

Journal of Issues in
Intercollegiate Athletics

Special Issue Editors' Note: Mental Health and College Athlete Well-Being

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The NCAA has paid increasing attention to mental health concerns in intercollegiate athletics, culminating with an inter-association consensus statement and best practices document for supporting student-athlete mental health in 2016. University campuses have seen a dramatic increase in the number of students seeking mental health services (Roy, 2018). The student-athlete population has paralleled this rise (NCAA Goals Study, 2016). However, student-athletes face unique stressors that can negatively affect their mental health and wellness and may have additional barriers to overcome in accessing mental health services (Beauchemin, 2014).

Providing mental health services to student-athletes requires a unique specialization in being able to treat common mental health concerns in the college population and understanding and being able to intervene in the dynamic environment that is intercollegiate athletics; and research suggests that student-athletes are more receptive to services provided by individuals with this specialized understanding (Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001; Greenspan & Andersen, 1995). The challenges posed to student-athletes are not more important than the challenges posed to the traditional college student, but there is certainly a difference in these challenges (Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

In addition to the normal pressures of being a college student, student-athletes are exposed to other environmental pressures and risk factors for mental health concerns (Kroshus, 2014). To name a few, student-athletes are confronted with, in no particular order: managing time demands of twenty-hour practice weeks and a full-time course load; performance pressure; social pressures from teammates; coaching demands; and pressure to perform academically to remain eligible. There is also pressure associated with social media, harassment and bullying, which has increased in the last decade (Beran, Rinaldi, Bickham, & Rich, 2012). Each of these factors is likely to contribute to an increase in stress, which may then lead to the development of mental health symptoms and disorders.

To put context around the mental health challenges facing student-athletes, Davoren and Hwang (2014) indicated that nearly 50% of student-athletes felt overwhelming anxiety in the previous 12 months. Nearly 40% of male student-athletes, and 32% of female student-athletes, indicated drinking five or more alcoholic beverages in one sitting, and 30% of these student-athletes endorsed experiencing blackouts (Hainline, Bell, & Wilfert, 2014). Nearly one in five female student-athletes meet criteria for an eating disorder (Sundot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Recent research from the Pac-12 conference and the #DamWorthIt campaign indicates that over 50% of student-athletes report stress and anxiety levels exceed a 7 out of 10; 21% of student-athletes have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder; and one in five student-athletes report seriously considering suicide. Further, over 93% of student-athletes reported they would be interested in receiving more mental health services on their campus, even though 90% of this same population felt their institutions did an "excellent" job of providing mental health resources (Pac-12 Conference, 2019).

Of course, these numbers are likely an under-representation. Fifty-one percent of student-athletes believe that there is still a stigma surrounding mental health help-seeking (Pac-12 Conference, 2019). That over half of student-athletes believe there is stigma associated with help seeking suggests that both practitioners and scholars must continue to provide education, resources and support to this population. There is still plenty of work to be done.

For us to better serve this dynamic and uniquely positioned population, practitioners and scholars must band together to further clarify the challenges they face and develop innovative

ways to provide treatment and services that match the population. Each article in this issue emphasizes the unique and varying challenges student-athletes are faced with, from understanding the credentials of their mental health providers to the disparate impact of mental health help-seeking across cultures. This issue is designed to take one step in the direction of providing both practitioners and scholars with much needed context, data and detailed information about the life of student-athletes to better inform all those that serve student-athletes as to how we can collectively enhance the student-athlete experience, health and wellness. This special issue also represents one step in the direction of collaboration between practitioners and scholars. We hope to highlight the ways in which research and practice can inform one another, and how this collaboration can better position us all to serve the student-athletes at our respective institutions.

We want to thank the authors for their contribution to this special issue. With the assistance of the authors, a research summary of all articles included in this issue can be found below. Thank you, authors, for doing this meaningful work and using this special issue as a platform to share your work. We also want to thank the Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics (JIIA) and the College Sport Research Institute (CSRI) for supporting this special issue. We hope you enjoy this JIIA special issue on Mental Health and College Athlete Well-Being.

Inside the Issue

Beyond the Lines: Exploring the Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on NCAA Student-Athlete Health

Brown, Jensen, Hodgson, Schoemann, and Rappleyea's cross-sectional, quantitative study explored the prevalence and impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and spirituality on the biopsychosocial (BPS) health of NCAA student-athletes. Participants included 477 student-athletes representing 20 sports from all three divisions across 53 universities. Results indicated that 65% of respondents experienced at least one ACE, whereas 39% and 25% endorsed at least two and three total ACEs, respectively. Student-athletes who endorsed higher total ACEs reported greater anxiety, depression, perceived stress, substance use, and injury/physical health problems. Conversely, student-athletes with higher levels of spirituality reported lower anxiety, depression, perceived stress, substance use, and injury/health problems, and greater levels of social support. As psychosocial health problems have been recognized as the number one concern for student-athletes, results support the need to screen student-athletes for ACEs, in addition to psychosocial concerns, to help identify those who may be at greater risk for developing/exacerbating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and/or substance use. Taken together, our findings highlight connections among childhood trauma, spirituality, and BPS health outcomes for student-athletes. Consequently, NCAA member institutions should implement standard of care protocols that utilize a comprehensive and collaborative approach to assess and treat all aspects of student-athlete health with equal importance.

Sport Psychology Utilization among College Football Coaches: Understanding College Football Coaches' Attitudes about Sport Psychology

With recent increased attention focusing on the mental health needs of student-athletes, it is important to understand ways that Sport Psychology Consultants can be effective in accessing

populations in order to deliver mental health and performance enhancement services. Additionally, because each sport possesses its own distinct subculture and unique needs, it is necessary to examine attitudes and perspectives that exist within specific sports. Football represents a sport with participants who could benefit from Sport Psychology services, but football has traditionally been a population that is difficult or even reluctant to engage. Halterman, Steinfeldt, Ruser, Cawthra, and Neidigh's study sought to better understand this dynamic by assessing coaches' abilities to identify mental health concerns and their willingness to refer student-athletes to mental health services. Coaches in this study shared their beliefs about mental health concerns, barriers to accessing mental health services, as well their perceptions of ideal characteristics that Sport Psychology Consultants should possess. Results from this study can be used to inform best practices and provide practical implications for accessing football teams in order to deliver psychological services aimed at improving mental health and overall well-being among college student-athletes.

Black Football Student-Athletes' Perceived Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services

Wilkerson, Stokowski, Fridley, Dittmore, and Bell's study examined the perceived barriers of Black Division I FBS football student-athletes in seeking professional mental health treatment. A phenomenological methodological approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences of the participants. The findings emerged into two major themes: weakness and silence. Applying the social learning theory, weakness represented participant perceptions that were learned from people, while silence embodied the perceptions learned from the participants' environments. Weakness developed as three distinct subthemes stigma, toughness, and time. The participants felt seeking mental health services would signify the inability to perform and felt they must appear both physically and mentally strong. Silence, on the other hand, established a perceived hidden element to mental health services with awareness, community, and cultural context subthemes. Participants were raised with the belief that mental health issues should be kept within their families; they felt obligated to keep issues quiet and expressed difficulty in trusting other people. Wilkerson et al. suggested athletic departments add cultural competency trainings and practice inclusive hiring representative of their student-athletes.

College Athletes and Suicide Prevention: A Collaborative Autoethnography

This collaborative autoethnography weaves together a personal and powerful story from a former college athlete turned student-athlete services professional with reflections from a licensed mental health counselor who works with student-athletes. Kim shared her own struggles with mental health as well as her initially unknowing impact on a teammate, who sought her support when contemplating suicide. Athletes are performers and can mask their feelings. Stigma associated with mental illness and the machismo culture of athletics are some of the biggest barriers to college athletes' seeking mental health counseling. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of 10 and 34 (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019) and the fourth leading cause of death for college athletes (Rao et al., 2015; Rao & Hong, 2016). Developing skills to talk to student-athletes about suicide is one method for professionals to participate in supporting the mental health of student-athletes and prevent suicide. Professionals must practice questions to ask student-athletes and ways to start the difficult conversation about suicide. The Mental Health Toolbox is introduced as a resource for this

purpose. Tangible resources (e.g., stress ball, display stickers), mental health trainings, and intangible resources and involvement (e.g., social media posts, discussing resources on recruiting visits) are provided.

Collegiate Athletes' Use and Perceptions of Institutional Sources of Support for Role-Related Stressors

Scholarship on college athlete mental health and well-being continues to underscore how athletes' exposure to stressors can increase their vulnerability to psychological distress and other mental health problems (see, for example, Humphrey et al., 2000; Davoren & Hwang, 2014). In *Collegiate Athletes' Use and Perceptions of Institutional Sources of Support for Role-Related Stressors*, Hatteberg applies the stress process model (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) to better understand 1) how athletes might draw upon institutionally-based social support to offset the harmful mental health effects of stressors and 2) whether athletes perceive this support to be effective. In her analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with 56 collegiate athletes, Hatteberg shows that athletes appreciate and make use of the expert assistance provided by institutional support personnel such as sports psychologists and mental health professionals, academic support staff, sports medicine staff, strength and conditioning staff, coaches, and faculty members, for stressors perceived to be within their scopes of expertise. Hatteberg also finds, however, that athletes are sometimes reluctant to solicit support from these institutional sources due to concerns about confidentiality and institutional priorities, as well as the belief that institutional supporters lack the power or ability to change athletes' stressful circumstances. Given these findings, Hatteberg makes practical recommendations for reorganizing the institutional support structures to which athletes have access in order to 1) increase the efficacy of support resources, 2) improve athlete utilization of such resources, and 3) better protect athletes' mental health and well-being.

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