeaux, 2011; Wininger & White, 2008). Thus, it appears that tutors may not be as strong of a source of stereotype threat for the athletes compared to faculty and non-athlete peers (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). As such, continued positive interactions with tutors could work to further alleviate experiences with and implications of stereotype threat. We further hypothesize two key reasons for these findings that challenge longstanding negative academic stereotypes of college athletes.

First, the fields of higher education and sport management have experienced a shift away from deficit lenses of athletes toward perspectives that center athletes' strengths (Gayles et al., 2018a; Harry, 2023). At the time of the previous scholarship noting more biased and negative perceptions of athletes from faculty and non-athletes, deficit understandings of college athletes were arguably more prevalent (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom et al., 1995; Knapp et al., 2001; Wininger & White, 2008). More recently, scholars have come forward with expanded models and understandings of college athletes, their forms of capital, and how they find success despite various obstacles (Coakley, 2021; Gayles et al., 2018b; Harry, 2023). Second, such findings of more positive perceptions and standards toward athletes may be the result of the organizational culture from which this sample of tutors were drawn, as the three schools are seen as academically prestigious and rigorous. Thus, tutors may have felt athletes should also live up to those heightened educational and cultural expectations. Indeed, such feelings may have contributed to less stereotypes placed on athletes by this sample of tutors, furthering the notion that these tutors may not be a strong source of stereotype threat.

The tutors surveyed, in the context of Situation 1—expanding the tutoring program—were particularly averse to athletes underperforming. In other words, if athletes are receiving additional support from an expanded tutoring program, the tutors held more negative perceptions of athletes in hypothetical situations like having a 2.2 GPA, pursuing a major at a slower pace, being caught cheating, and failing a course. However, with the expansion of the tutoring program, tutors displayed more positive attitudes toward athletes when they were featured in the school newspaper, received an A in a course, and won a national championship. These are rational responses as tutors likely want to see that their tutoring supports athletes, rather than athletes not taking advantage of the support and/or underachieving in academics (Kuhn & Rubin, 2022).

Additionally, the correlational tests discovered relationships between the hypothetical situations and peer and graduate(d) tutors that are also worth unpacking more. For example, peer tutors who were favorable toward admitting athletes with lower test scores and disapproving of an athlete failing a course, were more likely to support the expansion of the tutoring program. Thus, tutors may have understood academic underperformance as an indicator or need for the tutoring expansion to

better support athletes' education, rather than an undeserved privilege as previous scholarship indicated (Tucker et al., 2016). Indeed, such perceptions are part of the reason why academic support programs for athletes are required by the NCAA for Division I programs and justified by athletics departments (Harry, 2021; Rubin & Moses, 2017). However, one of the strongest situational relationships emerged between situations one and nine: The more accepting peer tutors were of an athlete's receiving of a full scholarship, the more in favor they were toward expansion of the tutoring program. The institutions that participated in this research, were academically rigorous and also costly to attend; therefore, peer tutors might believe that if college athletes are getting a full scholarship to attend the institution, they should be committed to their academics as well as their athletic endeavors.

Additionally, the favorable hypothetical situations of athlete academic or athletic success were unsurprisingly related to one another for the peer and graduate(d) tutors (three, seven, nine, and 10). For example, when a tutored athlete was featured in the school newspaper, tutors noted this as positive. In this context, they were also likely to see them receiving a scholarship to the institution as a positive, too. Similarly, when an athlete earned an A in the class they were receiving tutoring for, peer and graduate(d) tutors were in favor of athletes having a full scholarship to the school and winning a national championship. Tutors spend a lot of time with athletes, so it is rational they might feel personally successful when the athletes with whom they work reach certain achievements. While this research was not a causal exploration, the athletes this sample of tutors worked with may have felt less like targets of stereotype threat—as individuals or a social group—based on the positive and high standards of the tutors (Pennington et al., 2018).

However, peer tutors and graduate(d) tutors were strongly against athletes' entering with lower standardized test scores (situation two) while receiving a full scholarship (situation nine). This is not unlike findings from previous research noting the skepticism of faculty when it comes to special admissions of athletes (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Olson, 2019). There was also a moderately significant and negative relationship regarding peer tutors' attitudes toward athletes cheating and winning a national championship. This also appears rational as society generally prefers competitive equity in sports, and cheating, and winning as a result, counters those notions of fairness. Such negative perceptions, compared to the more positive ones described above, offer a context in which tutors could become more of a source of stereotype threat for athletes they support.

Statistical analyses demonstrated that the relationships between perceptions of the hypothetical situations were different for graduate(d) tutors than for peer tutors. This may be due to the fact that they are slightly more removed from the institution compared to the undergraduate peer tutors who are still enrolled and perhaps more immersed in athletics and athletics success of the institution. Generally, graduate(d) tutors were less favorable toward situations in which athletes had lower academic outcomes, such as receiving a 2.2 GPA and failing a course. In general, athlete peer tutors were not as averse to lower academic outcomes for athletes as graduate(d) tutors, but still held moderately high expectations for athletes they supported. Such

findings could emerge for a host of reasons. Peer tutors may be more willing, as they are currently in school and potentially care more about their athletics' teams success, to have athletes sacrifice classroom performance for on-the-field achievements (Knapp et al., 2001; Tucker et al., 2016). Similarly, the graduate(d) tutors may not necessarily be alums from the school in which the athletes they tutor are enrolled, thus, they may be more focused on athletes' academic rather than athletic goals.

Still, peer tutors held athletes to moderately strong expectations for success as a result of an expanded tutoring program, which likely decreased the stereotype threat of peer tutors toward athletes. This challenges some of the findings from previous scholarship noting that non-athlete peers perceive athletes to be "dumb jocks" and unmotivated academically (Knapp et al., 2001; Tucker et al., 2016; Wininger & White, 2015). One reason for this could be that as peer tutors engage with athletes in various settings across campus and in the more personal space of tutoring, they may be more lenient or understanding of the struggles of athletes as they balance their student, athlete, and social roles (Harry, 2023; Lu et al., 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Indeed, Kuhn and Rubin (2022) contended the more access and familiarity faculty have with athletes, the less likely they are to maintain negative perceptions and lower standards for this population. It is likely that similar findings emerged here as peer tutors had more accessibility and familiarity with the athletes they worked with. Graduate(d) tutors would likely not have these experiences with athletes across campus, and so, may be less understanding or knowledgeable about the pressures on athletes' balancing acts between sport and education.

Regardless, it behooves athletics departments that have the resources to recruit and hire tutors who are graduate(d) or are not athletes' current peers. This separation in age, experience, and involvement in sports teams between graduate(d) tutors and athletes may provide part of the context for higher academic standards for athletes. Indeed, previous research demonstrated that high expectations of athletes from faculty often results in more academic success for students and athletes (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). Thus, it is likely that similarly high expectations from others, like tutors, will foster academic achievement and academic identity as well (Smith & Martiny, 2018). High standards may lead to upholding academic integrity and ethics as well (Smith & Willingham, 2019).

For institutions who do not have the resources for only graduate(d) tutors, educating peer tutors on ethics, accountability, and departmental and NCAA policies is especially critical to prevent lax standards and expectations for the athlete-tutor relationship and academic outcomes (Cooper, 2010). This is particularly important as stereotype threat research notes high standards and positive perceptions better supports short and long-term development and achievement (Smith & Martiny, 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Still, it appears that a significant benefit of having peer tutors, at least for this sample from these three institutions, is a breakdown in negative perceptions and stereotypes toward athletes.

Overall, administrators working in academic support areas for athletes should continue to promote tutors' strengths-based and positive attitudes toward athletes. In promoting such perceptions, providing training on the influence of stereotype threat

on athletes and ways tutors can challenge this force, may be beneficial. Positive and more nuanced perspectives—such as those that can emerge from such trainings—may help establish a culture that works against negative stereotypes of athletes and decreases the potential for them to encounter stereotype threat and succumb to the “dumb jock” narrative (Harry, 2023; Stone et al., 2012). Additionally, tutors’ positive lenses may further encourage the development of athletes’ student identities and roles, even as they engage in difficult academic material. Indeed, when athletes encounter negative feedback, such as degrading comments from a faculty member or a tutor, they are more likely to feel they are the target of stereotype threat (Pennington et al., 2018). In this way, athletes will shy away from the student role and are in danger of student role foreclosure (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Dee, 2014; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). However, when they receive realistic and positive feedback, they are more likely to engage with difficult material and aspire for understanding and success (Harry, 2023; Lu et al., 2018). Thus, it is likely that when athletes do not see tutors as a source of stereotype threat, as was indicated in this study, they likely also do not feel targeted for stereotype threat and can achieve greater academic success.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations associated with this research. This smaller sample only included tutors from three athletic departments in the Power Five conferences. Thus, generalizations about the entire population of tutors for athletes including those from other departments in the Power Five, Football Championship Subdivision, institutions without football, and Divisions II or III should be kept to a minimum. Similarly, this sample was likely smaller due to the history of tensions between academics and athletics at Division I schools. For example, practitioners in athletics are cautious because of previous athletic-academic scandals; thus, they may be skeptical of participation in research. Indeed, even the administrators we communicated with were somewhat reticent to participate and expressed a desire to full anonymity and protection for their tutors. A final limitation is that this was not a causal study. While previous literature shows that negative stereotypes adversely influence athletes’ and non-athletes’ outcomes (Steele, 1997), the results of this study do not suggest that tutor perceptions affect athlete academic outcomes. Future research should explore this connection in more depth.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of the aforementioned limitations, this study expanded upon previous scholarship concerning perceptions and stereotypes of Division I college athletes by exploring tutors’ attitudes toward this student group (Comeaux, 2011a, 2011b; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom et al., 1995; Wininger & White, 2015). Results from the SAS survey indicated graduate(d) and undergraduate tutors held generally positive perceptions of the athletes they worked with, regardless of the academic, athletic, or social context. Still, compared to the undergraduate tutors, graduate(d) tutors in this sample demonstrated higher academic standards of athletes. Our analyses also demonstrated that the more positive perceptions tutors held in one situation,

the more likely they were to hold a positive perception in another SAS scenario. The results of this study are significant as they challenge much of the previous research noting negative attitudes toward college athletes from other interactive groups (i.e., faculty and non-athlete peers). Practitioners in academic support for athletes can use these findings when organizing their tutoring programs and educating tutors on how to not “threaten” athletes they work with. Rather, tutors can be seen as a source of empowerment as they assist athletes in taking on their academic duties. Finally, these findings are significant as they hopefully demonstrate higher education’s shift away from the “dumb jock” stereotype and toward a more uplifting and strengths-based understanding of athletes and their academic potential.

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