



Touchdown! A Student-Athlete and Mentor Develop a Playbook for Undergraduate Research

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This is the story of a faculty member teaching a course on empirical research methods in English Studies to a class that included a student-athlete who played on an NCAA Division I football team. It is an improbable partnership and collaboration, all around, including the authorship of this article. Unlike the other students in the class, Cameron was not an English major. How would he tackle a research topic in this field? The narrative begins in mutual wariness and ends with a celebration of the transformative power of undergraduate research.

The Context

Saucier and Marten (2015) believe that independently designed and conducted research by students may be embedded in courses as early as year one of a student's undergraduate education. They point out that Kuh (2008) and Hunter, Laursen and Seymour (2007) have shown "undergraduate research is an engaging educational practice that highlights the intrinsic interest of course subject matter and builds students' academic self-efficacy" (p. 1). They highlight a learning communities model at Kansas State University that stresses simplifying, guiding, progressing, and collaborating are especially important for students underrepresented in research-based careers. Likewise, Downs and Wardle (2007) have suggested that first-year composition courses are an appropriate place to introduce students to the methodology of writing studies, a paradigm shift in the way these ubiquitous courses are taught at the over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States. ¹ The field of Writing Studies, in fact, has been influencing discipline-specific practices of entire departments of English Studies, including research methods, according to DelliCarpini (2007).

English Studies relies primarily on humanistic approaches to scholarly and research activity with some social scientific approaches in subfields. As a result, students have little exposure to empirical research that draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods. A course designed in 2016 for English majors at Utah State University set about changing that. English 3470, Approaches to Research in English Studies, meets a Quantitative Intensive (QI) graduation requirement. QI courses build on foundational quantitative literacy courses in the same way that Communications Intensive (CI) courses build on communication literacy courses (e.g., first-year composition). These are termed "Depth Education" that extends and deepens the General Education curriculum. Students are expected to demonstrate ability to use

¹ Writing Centers historically provided sites for undergraduate research as tutors engaged in investigations of practice; however, even these projects face the challenge of time invested although notable benefits accrue to tutoring itself (Ervin, 2016).

1. Mathematical models such as formulas, graphs, tables and schematics and be able to draw inferences from them.
2. Quantitative information symbolically, visually numerically and/or verbally.
3. Arithmetical, and/or algebraic and/or geometric, and/or statistical methods to solve problems.
4. Estimates to check answers to quantitative problems in order to determine reasonableness, identify alternatives, and select optimal results.

Additionally,

5. QI courses should address the limits of mathematical and statistical methods.

The rationale for QI classes is that understanding the application of numbers to the discipline is important, just as being able to write and speak in a particular discourse community is essential, hence the prevalence of writing-across-the-curriculum/writing-in-the-disciplines initiatives. The Department of English at our institution was one of the few units on campus without a QI-designated course. This was true for the first 20 years of a revamped general education program that launched in 1998. In general, faculty in the department did not see quantitative reasoning as applicable to humanistic inquiry, nor did they have the expertise to teach a quantitative-infused course. On the other hand, some subfields of English, such as Writing Studies, draw on social scientific traditions and methods. This is where a research methods course with a focus on text comes in.

In 2015, Kinkead, after learning that English majors ² were completing the graduation requirement with courses such as Astronomy, Political Science Surveys, and Health Education Planning and Evaluation, proposed a research methods course using both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to fill the QI-course gap in the department. As Hudson notes in “Numbers and Words: Quantitative Methods for Scholars of Text” (2005), “antipathy to quantification” (p. 134) exists in literary research. She argues that the field is “impoverished” from this aversion as literary analysis could be enhanced by being more open to the similarities and power between words and numbers. The approved course was first offered in 2016 in conjunction with the publication of *Researching Writing: An Introduction to Research Methods* (Kinkead, 2016). Anxiety about conducting empirical research with quantitative tools is palpable among the English majors enrolled in the class. The literature in undergraduate research and humanities often notes these anxieties (Fitzgerald & Midiri, 2013; Perdue et al., 2014).

By the conclusion of the semester, each student will have completed an IRB-approved empirical research study, written a report, delivered a lightning talk, and presented a research poster. To prepare students for this individual project, a whole-class research project launches at the start of the semester. Topics have included a study of the Blue Book used for essay examinations (Duersch et al., 2018), a history of writing instruction at the Utah State beginning in 1890, an assessment of communication-across-the-curriculum courses (Kinkead, 2018), and English majors’ attitudes toward conducting empirical research. The steps in the research process are introduced and practiced via the whole-class project and then enacted in the individual endeavors. ³ Students participate meaningfully and authentically in the most critical parts of the research process: identifying a research question, conducting a literature review, designing and following through on data collection and analysis, developing the results into a report, and disseminating the findings. This essay focuses on the research project of one of the students — Cameron Haney, a student-athlete — during Fall, 2019.

² Their emphasis areas include Creative Writing, Technical Communication, Literature, American Studies, and English Education.

³ The course is described in Kinkead (2019).

Positionality

The positions that we inhabit as a result of our gender, race, class, religion, and socio-economic status influence our relationships, and this may be especially important in mentor/mentee interactions. The designated topic for the whole-class project during this semester was an analysis of 18 autoethnographies of English majors, which detailed their individual histories as writers. In short, we wanted to examine their lives as writers. We were investigating the subculture of college students in this particular field of study. As it happened, this approach provided an entrée to research for Cameron, too, but in the subculture of the student-athlete.

Mentor

Kinkead is a senior faculty member in the Department of English and a published author in Writing Studies and Undergraduate Research. For over two decades, she served in college and central administration roles in undergraduate education. These leadership roles gave her a global view of the institution, including athletics. As Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies & Research (2000-2006), she oversaw recruitment and retention, advising, registration, financial aid, general education, and undergraduate research. Challenges in athletics such as admissions standards were sometimes on the table; on the other hand, she worked closely with the athletic-academic staff to learn how their retention programs were designed. Tasked with improving the institution's student profile, she managed initiatives to enhance standard data points such as GPA and ACT as well as improve retention and time-to-graduation rates. For a humanist who had never used a spreadsheet, data became her daily life. She even attended an NCAA Rules Seminar to understand important compliance issues.

As the director of undergraduate research for eleven years, she oversaw student engagement in meaningful inquiry. Her advocacy for undergraduate research as transformative — no matter the discipline — resulted in publications in this high-impact practice generally and also specifically in English Studies. (See Kinkead in References, such as Kinkead, 2020; Kinkead & Blockus, 2012; Kinkead & Grobman, 2011.) She was influenced tremendously by the Boyer Report (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998), which recommended that mentored undergraduate research should be standard pedagogical practice, and wrote in 2003 that faculty members should provide careful guidance into the “inquiry methods of the discipline” (p. 6). Additionally, she has served on the Institutional Review Board (IRB). She is also a first-generation college student from a farm in the Midwest.

Mentee

Haney was recruited from Cathedral High School in Los Angeles to the Aggies Football Team in 2015 and redshirted during his first season. As a high school player, he earned California Interscholastic Federation first-team, all-state, and first-team All-Angelus League honors. At 5'10" and 185 pounds, he played cornerback, a defensive position crucial for covering receivers but also tackling. By his senior year at the university in 2019, he started in all the games that he played in and led the team with 11 pass breakups and 12 passes defended as well as 37 tackles, which included sacks. He graduated in 2020, having concluded his research study in English 3470 and presented it at the university's Fall Research Symposium. He was certified in human subjects research prior to enrolling in this research methods course.

In introducing the players in this narrative, we have deliberately used third-person, something like a scouting report in order to be objective. As we relate the details of what happened in this mentored undergraduate research experience, we turn to first person, labeling ourselves mentor and mentee. In doing so, we acknowledge that in course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs)⁴,

⁴ See Hensel (2018).

the more typical labels are professor and student, and perhaps we should re-think how we term ourselves in this particular context of the classroom when initiating novice researchers into disciplinary inquiry, being more transparent about our roles.

The Kickoff

Mentor

The Research Methods course begins with the intentional establishing of a community of researchers through introductions. Of the 20 students enrolled in the Fall 2019 class, almost all of them were majoring in some field of English. The exception was Cameron, who was in his final semester of an interdisciplinary degree with emphases in Communication and Sociology. With experience in a variety of empirically based projects from previous semesters, I wondered what his project might focus on. Student-athletes had been enrolled in other classes I'd taught, but in the main, these were women in field and track; I'd found them very disciplined and organized with a deliberate goal-oriented approach. One was conducting undergraduate research on cougar behavior and would, in fact, win our outstanding undergraduate researcher award, but I had never mentored a student-athlete in research previously. Frankly, I didn't have a playbook for functioning as a mentor to a student-athlete. I am aware of mentoring programs for student-athletes as a common practice, but these are a "means to address sociocultural issues . . . to enhance their holistic development and even to consider the role of race and racism" (Blymper, 2015, p. 175). I fretted not only about the topic yet to be chosen but also about the weight of responsibility of a faculty member charged with evaluating an important member of a winning football team. I don't mean to suggest that there is pressure on faculty from athletics, but I am sufficiently savvy to understand the ramifications of a student-athlete's success or failure. I knew that athletic academic advisors would be keeping tabs on Cameron's progress. I also understood as Harrison et al. (2006) suggest that I serve as the "intellectual coach" (p. 277) for a student-athlete.

The first assignment during week one is for students to track all of their own writing for several days, and I mean *everything*: browser searches, notes, texts, lists, and sticky-note reminders. The group comes up with a list and then discusses how items can be quantified so that we come to understand types of measurements: volume, length, and time. It is an initial foray into quantification. At the end of the week, each person has an Excel spreadsheet of data. These documents are discussed and then transformed into a graph or chart, which seems almost magical to English majors. In addition to individual charts, we compile the evidence from all class members to derive a class profile on writing. This is an infographic that is discussed in terms of its format and interpretation, which also begins to delve into one of the QI objectives: how statistics can be interpreted or misinterpreted.

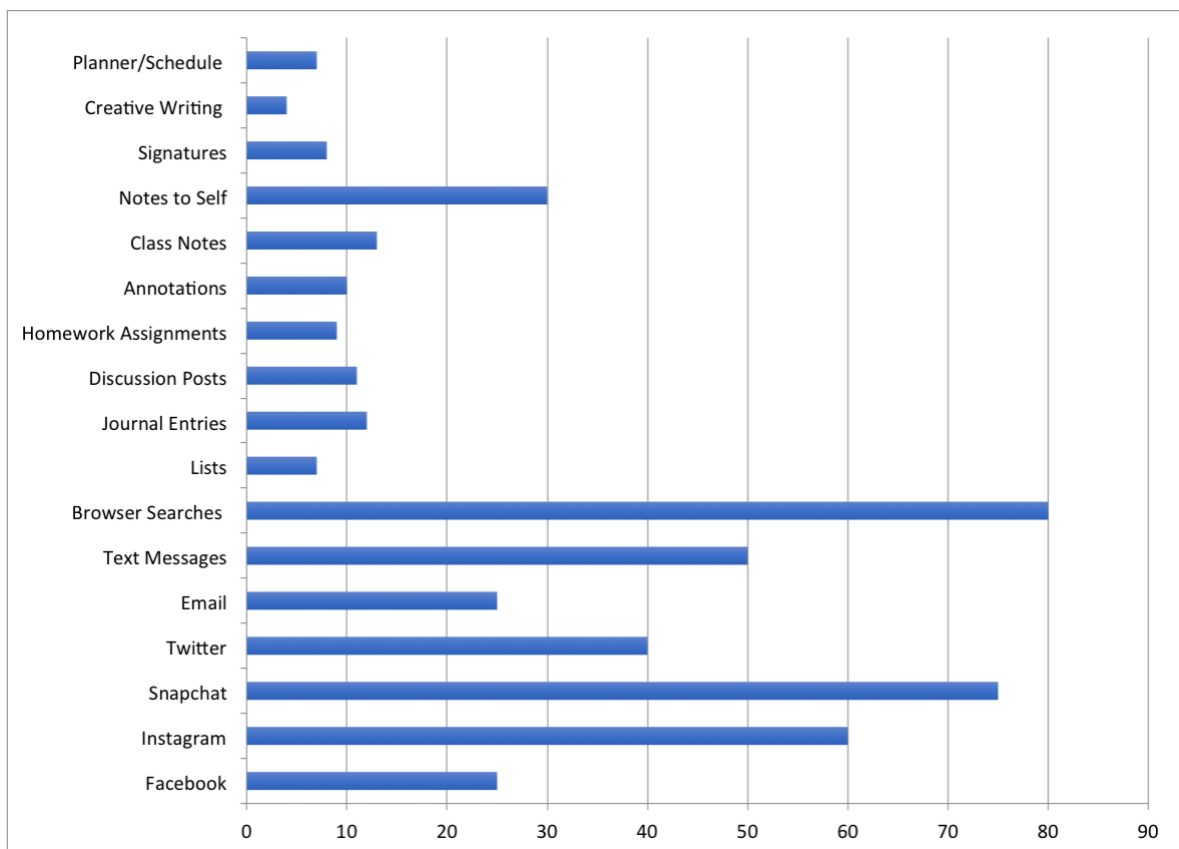
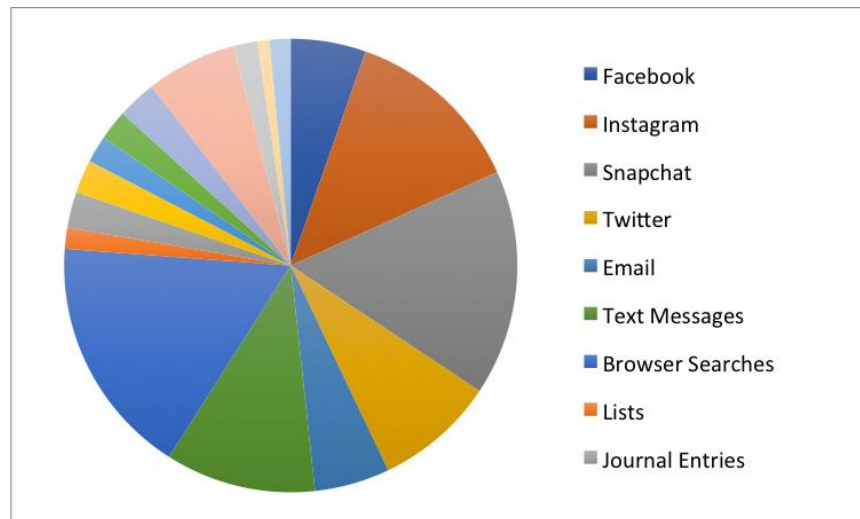
Mentee

I won't lie to you. Although I have always had a knack for English and loved writing and reading, I enrolled in this class on the recommendation of my academic advisor. I just dove in off the cliff, not really sure what I was getting into with a course title of research and English. I've been on campus for four years, and I came with the realization that I'd probably be the only African American male in the class. The first two weeks were tough. I had mixed feelings and wondered if I should stay in the class. After all, everyone else was an English major. I had my doubts, but gradually, I started to understand the class more, and I could see there was a common nervousness about research. From the very first assignment, it was clear that we were all in the same boat.

Keeping track of my writing seemed fairly easy, and we compared our results in class in small groups and talked about what they meant. Some people were off the charts in terms of the number of text messages. Others wrote creatively. For me, I focus more on Instagram and Snapchat as I'm aware of being a public figure as a football player.

Our overall goal was to find commonalities and differences among English majors. I felt good energy. Joyce was very interactive and reassuring as a teacher, and my experience previously in the two required composition classes was the same with really friendly and caring teachers. Here are two versions of my weekly writing tally, one as a pie chart, and the other as a bar chart (Figure 1). We talked about how easy or hard it was to interpret data from these. These in-class discussions were important to understanding how to present results.

Figure 1. Charts of a week's writing log



Finding a Research Question

Mentee

As we were working on the whole-class research project, we were also asked to come up with three possible topics for our own research. I submitted these on Canvas, our course management system:

1. How much does religion affect college campuses and education?
2. What do college students think about educational features on social media?
3. Do college parties affect students' abilities to learn in classes?

Dr. Kinkead made a comment, "Our challenge for broad research questions like this will be: Are they doable? Are they measurable? Have they already been covered in the research literature? I'm curious what 'educational features' are on social media. I look forward to your enlightening me." When I wrote my introduction the week earlier, she had started quizzing me about writing and athletics: "I'm really curious if there is an aspect of writing and athletics that you might work on for your research project?" At the time, I didn't see how that would work.

Mentor

Orr (2013) says that one of the real challenges in undergraduate research is finding the right project coupled with the right student. Our search for a research question had some false starts and fumbles. I was sufficiently frustrated in coaching Cameron that I talked about possible research topics with my husband, also an academic, at home. It's a matter of course that I share research topics of my students with him as thinking aloud about them is helpful to me, and he often has good ideas; moreover, their subjects are often really, really interesting. They come up with topics that I'd not think about: Why is there a rise in calligraphy on wedding invitations? How is literature used in social media memes? Are English majors perceived as grammar sheriffs? As I talked about feeling at a loss with Cameron, my husband said, "Well, it's a problem, isn't it, because football players don't write." I immediately said, "Are we sure about that?"

Because the students in the class share their ideas publicly for feedback, I felt comfortable in asking Cameron straight out during our next meeting, "Do members of the football team write?" He perked up immediately and said, "Are you kidding me? We write all the time. Want to see?" He began pulling from his backpack multiple notebooks, which I came to find out are standard for football: plays, opposing team players' identification and stats, and film notes. I must have been beaming. We had discovered the elusive research question. The response for the revised research question that Cameron posted looked like this:

Question: What are the writing styles of a student athlete in football and other sports?
Time period: football season (4 months)
Setting: football, athletics department
Number of participants: about 5?
Method: ethnography and content analysis
Tools: surveys, interviews

My role as mentor was to help refine ideas to a doable project over the rest of the semester. Through our individualized conferences, I was becoming smarter about what this project might involve. I suggested rephrasing to be more specific: What role does writing play in the life/work/education of an NCAA Division I College Athlete? How is writing used as a tool by coaches to improve athletic performance? The question would continue to evolve as the two of us worked through a proposal and methods.

Writing the Research Proposal and Review of Literature

Mentor

Completing a research project in a 15-week semester is a tall order. Some people in the field of Writing Studies have said that “there is simply not enough time in one academic term to complete the research cycle” (Cope et al., 2020, p. 54). My experience with nearly 100 students over several semesters says otherwise. In order for students to be successful, scaffolding of the project includes overviewing research processes through the whole-class project plus a set of templates that students can employ. A format for the research proposal includes the following sections:

- Project Title
- Research Question
- What is the purpose and significance of this research?
- Review of Literature
- Project Details and Methods
 - Who are the participants? How many? What are their ages? Gender? How will participants be identified and invited to the study?
 - Enumerate the steps in the research process: What will participants do? How will they be invited? How will their consent be obtained?

The research proposal answers questions needed for IRB approval and also determines if the project is doable and if it will fill a gap in the scholarly literature. Institutional resources from the IRB include templates for informed consent and letters of information, with the former used for interviews and the latter for surveys.

Mentee

Although I had been certified in human subjects research through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) for another class, I hadn't really done a research project before, so having the framework for the proposal was very helpful. The review of literature was hard. Not much has been written on writing and the athlete. When I searched for “does writing improve athletic performance,” I mainly got nutritional and exercise advice, but I knew from what coaches said that they felt writing [was] important to our playing. I found a couple of sources, one article on “A comparison of athletes and non-athletes at highly selective colleges” (Aries et al., 2004). A better source was [WritingAthletes.com](http://www.writingathletes.com/), a website created by Rich Kent (<http://www.writingathletes.com/>), a coach at the University of Maine. He authored *Writing on the Bus* (Kent, 2011), which includes activities for coaches to use with athletes to think about goals and reflect. Dr. Kinkead provided me with the best source: Rifenburg's *The Embodied Playbook* (2018), as it had a case study of a basketball team but also included descriptions of football. Rifenburg (2018) understands that football athletes must learn hundreds of plays. He used the term “textual artifacts” (p. 26) for plays and reports. I could see that my study could add information to the existing scholarly research.⁵

Our class visited Special Collections and Archives in the University Library, and the librarian had picked out items that might apply to our projects. She had chosen for me the David Lane Wright's papers (1929-1967). David Lane Wright was a student who played football at Utah State University and majored in English. There wasn't a lot that pertained to my project, but it was interesting to see a football player who wrote so much.

It was almost overwhelming to get everything written for the research proposal. We had to draft our questions for interviews and surveys and have the recruitment script ready for each. We also had to

⁵ Rifenburg (2020) was published after our class but is another excellent entry into literacy practices of student athletes.

draft the letters explaining our project and obtaining permission from the participants. We practiced these on our whole class project, and then we did them individually. Each piece had a sample or a fill-in-the-blank form, which made it easier. At the start, it looked impossible.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

Mentee

I wrote questions for interviews with a coach. Then I did questions for players using Qualtrics survey. We had peer review in class to test the questions and revise. We did a dry run in class interviewing a participant for our whole class project, and it was set up in detail. Another student in the class, Talia, was the one who welcomed the guest. Another student explained the research, and another one did the informed consent form. Each question was asked by a different student. Dr. Kinkead just sat on the sidelines and didn't say anything. This activity was typical of the class. We went through all the steps toward an end goal, and it got easier.

Before I interviewed the coach, Dr. Kinkead had me visit her office, and we did a mock interview. She was funny, leaning back in her chair and trying to puff up to look more like a coach. We talked about how to revise the questions, and I put them in a different order and added some. That was helpful before I did the real interview.

I wasn't so keen on writing the research proposal, but I really liked talking to the subjects. In working on an autoethnography, I had done an analysis of my own writing. That analysis helped me anticipate responses from the other players as we have similar profiles. They have a passion for the game, and their writing demonstrates that. It helped that these are people I care about, a feeling that was mutual, and they invested in the process and offered informative responses. As a matter of fact, there were more players who wanted to join in, but I already had the number of subjects that I needed and had specified in the IRB proposal — eight — so I had to turn others away. The Qualtrics report of responses provided graphs of the responses.

Interviewing my coach, I didn't really know what he'd say as it's different to ask a coach a question rather than teammates. He was open about what it takes to be a successful university player. He even talked about how some players can get lost between the freedom and time commitment, kind of a double-edged sword. There is the training, which takes up a good part of the day, but then there is a lot of coaching sessions with writing and homework — both academic and athletic. I got a lot of good quotes from the coach that were helpful to me on the research project and for my future in case I look at coaching as a career.

Writing and Disseminating the Report

Mentor

Throughout the course, I use acronyms to make difficult concepts simpler and memorable. One of the favorites comes from Haswell's (2005) definition of research as RAD: replicable, aggregable, and data-supported. We actually do group recitation on a weekly basis to cement these concepts, essential to empirical and quantitative research: "What does R stand for?" and they offer in unison "replicable," and so forth. Again, RAD research is atypical for students schooled in humanistic inquiry. Likewise, the research report is framed differently than the typical scholarly paper and includes levels of headings, an atypical format for English major. The organization of the final report draws on an IMRaD format: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. The actual organization is more complex with abstract, limitations, implications, future research, and appendices, but IMRaD is a good start for thinking about presenting the research and its results. The mnemonic devices are useful, particularly to students in the humanities for whom this approach to research is out of the ordinary. The QI requirement also means that reports include charts and graphs to illustrate data collected.

A goal of the class is authentic dissemination. Shanahan et al. (2015) found that one of the salient factors in mentoring undergraduates is to “Encourage students to share their findings and provide guidance on how to do so effectively in oral and poster presentations and in writing.” Students present their individual research projects as oral presentations (using slides), what we call “lightning talks,” and posters in class, and as a result, they come to see how a report, an oral presentation, and a poster provide different media with varying conventions. The three inform one another, and often a student will tell me that the report was revised after the poster was developed as the longer product could be improved. These are the dry runs for a more public presentation, which occurs at the end of the semester, a university-wide research symposium. Abstracts must be submitted some time prior to the actual conclusion of the project, so it is pushing to get those done, and some students are frankly just too nervous to put their projects forward. A few do, including Cameron. All class members do share in the public presentation of our whole-class project at this university-wide showcase of student research.

It’s also my responsibility as mentor to draw back the curtain on dissemination opportunities and support beyond our class. One assignment late in the term asks them to investigate through our centralized undergraduate research office local, state, and national venues for presentations and publications, as well as financial support for travel or grants to conduct research. As a result, some students present their projects at our State Capitol event in January, our state undergraduate research conference, the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research (UCUR) in February, or the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) later in the spring.

Mentee

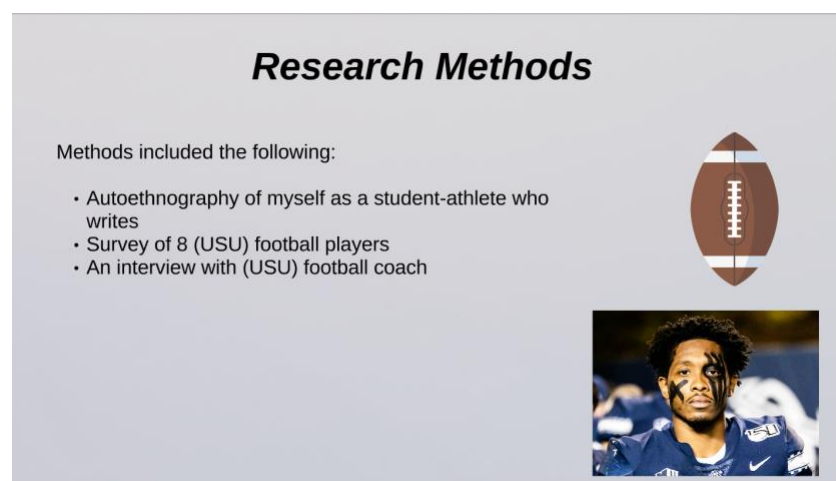
When I was recruiting my teammates to the project, I said to them that their participation would help enlighten others as we shared information on how much we write in football. They were honest in their answers. Almost all of them write on a daily basis, and 75% said that writing helps them perform better in games. Over 60% said they use writing to de-stress before a game.

The coach’s interview provided the perspective on the importance of writing to athletes: “Writing crystallizes your thinking, which is why I always assign my players writing tasks and encourage those guys to write daily.” This was Rifenburg’s (2018) point in *The Embodied Playbook*, “plays are writing that does action” (p. 64). The coach also encouraged athletes to take notes on paper rather than using technology for the hand-brain connection.

The research report was one of the longest papers I’d written in college. I developed a Prezi for my lightning talk in class (Figure 2). Slides included my research methods, survey findings, artifacts (e.g., plays and notebooks), interview takeaways, and results.

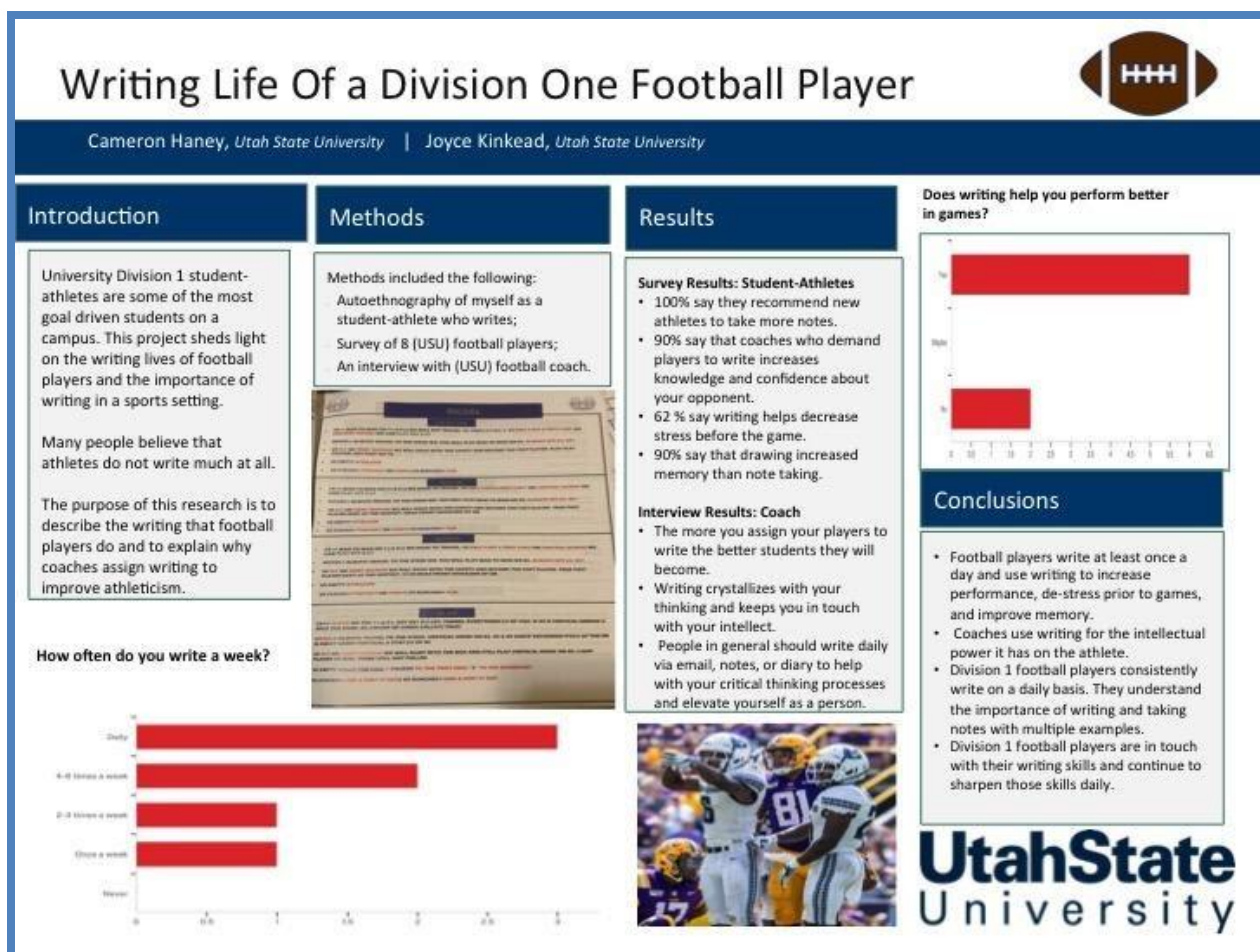
Both this presentation and a related poster required using images and graphs. The poster was presented at the university’s Fall

Figure 2. Sample page from Prezi oral presentation



Research Symposium, and I was really proud of the result and enjoyed talking to people about the project.

Figure 3. Research poster by Cameron Haney, 2019



Reflections

Mentor

My first message about working with student-athletes on undergraduate research is to park assumptions at the door. Although versed in the literature of higher education and having more experience with student-athletes perhaps than many other faculty members, I still held some preconceived ideas, including that I was largely unaware about the kinds and amount of writing student-athletes did in service of their sport. As I've already noted, I didn't have a playbook for working with student-athletes, and it's only through working with Cameron, that I even understand the term *playbook*. Through Cameron's own literacy narrative, composed at the beginning of the semester, I found out that in addition to writing specific to his sport, he had a blog as well as a foundation in Los Angeles to help youth. That really blew me away. Impressive.

I also found that individualized conferences invoking the role of coach were effective. It was through these face-to-face meetings that we developed a relationship and navigated the research process. Cameron was eager to discuss his project, more so than any other student in the class. I became a champion for Cameron. By that I mean, I believed in him and expressed that attitude through my confidence that the project was important. I want all of my students to be successful in their

research endeavors, and I admit to fretting when the process doesn't go smoothly for some, but I was aware that the accomplishment of this particular project had implications beyond the classroom. It was, quite simply, a really neat project and from a person who did not have English as a major.

My awareness of collegiate sports was heightened overall but specifically in regards to football. I paid more attention to the sports news and noticed that Cameron was often featured with articulate commentary on games. I clipped news items to share with him. For Homecoming, I went to the game, which Cameron told me meant a lot to him. My naiveté about the sport was due, in part, to the fact that my small, rural high school did not have a football team; in fact, no football existed in the county at the time. It was not until college that I attended my first football game and was mystified by first downs, off-sides, and point-afters.

I learned about the intense regimen that student-athletes undergo. Cameron described a typical day for him during training in the summer and then again during the season. During the former, seven hours of training⁶ and living a well-balanced life, including strict healthy diet were typical. During the season and academic term, he told me the coaches try to lighten the load to focus on classwork. A system of study halls for two or three hours a day is mandatory, and the players' academic advisors, mentors, and coaches meet early in the morning twice weekly to discuss every football player and his performance. I'll never qualify as the Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR) on campus, but I'm now more educated, aware, and attuned to student-athletes.

Although it may seem contradictory, given the strength and agility of student-athletes, they can be a vulnerable population, as Rifenburg (2018) points out in his study of players. Vulnerability applies to student-athletes as human subjects; however, they are vulnerable in several respects. They are susceptible to injury on the field or in training. Academic progress is also at risk, given their time commitments to the sport. Student-athletes are in the spotlight nationally in the debate on whether or not they should earn compensation for endorsements, which is not allowable now, even though they produce revenue for their academic institutions. NCAA's rules for "amateurs" may be antiquated. How do student-athletes remain students and not employees of the institution? This is a continuing discussion. So not only did I feel that I must be careful in mentoring Cameron, but the participants in his study — his teammates — also needed to be treated with sensitivity — as all human subjects should be. Given my background in attending an NCAA Rules workshop, I also wanted to be sure that our work was in compliance.⁷

In their book, *Excellence in Mentoring Undergraduate Research*, Vandermaas-Peeler, Miller, and Moore (2018) ask if undergraduate research is reaching the students it needs to be reaching. The involvement of student-athletes in research is challenged in numerous ways, depending on the sport and the research experience. Humanistic and social scientific research may provide flexibility in contrast to laboratory or field research. Likewise, course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) provide embedded opportunities to engage in meaningful ways.

Mentee

Managing time and commitment is huge for football players. In season, we have 20 hours per week physical activity, and there is also the "mental work" of watching films, taking notes, learning basic principles and key ideas — what we call "football school" that teaches the smart sides of the game. I

⁶ NCAA rules a maximum of 8 hours of training in the off-season and 20 hours in season.

⁷ One of the rules that I learned at NCAA training was that recruiters could send greeting cards to potential players; however, the card could have no moving parts. An instance shared was that an e-card could extend birthday greetings but not have a flickering candle. That level of specificity was astounding.

had to miss some classes for competition, and let me tell you, I was sorry to miss this class because I knew that I was missing something. There were games when the team lost that I thought it would have been better to go to class.

I came away from the class with increased skills. For instance, for interviews, I learned how to structure questions and how not to get off topic during the actual interviews. The attitude I brought to the interview was also important. Because I was enthusiastic and interested, the coach I interviewed was intrigued and not bored. Structuring questions is really important, whether for interviews or surveys. Developing the Qualtrics survey involves another skill of getting just the right amount of questions to keep the participants' attention.

In terms of communication skills, the oral presentation was done with Prezi, and the selection of material to cover differed from the research poster. The poster had so many parts. I had assumed that the more text on the poster, the better. But actually less is more. The design of the poster went through several versions and included choices on color schemes and how to use the power of graphs.

Another aspect that was influential to me was how important peer review was. I was nervous about what others thought of my work, but they were positive in their comments, and when they got feedback, they were humble. Everyone had changes to make, and everyone contributed. The feedback I got was great. Unlike the football field, it wasn't a competition. Everyone wanted to see others make the win.

Presenting my research poster at the university's research symposium was the highlight of my undergraduate career. Conducting research is something like being on the field. Rifenburg (2018) says that "for football, physical text is vital" (p. 94) and that athletes enact those texts through their bodies. Being in front of my poster and delivering my "elevator talk" brought my research findings and my body together. My coaches and teammates came out and supported me, but I also talked to other student researchers and explained my project to judges. People were really interested in the writing of football players. One judge asked me if I might go deeper into the learning of student-athletes.

I didn't expect this, but I'm still thinking about this research project and want to do more. I could get better. I wonder about how players use drawing as well as writing or about the different styles of note taking. The informants had so much information that I could investigate further. My research poster is on display in the academic study area of athletics, and every time I walk by it, I'm proud, but I also see ways it could be improved. This research project has taught me to believe in myself. I think I can do anything I put my mind to. I can see myself doing research in the future.

End Zone

The conclusion of any semester feels like it's game over, but it's been fascinating to see the afterlife of this project. The very next semester, another student, who coaches baseball, wanted to focus his research project on the types of writing that high school coaches use to improve athletics. From my experience with Cameron, I knew sources to recommend, and he also included Cameron's study in his review of literature. The overarching goal of research is to add to our knowledge base. There is a paucity of scholarly work on literacy practices of student-athletes, with the notable exception of Rifenburg (2018), who investigated the writing practices of student-athletes.

In addition to the contribution to the discipline are the very real gains of mentored undergraduate research for the student: increased confidence, skill, and professional knowledge. I add that there are parallel gains for the faculty mentor. Temple, Sibley, and Orr (2019) point out that mentoring has

both rewards and challenges. I did get a “fresh perspective” on an area in Writing Studies that I had not even considered: student-athletes. My own professional and personal growth was considerable as a result of working with this student-athlete. In particular, I gained a heightened understanding of college sports overall and our institutional context more specifically. Personally, I follow Cameron on Twitter and feel a stake in his future. Although Cameron has graduated, he’s approached me about graduate studies, and I’m a willing collaborator as he considers various options. Our collaboration over one undergraduate research curriculum-based project highlights an interdependent relationship of being influenced while also influencing. The value of interpersonal connection between mentor and mentee in a successful undergraduate research project cannot be underestimated.

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