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An Examination of the Underutilization of Mental Health Resources in Collegiate Student-Athletes

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Kathleen Glover

Abstract

Previous and developing literature indicates that collegiate student-athletes, while more susceptible to psychological problems, are underutilizing mental health resources. This project examines the aforementioned problem through the use of extensive student-athlete mental health literature to identify themes that are affecting student-athlete's likeliness of seeking psychological services. Throughout the themes, the need for additional support from student-athlete stakeholders is presented. A workshop series to guide increased mental health literacy in student-athlete stakeholders to create opportunities to recognize signs of mental illness and form cultures that encourage the utilization of psychological services is constructed. It is anticipated that by including stakeholders in this intervention that the utilization of mental health resources by student-athletes will increase.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Collegiate student-athletes are more susceptible to experiencing mental health issues than their non-athlete peers (Watson, 2006). These mental health issues can arise from the student-athletes' transition to college, the high pressure of the college athletics environment, and experiencing the temporary or permanent inability to play their sport due to injury (Economou et al., 2021). While student-athletes are a population that is highly vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues, student-athletes are less likely to seek mental health services than their non-athlete peers due to physical, mental, and emotional barriers that are present (Putukian, 2016). In a study by Cutler and Dwyer (2020) that examined student-athletes' perceptions of support surrounding mental health services, the findings of their research indicate that student-athletes did not feel that they receive adequate mental health support from their institutions and athletic departments. Student-athletes feel that athletic departments focus heavily on their athletic contributions to their institution rather than their holistic development and well-being. This overarching barrier to student-athletes having accessible mental health is the first of many barriers that follow making the ability for this population of students to gain sufficient services to support their mental wellness. Good mental wellness practices are essential for student-athletes to be at their best mentally and provide the opportunity for student-athletes to perform at their best athletically (Kern et al., 2017).

As the crisis and controversy surrounding student-athlete mental health support continues to grow following highly publicized student-athlete suicides so does the research on where mental health support for student-athletes is falling short. Researchers are examining more carefully the convergence of these factors affecting student-athletes that are often overlooked by

the romanticizing of the student-athlete experience (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). In order for student-athletes to be able to obtain adequate treatment for their mental health issues, a framework that addresses the barriers student-athletes face and creates supportive spaces to encourage student-athletes to acquire mental health treatment needs to be developed and shared with stakeholders.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

Collegiate student-athletes consistently experience environments that are a breeding ground for psychological distress. The high-pressure environments, long hours spent training, isolation from others, and the expectations of success put student-athletes at risk to develop mental illnesses (Barnard, 2016). On top of athletic factors that contribute to the psychological distress of student-athletes, this population of students are also expected to balance a full academic course load with social demands. This psychological distress is shown to manifest in student-athletes in forms of depression, anxiety, substance use, stress, relationship issues, and disordered eating contributing to mental illness diagnoses (Gavrilova and Donohue, 2018).

Professor Daniel Eisenberg from the University of Michigan studied and surveyed 31 NCAA Division I teams before and after providing educational presentations on mental health (Velasco, 2017). After analyzing the results, Eisenberg reported that 33% of college students experience significant mental health symptoms and 30% of those students seek help (Velasco, 2017). Only 10% of college student-athletes with mental health issues seek help (Velasco, 2017). The data gathered by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for their Best Practices (2016) report shows comparable findings that indicate its student-athletes are struggling with mental wellness. From the results of their survey of student-athletes, the NCAA reported that in the last month 30% of student-athletes felt overwhelmed. This data indicates that

the student-athlete population is facing serious conflicts with their mental health and intervention is needed.

While it is clear that student-athletes are in need of mental health services, research suggests that student-athletes are considerably underutilizing the psychological services that are available to them (López & Levy, 2013). Student-athletes are underutilizing mental health services due to the negative stigmas that surround seeking psychological help. These stigmas come from many different stakeholders. Student-athletes underutilize services because they fear negative reactions from athletic department staff or their coaches (Ryan et al., 2018). Student-athletes noted that often stakeholders emphasize a sport culture of extreme toughness and project the ideology that mental illness is a sign of weakness intensifying behaviors of underutilization of mental health resources. Additionally, student-athletes underutilize mental health resources that are available because they do not feel that their institution's mental health counseling services are equipped to understand their athletic or ethnic backgrounds (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018).

If the underutilization of mental health resources by collegiate student-athletes is not addressed, the rates of mental illness experienced by this population will continue to rise leaving student-athletes extremely vulnerable to the negative repercussions. Institutional and athletic department administrators are often very protective of their reputations. Cutler and Dwyer (2020) discern the idea that all organizations, even those so closely centered around people like in college athletics, are most worried about the bottom line. While there are many effects that would domino if the underutilization of mental health services by student-athletes is not addressed, a hit to an institution's reputation could be costly, and more than just financially.

Background of the Project

This project will work to address the issues surrounding the underutilization of mental health services by the student-athlete population when compared to their non-athlete peers. To help increase the utilization of mental health resources, it is important that coaches and athletic department staff are creating inclusive mental health cultures and are knowledgeable of the referral resources. The factors contributing to the underutilization of resources run deep throughout the cultures of athletics. To be able to better understand how the issue has developed to its current state it is important to understand where the student-athlete mental health literature began.

Regarded as one of the first studies on student-athlete mental health that reviewed the problem holistically, Pinkerton and colleagues (1989) examined the psychological considerations and interventions for college student-athletes. Their landmark study included research on college student-athletes who were at a greater risk to experience various forms of psychological distress than their non-athlete peers. Through their transition to college, student-athletes experience athletic, academic, and social demands that can become a breeding ground for mental health issues when amplified by their stressful circumstances and isolation due to their extensive time commitments.

Pinkerton et al. (1989) introduces research that examines the relationship between student-athletes experiencing more mental health issues than their non-athlete peers but underutilizing mental health resources. The research from Pinkerton and colleagues (1989) provide evidence that there is a history of this behavior for over 30 years. Denial of emotional difficulties, counter dependency, and maintenance of social support are presented from the literature as contributing factors. These themes include similar ideologies to those presented in

this project's literature review. There are additional extenuating circumstances including finances, gender identity conflict, and the fear of success that scarcely exist in present day literature although they are issues for student-athletes that are not bound to that decade (Pinkerton et al., 1989).

Pinkerton and colleagues' (1989) archival research on student-athlete mental health presents findings based primarily on the experiences of male student-athletes even though female student-athletes were popular at the time this study was conducted. The interventions that were suggested based on the findings of this study included desensitization to mental illness, group therapy, and career counseling services. While these suggestions for intervention practice are much different than those recommended by researchers for practice today, Pinkerton and colleagues (1989) do recommend forming positive and therapeutic relationships with others to counteract the denial of mental health issues. Comprehensively, Pinkerton et al.'s (1989) landmark research introduces and emphasizes the importance of providing specialized and alternative mental health interventions for student-athletes to curb the underutilization of psychological services.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to explain how the Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop for collegiate athletic department personnel can help increase the usage of mental health resources by their student-athletes. This project will examine the various barriers that student-athletes frequently face in seeking mental health resources. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action framework will be used to explore the impact that these barriers have on student-athletes' utilization of mental health resources. Intervention strategies to address the issues of underutilization of mental health resources will be created drawing from the

literature reviewed and analysis of the theoretical framework. The workshop series is an intervention strategy designed to educate coaches and athletic department staff on the barriers that student-athletes could potentially experience when seeking psychological services and how to overcome these barriers to better serve student-athletes. This project is unique in that it looks at ways that all athletic department stakeholders can create more inclusive and supportive mental health environments. By increasing the stakeholder's awareness of the barriers that student-athletes face through the utilization of this framework to create supportive mental health cultures, institutions can work to increase the student-athlete population's utilization of mental health resources.

Objectives of the Project

Collegiate student-athletes frequently experience barriers that hinder their likeliness of seeking mental-health resources to address their psychological concerns. The objectives of this project are catered to creating resources to prevent the underutilization of mental-health resources by student-athletes. Additionally, this project looks to increase stakeholder's mental health literacy in an effort to create cultures of the athletic communities that are supportive and inclusive of student-athletes engaging in positive mental wellness behaviors. By providing stakeholders with increased mental health literacy and a goal to intentionally create these supportive environments for student-athletes, the purpose is to increase student-athletes' utilization of mental health resources.

- Increase student-athletes' utilization of mental health resources
- Identify the barriers that are hindering the utilization of mental health resources from the student-athlete population
- Breakdown the stigmas associated with student-athlete mental health

- Increase stakeholder's mental health literacy to ensure coaches and athletic department staff are adequately trained to identify, support, and refer student-athletes to the appropriate mental health resources the athletic department and institution has for utilization.

- Address the role that stakeholders play in student-athletes' utilization of mental health resources.

- Create a framework for a workshop that athletic departments can implement to increase their stakeholder's mental health literacy and better support their student-athlete population.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this project, several terms are used that warrant definition. These terms are presented below in alphabetical order.

- *Disordered Eating:* Encompasses a wide range of eating-relating problems that includes dieting, restricting, and clinically diagnosed eating disorders (Pereira & Alvarenga, 2007).

- *Mental Health:* Refers to the psychological well-being of an individual (Born, 2016-2017).

- *Mental Health Literacy:* Refers to the ability to be able to identify a situation where a mental health problem is present and possess the skills to respond to the problem appropriately (Kroshus et al., 2019).

- *NCAA:* Is the acronym frequently used for the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

- *Stakeholder:* Refers to an individual who affects student-athletes' decision making and often includes the social groups and cultural environment around the student-athlete (Moreland et al., 2018).

- *Stigma:* Refers to the socially driven label, often of disapproval, associated with individuals who seek mental health resources (Chow et al., 2021).

- *Student-Athlete:* A student whose matriculation to an institution was solicited by a member of the athletics staff who expressed interest towards the student participating in their program. The student reports for the squad under the athletic department, not intramurals (Pinkerton, 1989).

Scope of the Project

This project will examine the various barriers that student-athletes frequently face when seeking help for psychological concerns. Additionally, this project will address the need for the stakeholders in student-athletes' experiences to evidently invest more holistically in the student-athlete rather than just the student-athlete's athletic contributions to the institution. This project will review the literature and the theory selected to review to build a framework for athletic departments to utilize in addressing this issue. A workshop, Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics, is designed to educate stakeholders on student-athlete mental health and the role they play in this situation. The workshop will cover the various factors affecting the underutilization of mental health resources in student-athletes and examine solutions to this problem. This project will not cover resolutions for all stakeholders but rather focus on those student-athletes who have the most intimate relationships with, such as coaches and athletic department support staff. While the specific types of psychological services available for student-athletes to utilize plays a role in this issue, further study will need to take place to address the particular mental health resources that student-athletes are being referred to.

Factors that may hinder the effectiveness of the implementation of this project include buy in from the coaches and athletic department staff at an institution. The type of institution, its

size, and the resources available also pose a threat to the effectiveness of the implementation. This project was created for implementation at a mid-size, public regional institution within NCAA Division II athletics. Not all institutions receive the same amount of funding or have access to the same or similar mental-health services that are utilized as resources for stakeholders in this project's implementation. While this project follows a theoretical framework, the exact response from student-athletes at a given institution cannot be predicted and could affect the effectiveness of the project.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Student-athletes are more susceptible to experiencing mental health issues than their non-athlete peers but are also less likely to seek help (Watson, 2006). Student-athletes are under unique circumstances throughout their college experience that can affect their mental health. These circumstances could include strict schedules, increased time commitment to their sports, and the pressures to be successful both on the field and in the classroom piled on top of their other life commitments (Hilliard et al., 2020). Left unaddressed, these mental health concerns that can form from their unique circumstances could potentially affect an athlete's performance.

Pinkerton and colleagues (1989) specifically cite that the social isolation, the time demands of practice and games, and the believed or factual poor athletic performance can lead to decreased self-esteem therefore creating mental health issues. A study of student-athletes found that 62.6% of the respondents believed that their athletic performance was hindered by their mental health issues (Kern et al., 2017). Putukian (2016) argues that student-athletes may be at a higher risk for mental health issues in that they are less likely to inquire about treatment options due to the stigma and attitudes surrounding mental health. A student-athlete's likeliness to seek treatment can be affected by a range of impediments that include the stigmas surrounding mental health, the masculinity norms male athletes face as well as numerous additional barriers. This literature review concentrates on these three themes that are frequently established throughout literature on collegiate student-athlete mental-health.

Theory

Theory of Reasoned Action

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) developed the theory of reasoned action that examined the relationship between attitudes and behaviors. Throughout their research, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) emphasize the critical role that attitudes play in influencing a person's intention to perform behaviors. In their examination of the theory of reasoned action, Dillard and Pfau (2002) note that this theory asserts that intention is the strongest indicator of an individual's behavior. The individual's intention to perform these behaviors is formed by two components. These components include the individual's attitude toward the behavior as well as the individual's subjective norm. The theory of reasoned action suggests that attitudes are formed from the beliefs that individuals have towards a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Subjective norms are developed from the perceived beliefs that significant individuals possess regarding performing the behavior as well as the motivation to comply with the perceived beliefs of these influential individuals (Dillard & Pfau, 2002). These two components are critical to developing behavioral intentions.

The framework that Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) introduce on the theory of reasoned action can guide the understanding of student-athlete mental health behavior. In this analysis of the literature on student-athletes seeking mental health resources, their intention to perform the behavior of seeking mental health services is affected by their personal beliefs towards accessing these services and what they perceive are the beliefs of important individuals in their lives about performing this targeted behavior. By examining these components researchers can make predictions on student-athletes' behavior and create interventions to increase the utilization of mental health resources.

Research

Stigmas and Attitudes Towards Mental Health Help Seeking

The stigma and attitudes surrounding mental illness and help seeking in college athletics influence a student-athlete's intention to seek help as well as their own attitudes about mental health (Hilliard et al., 2020; Moreland et al., 2018). In a study that analyzed elite athlete's group discussions on the barriers and facilitators to mental health help seeking, the results indicated that, "over 40% of the barriers listed by participants related to stigma and the embarrassment an athlete would feel in seeking help" (Gulliver et al., 2012, p. 10). Three types of stigmas emerge from student-athlete mental health literature that can affect their help-seeking behaviors and include public, personal, and social network stigmas.

Public stigma is an external stigma that represents the idea that seeking treatment for mental health problems is frowned upon by society and problems should be dealt with privately by an individual (Hilliard et al., 2020). Personal, or self-stigma is an internal stigma that refers to one's own perceptions regarding mental health and that seeking treatment is objectionable. Kaier and colleagues (2015) state, "personal stigma may harm self-esteem when one sees oneself as part of a stigmatized group" (p. 736). This can manifest in student-athletes through negative feelings about themselves for having mental health issues because of their identity of being a member of the student-athlete population and feeling that society says they should not have these experiences. Finally, the external, social network stigma refers to the opinions of family and friends in an individual's immediate social network on mental health. The social network's views regarding mental health and seeking treatment may be perceived differently to a student-athlete compared to the perceived public stigma due to the more intimate relationships that the student-athlete has with the members of their social network (Hilliard et al., 2020). Members of this

influential group could also include teammates, coaches, or athletic support staff. A study looking for correlation amongst the stigmas found that negative outlooks on mental health and help seeking from both the public and social networks negatively impacted National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletes by consequently creating a greater self-stigma among this population of students (Bird et al., 2018). This indicates that other individuals who play a role in student-athletes' experiences play critical roles in student-athletes' perceptions of seeking mental health resources.

In their research, Moreland and colleagues (2018) acknowledge the difficulties student-athletes experience when making decisions surrounding their mental health when people close to them and their environments express negative attitudes regarding help-seeking. This reiterates the dominant role social network stigma plays in student-athletes' intentions toward help seeking that Hilliard and colleagues (2020) and Bird and colleagues (2018) discuss previously. The socio-cultural views on mental illness and help seeking that are held by stakeholders including their teammates, coaches, athletic trainers, friends, and even family often have a profound influence on student-athletes' responses (Moreland et al., 2018). Additionally, Moreland and colleagues (2018) findings indicate that the attitudes and opinions of student-athletes' leaders including coaches, athletic trainers, and administrative staff regarding mental health routinely create the overarching cultural norms within both teams and the athletic community that influence student-athletes' likelihood of seeking mental-health services at their institution. This influence included the heightening of barriers to help seeking for student-athletes when they perceive that acquiring mental health resources would negatively affect their levels of participation in their sport (Kroshus et al., 2019).

Kroshus and colleague's (2019) research continues to analyze research that identifies the vital role that coaches play in influencing the attitudes and perceived stigma associated with mental health in their athletic environments. The findings of this study on supporting student-athletes' mental wellness presents the opportunity for coaches and athletic staff to encourage stigma-free sport cultures regarding mental health through verbal and non-verbal communication about normative mental health behaviors (Kroshus et al., 2019). This type of support is suggested to not only prevent mental illness but encourage student-athletes who are struggling to seek the mental health resources necessary. This form of communication from student-athletes' social networks can change the way that student-athletes perceive their coaches and support staff's views regarding mental health and seeking treatment and in turn influence their own help seeking behaviors.

Even though student-athletes are more susceptible to mental health issues, psychological services are underutilized (Watson, 2006). Kaier and colleagues (2015) found that an athlete's perceptions of the stigma surrounding mental health affected their intentions to seek treatment for their mental health. Student-athletes were less likely to seek psychological services if they reported having a greater personal stigma towards mental illness. These negative views towards help seeking indicate that there is a gap in practice. Student-athletes may be lacking adequate resources on mental health help seeking whether that is educational resources or additional support from stakeholders.

Kaier and colleagues (2015) hypothesized that the perceived public-stigma could be greater due to the common celebrity status that student-athletes have on their campuses. Student-athletes noted that they were also worried about other students recognizing them utilizing mental health resources on campus. This aligns with Barnard's (2016) rationale from his research that

noted non-athlete students had, "more positive views toward celebrities that sought psychological assistance than athletes" (p. 163). Using the results of the Perceived Discrimination-Devaluation Scale, which measures mental illness stigma, Kaier and colleagues (2015) compared the student-athlete outcomes of the study against the results of their non-athlete peers. Kaier and their colleagues (2015) found that student-athletes had considerably higher rates of both personal and public stigma than non-athletes. These findings indicate that non-athletes are more likely to seek mental health resources than student-athletes due to the lower stigma rates that are present.

Barnard (2016) presents conflicting literature in the results of his study on whether there are significant differences in the willingness to seek mental health treatment between collegiate student-athletes and their non-athlete peers. In their research, Barnard (2016) identified that the gap between student-athletes and non-athletes has dwindled making student-athletes just as likely to seek treatment for their mental health as non-athletes. Barnard (2016) hypothesizes that this could be due to the increased presence of mental health professionals who specialize in sports psychology beginning to be regularly staffed on college campuses. Additionally, the findings from Barnard (2016) consider that the visibility of mental health issues being disclosed by professional athletes could be changing the culture in college athletics as well. This research acknowledges the potential for the creation of a trickledown effect due to the beginning of openness regarding mental health in athletics. This openness may make mental health issues among student-athletes more accepted within collegiate athletic programs (Barnard, 2016). These findings indicate that by lessening the stigma towards seeking mental health resources, student-athletes' behaviors towards help seeking can be positively influenced.

Male Student-Athletes Help Seeking

The research reviewed indicates that male student-athletes' mental health experiences including the stigma surrounding mental health and the likeliness a student-athlete seeks psychological services are much different than the experiences of female athletes. Barnard (2016) found that whether a student-athlete was a male or female was significant in predicting help seeking behavior. The masculine and aggressive culture surrounding male collegiate athletics often creates a negative view of those who seek mental health treatment and sees male athletes as weak for pursuing resources (Barnard, 2016). Throughout each of their studies on mental illness in male football players, DeLenardo and Terrion (2014) and Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt (2012) found that male collegiate athletes were seeking professional psychological services at significantly lower rates than their female peers and indicated that masculine norms were influencing their attitudes towards mental health. Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt (2012) note that while different collegiate male sports programs experience different levels of masculinity within their culture, contact sports specifically support strong masculinity norms through competing physically against one another perpetuating the belief that you have to go through physical pain and risk your physical health to be considered masculine.

Using the results from the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory and the Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale, three clusters emerged from Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt's (2012) research of NCAA football players. The first cluster, non-conforming players, was made up of collegiate male student-athletes that had the lowest levels of conformity to masculine norms and the lowest levels of stigma towards those who sought psychological services of the sample (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). While the next cluster, paradoxical competitors, had mixed results to masculine norms conformity, when compared to the results in cluster one the levels of

stigma surrounding help-seeking were undoubtedly higher. The final cluster of high-conforming players recorded significantly higher levels of conformity to masculine norms and boasted the most stigmatized players towards help-seeking of the clusters (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). The results of Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt's (2012) study indicate that there are patterns among collegiate male student-athletes' views on mental health seeking based on the recorded levels of masculine conformity and stigmas. Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt's (2012) analysis of the research demonstrated that players who reported higher levels of conformity to masculine norms also saw a positive correlation with levels of stigma towards other players who seek help for their mental health.

While DeLenardo and Terrion's (2014) research had similar findings to Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt (2012), they focused specifically on the stigmas surrounding collegiate male student-athlete mental health that categorically makes males less likely to seek psychological help than female student-athletes. The study concentrated on themes affecting help-seeking that emerged from the study's interviews with male student-athletes. The perceived public stigma surrounding mental illness for male student-athletes was that having mental issues reflected weak character. Participants believed that the public expected male athletes, specifically in the game of football, to have enough mental toughness to withstand psychological issues. Mental health problems were said to be a sign of weakness "particularly if they are perceived as the individual's choice" (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014, p. 29).

Throughout the interviews that DeLenardo and Terrion's (2014) conducted with male student-athletes, players continuously expressed concerns about the social network stigma surrounding mental health. Athletes were worried that they would be rejected by teammates or coaches who did not understand mental illness and considered them a threat to the success of the

group. Participants said the power that the coach has to control playing opportunities creates a barrier for collegiate male athletes to seek help (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014). Male student-athletes felt coaches and fans only cared about them if they were performing well, leaving little confidence that they would feel supported in the event they experienced mental illness (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014). This barrier of playing time being affected and lack of support demonstrates the influential role that coaches play in affecting mental health help seeking behavior in male student-athletes. Additionally, collegiate male athletes are less likely to seek help than female athletes due to male mental health being seen as a weakness by the public, threats to their own self-perception, and the risk of straining relationships among the team.

Barriers to Mental Health Help Seeking

While numerous studies have shown that the stigmas surrounding acquiring mental health resources are the largest barrier to help seeking for student-athletes, the research also suggests that there are also several additional physical, mental, and emotional impediments to a student-athlete's likeliness to explore available psychological services. A student-athlete's ability to recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness in themselves and others is a primary barrier in the ability for this population of students to be able to acquire the necessary psychological services (Putukian, 2016). Due to the demanding environment and consistent uncertainty that surrounds college athletics, many student-athletes have become familiar with experiencing the pain and roller coaster of emotions although they often have not developed healthy coping mechanisms to manage their symptoms (Putukian, 2016).

Gulliver et al.'s (2016) research acknowledges that a student-athlete's ability to recognize their own symptoms of mental illness influences the chances of student-athletes seeking mental health services. Student-athletes stated that they believed the depressive feelings were a normal

everyday occurrence for those in their position and had a hard time deciphering whether their symptoms were caused from the physically taxing aspects of their sport or the emotional ones (Gulliver et al., 2012). Additionally, the student-athletes that Gulliver and colleagues (2012) study indicated that they had a harder time acknowledging their own depressive or anxious symptoms compared to noticing other people around them exhibiting signs of mental illness. This demonstrates a gap in practice at institutions in educating both student-athletes and stakeholders on the ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health issues.

The findings of Sudano and colleagues' (2017) research suggests that the barriers to mental health care for student-athletes run deeper than collegiate athletic departments creating a demanding culture and student-athletes being unable to recognize mental health side effects. Some institution's mental health care practices within athletics create impediments to a student-athlete's ability to seek resources. Mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, disordered eating, and substance abuse are common among collegiate student-athletes (Wieland et al., 2018). These effects are often triggered by stressors such as extensive time demands and injuries. Student-athletes may experience symptoms of anxiety or depression if stressors are left unaddressed and it is the institution's responsibility to provide accessible care to student-athletes so they can be taken care of (Sudano et al., 2017). Institutions and athletic departments may be intentionally or unintentionally perpetuating negative mental health help seeking behaviors in their student-athlete and stakeholder populations.

Moreland and colleagues' (2018) research exhibit similar findings to Sudano and colleagues' (2017) concerns that indicate some college athletic facilities are not capable of providing student-athletes with the appropriate resources that are required to be able to intentionally address mental illness diagnoses that are commonly bred in collegiate athletic

environments. But, issues with mental health resources being confidential, convenient, and culturally sensitive are not uncommon. Research indicates that student-athletes prefer and are more likely to seek treatment from counselors with a sports background and come from a similar gender, race, or lived experiences as themselves (López & Levey, 2013; Lubker et al., 2012). Hong and colleagues (2018) raise concerns about the challenges of student-athletes who do not have access to qualified campus mental health professionals and are forced to seek help off campus. Mental health providers who practice off campus do not always fully understand the climate and situation student-athletes are in which can make providing them with adequate support difficult (Hong et al., 2018). Additionally, not all mental health care providers, whether on or off campus, may not have the ability or experience to adequately care for student-athletes.

In their work, Sudano and colleagues (2017) review and agree with The NCAA Best Mental Health Practices document that works to create an integrated care model that combines medical and mental health in a unified team approach. But, Sudano and their colleagues (2017) have hesitations. While this approach can make mental health resources more accessible to students at some institutions there are foreseeable barriers that could hinder this integration with the utilization of the NCAA's suggested "one size fits all" model that needs to be considered. The study indicated that financial stability, physical space, organizational infrastructure and other resources based on the institution can get in the way of an institution's ability to provide quality mental health services to their student-athlete population based on the necessary practices in the document provided by the NCAA (Sudano et al., 2017). Without the evaluation and proper solutions to these barriers prior to the attempted integration tailored to the individual institution, student-athletes' mental health access could have impediments before they even attempt to seek treatment within the resources that are to be available through their athletic department.

An essential component for student-athletes to have the opportunity to seek mental health resources is knowing that resources are available for them to utilize. In their research Gulliver and colleagues (2012) introduce the disconnect many student-athletes face who do not live on or near campus. This portion of the student-athlete population may not be as familiar with the mental health resources that are available to students through both the athletic department and the institution. Due to the stigma surrounding mental health, student-athletes experience anxiety and are uncomfortable approaching someone who they could reach out to for information regarding psychological services because they are unsure of the response they will receive. Student-athletes reported not being comfortable speaking with peers or their health care provider because they believed they were not someone who could understand their experiences (Gulliver et al., 2012).

In 2016 the NCAA published a document on the Best Mental Health Practices that stated student-athletes should have easy accessibility to mental health providers (NCAA Sport Science Institute, 2016). In their review of the need for collegiate student-athlete mental health protection by the NCAA in the same year, Born (2016) emphasized the need for a more aggressive approach by the NCAA and its member schools to provide student-athletes with improved access to mental health resources. This indicates that both the NCAA and member schools hold a responsibility in providing student-athletes with adequate access to mental health resources. Hilliard and colleagues (2020) acknowledged in their research that the time student-athletes commit to their sports each week created a physical barrier in the time constraint that interfered with their ability to access psychological services. Student-athletes argued that not all counseling services at NCAA member schools offer hours or the ability to work around their class and practice schedules. Researchers' findings note that due to the time constraints from their sports,

student-athletes often feel they need to spend their time pursuing their academic obligations and resting rather than taking advantage of available mental health resources. Student-athletes feel that their intense athletic commitments are what is creating the depressive and anxious feelings in the first place (Gulliver et al., 2012; Hilliard et al., 2020; Pinkerton et al., 1989). Recommendations from the results of Hilliard and colleagues' (2020) study suggest athletic departments and staff must be intentional about creating and prioritizing time for student-athletes to have time to recover and access psychological services if needed.

Summary

The research from the literature selected for review indicates that mental health stigmas and attitudes, stigmas surrounding male mental health, and additional barriers to mental help seeking create impediments for student-athletes to receive the resources necessary to succeed. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action is used to explore the relationship between student-athletes' attitudes towards mental health and how these attitudes affect their intentions to seek mental health resources. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude theory argues that an individual's attitude towards a behavior paired with the subjective norm of the behavior forms the individual's intent to perform the desired behavior. This research suggests that the formation of the intention stage of Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory is the most instrumental in predicting behavior. The literature reviewed reveals that public, personal, and social stigmas play a large role in influencing a student-athlete's thoughts and eventual decision making about seeking mental health resources. The overpowering masculine culture surrounding collegiate athletics contributes and often negatively impacts the way males are viewed for seeking mental health resources. While the mental health stigma and masculine norms surrounding mental health play a large role in student's likeliness to seek mental health resources, there are many additional

physical, mental, and emotional barriers that need to be overcome. Some of these barriers include the ability for a student-athlete to recognize their own symptoms of mental illness, and institutions having accessible mental health resources for student-athletes.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed regarding mental health in student-athletes has demonstrated that the stigmas, masculine and aggressive culture surrounding mental health in male sports, and additional barriers to seeking treatment affect a student-athlete's likeness to seek treatment. Student-athletes' interactions with stakeholders including their teammates, coaches, family, and additional institution support staff have an extensive impact on their understanding of mental illness and their own mental health (Moreland et al., 2018). The research indicates a need for more mental health education to combat the stigmas and mental health resources specifically tailored toward the student-athlete populations. Additional resources designed explicitly for male athletes covering the falsity of masculine norms for male athletes may be necessary.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities have begun to invest in the mental well-being of their student-athletes as opposed to just their athletic contributions to their institution. Unfortunately, much of this investment in wide spread mental health initiatives has developed on the heels of tragic and highly publicized collegiate student-athlete suicides in the last 10 years. Stanford University student-athlete Katie Meyer marks the most recent of these suicides with her death in March of 2022. In the wake of Meyer's death social media has erupted with growing concerns about institutions' athletic departments being reactive to student-athlete mental health and permitting cultures that perpetuate mental health issues (Andone, 2022; Cutler and Dwyer, 2020; Schemm, 2022).

Student-athletes experience increased stigmas and barriers that make them more susceptible to experiencing mental illnesses than their non-athlete peers (Watson, 2006). Hong and colleagues (2018) discussed the importance of including the collegiate athletic community with coaches and staff in education about student-athlete mental health. This is vital to comprehensively address these issues and raise awareness about the importance of mental health and wellness. By utilizing a consistent collaborative approach to mental wellness in athletic departments through the inclusion of coaches and staff, these stakeholders can make significant progress towards destigmatizing mental health in collegiate athletics and increasing student-athletes' help seeking behaviors. This intentional approach to support from stakeholders encourages the creation of safe and supportive environments for student-athlete's mental health. Without adequately executing educational opportunities for stakeholders to learn more about student-athlete mental health and fostering supportive mental wellness cultures for student-

athletes, we may continue to experience the frequency of mental health crises in this population of students.

The purpose of this project is to utilize the created Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop, that shares educational materials for athletic departments to use to increase mental health literacy among coaches and staff. This type of education encourages the development of a culture that supports the mental well-being of student-athletes. This chapter will examine components of this project. These components include a workshop, handouts, and surveys used to evaluate the current mental health practices. The steps taken to evaluate the effectiveness of this project through post workshop surveys from the participants will also be included in this chapter. This chapter will use the findings from the literature to create an intervention that can be utilized for future practice of student-athlete mental health.

Project Components

To develop the curriculum for this program, thorough research was conducted to understand the most prominent barriers student-athletes face in mental health help seeking practices. The goal of this intervention is to break down the stigma surrounding mental health in student-athletes. Through the creation of a framework, Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics, that utilizes survey, presentation, and discussion elements to increase mental health literacy in stakeholders, this intervention encourages college coaches and athletic department staff to be intentional about creating cultures within their athletic communities that are supportive of student-athlete mental wellness. As a result of participating in the Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop, coaches and athletic department will be able to:

- Identify at least one barrier to student-athletes seeking mental health resources within their community.

- Give examples of at least two stigmas surrounding student-athlete mental health.

- Differentiate between the emergent and non-emergent mental health resources available to student-athletes on their campus.

- Recognize at least three signs of mental health issues that could develop in student-athletes.

- Produce at least two ways participants can improve their cultures to be more encouraging of student-athlete mental health help seeking.

The first step in this framework is to evaluate the current level of mental health literacy in coaches and athletic department staff by issuing a survey (Appendix A) that can collect baseline data surrounding the themes of mental health stigmas, culture setting, the ability to provide adequate mental health support, and their perceived level of their own mental health literacy. To adequately address the gap in practice indicated from the previously reviewed literature, providing educational opportunities to increase mental health literacy in collegiate athletic coaches and staff members is essential. These educational resources can be tailored to the coaches and athletic department staff who are participating in the workshop. Based on the information collected from the initial surveys sent to the coaches and athletic department staff attendees as well as all student-athletes prior to the Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop, data can be collected on coach and staff mental wellness perceptions and current practices.

Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics Workshop

After issuing a survey to have baseline data on the current mental health perceptions and practices of collegiate athletic coaches and staff members recorded, an educational workshop to increase mental health literacy on the population of collegiate student-athletes will take place.

This workshop will include passive programming, discussion, and participatory programming components that can help educate and guide the future practice of collegiate athletic coaches and staff members regarding mental wellness of their student-athletes.

Researchers indicate the important role that stakeholders in collegiate athletics play in creating safe and supportive mental health environments for student-athletes (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020; Kroshus et al., 2019; Moreland et al., 2018; Sudano et al., 2017). By stakeholders thoughtfully developing these inclusive cultures, the stigmas and negative attitudes towards mental health help seeking are inherently reduced. Additionally, help-seeking behaviors are encouraged affecting the intention of student-athletes to perform the desired behaviors of utilizing psychological services (Kroshus et al. 2019).

This one-day workshop was thoughtfully designed to be able to fit into the busy schedule of college athletic departments while still providing intentional mental health programming to address the role it plays in college athletics. The Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop is intended to be presented by a member of the athletic department's sports psychology team. But, understanding that not all athletic departments have access to those resources, a member of the medical staff or athletic training staff would also be qualified to facilitate this workshop. The programming for Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics includes elements designed to increase the knowledge of college coaches and athletic department staff on the themes surrounding student-athlete mental health while encouraging the discussion of actionable methods that can be implemented in their communities. This framework was developed at a mid-size, public regional institution within NCAA Division II athletics. As this project's framework is a guide for athletic departments to utilize, it will need to be adjusted to fit the needs of the varying stakeholders and institutions. This may mean considerations in terms of

who is facilitating the program, the number of participants, or the referral resources for the

participating stakeholders to utilize need to be considered. The passive programming element of

this workshop includes a visual presentation that reviews the findings of the literature reviewed

in the previous chapter. The specific segments to be presented include:

- The Stigmas Surrounding Collegiate Student-Athlete Mental Health

    - Utilizing the findings from the literature, this segment will examine the stigmas

        that student-athletes' experience that often affect their intentions to seek mental

        health resources. By encouraging stigma breakdown, it is the hope of the author

        that stakeholders can better see and understand the impediments that exist for this

        population of students.

- The Barriers to Help Seeking

    - There are numerous physical barriers that exist for student-athletes to obtain the

        psychological services they need. This segment of the workshop examines the

        constraints including time, location, and knowledge that student-athletes

        frequently encounter.

- Male Student-Athletes Help Seeking

    - This segment covers the specific culture surrounding mental health that is

        frequently seen in male teams. The facilitator of the workshop will create a

        dialogue to foster conversations among stakeholders about their experiences while

        also educating them on the additional mental health stigmas that exist in male

        dominated sports.

- Student-Athlete Stakeholder's Effect on Team Culture
  - This segment examines the ways in which coaches and athletic department staff directly and indirectly affect student-athletes' behaviors towards mental health help seeking. The facilitator will share traditional behaviors by stakeholders including negative language or unrealistic time demands and then present recommendations for practice. Additionally, this segment looks for solutions to these common issues and how these changes can foster cultures that are more supportive of student-athlete mental health.

- Recognizing the Signs of Mental Health Issues
  - In order to be able to properly refer student-athletes to the psychological services available for student-athletes, stakeholders need to be knowledgeable of warning signs that student-athletes may be experiencing mental illness. This segment is covered in the presentation by examining the warning signs such as uncharacteristic behaviors, lack of concentration, or withdrawal from relationships.

- Emergent and Non-Emergent Mental Health Resources
  - This segment examines situations in which emergent or non-emergent mental health resources may be necessary. Additionally, the facilitator will talk about the resources that are available on campus in both scenarios to educate the stakeholders on how they can be utilized within their communities.

It is my hope that increasing the mental health literacy of athletic coaches and staff will increase their ability to support their student-athletes. The discussion portion of this workshop was designed to create a dialogue between student-athlete stakeholders on mental health in

college athletics. Additionally, the questions posed provide the opportunity for reflection on the content previously presented. The guiding questions are influenced by Kroshus and colleagues' (2019) research on coaches supporting student-athletes' mental wellness. They should be adjusted as the moderator sees fit to adapt to the needs of the institution. The guiding questions selected include:

- What information from this presentation were you most interested to learn?

- What do you see in your athletic community as the most prominent barriers to help seeking for student-athletes?

- Which stigma do you feel poses the largest threat to student-athlete help seeking? Why?

- What do you feel is the role of coaches and staff in student-athlete mental health?

- In what ways do coaches and athletic department staff directly or indirectly discourage student-athletes from seeking mental health resources?

- What do you feel athletic departments need to do to better support their student-athletes' mental health?

- Do you feel that you would be able to identify if a student-athlete was experiencing mental health issues? How or why?

Following the passive programming and discussion portions of this workshop, the participatory portion encourages coaches and support staff to apply the knowledge they have gained so far from this workshop. The facilitator will have the participants break into small groups based on the number of participants in the workshop to engage in the following activities:

- Create within your group two actionable ways, through the direct or indirect communication examples from the presentation, that can be created and implemented in

your athletic community the next six months to foster supportive mental health cultures for student-athletes. Please create a visual to present these methods with the other groups.

It is my hope that by collaborating and presenting ways to create and grow support for student-athlete mental health that stakeholders will recognize tangible ways in which they can directly implement items in their communities. Coaches and staff are often not mental health professionals and should not engage in support that is outside of their training. But, it is clear that these stakeholders are in a close relationship with student-athletes to notice when they are struggling with potential mental illness. It is my hope that through this student-athlete mental health workshop with stakeholders who are frequently in spaces with student-athletes they can be more equipped to support this population of students including the potential referral to the appropriate resources.

Student-Athlete Mental Health Stakeholder Workshop Handouts

At the end of the workshop, the participants will assist in the creation of a document (a handout of their choice using computers) for themselves that includes information that they feel is relevant to have on hand. Through discussion with the moderator and other stakeholders, they will discuss the information covered in the workshop presentation and decide what they would like to include on their handout. With the template of the handout already created (Appendix B), the moderator can copy in the information selected by the stakeholders. This collaboration encourages the stakeholders to take ownership of the experience and incorporate information from the session that is most applicable to their communities. Examples of information that could be included are signs that indicate that a student-athlete may be struggling with their mental health, resources to refer student-athletes to, and guiding questions for conversations with student-athletes. Emergency information in the event of a mental health crisis is required to be

printed on every handout. Following the creation of this handout, they will be printed and distributed to all stakeholders present before their departure.

Project Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of this project post workshop surveys will be utilized to assess the programming and the feedback from workshop participants. Additionally, the feedback will be able to identify if the previously proposed learning outcomes are met through the programming utilized. This post workshop survey (Appendix C) asks questions regarding the attitudes towards the workshop's effectiveness, what their main takeaways from the workshop were, intentions for implementing new supportive mental health practices in their communities, and whether they would recommend this workshop to others. Additionally, providing space for workshop attendees to discuss whether they felt the workshop increased their mental health literacy and their ability to provide adequate mental health support to student-athletes is an important element to this post-workshop survey. By asking participants after the workshop about their competencies surrounding student-athlete mental health, practitioners can see whether the workshop was effective at increasing mental health literacy. This mental health literacy is necessary to adequately create supportive mental health environments for student-athletes.

In addition to collecting and analyzing the survey data, following up with workshop participants on their implementation in the months following the workshop of both the actionable items discussed in the workshop and their plans for implementation as collected in the post-workshop survey may be necessary. Through this follow up, moderators will be able to evaluate whether the actionable goals created in the workshop were completed by attendees. This creates the opportunity to check progress on plans implemented and identify the barriers to implementation.

Additionally, the effectiveness of this project can be evaluated by the number of students who are referred to or meeting with counselors or sports psychologists following the implementation of the actionable items by stakeholders to create more supportive environments. The literature reviewed emphasizes the importance of utilizing direct and indirect communication to create supportive mental health cultures. These cultures and communication from stakeholders can positively influence the attitudes and intentions of student-athletes' help seeking. If more student-athletes are seeking help for mental illness, this could be a sign that the implementation of the project has been effective.

Project Conclusions

Collegiate student-athletes experience numerous barriers to mental health treatment that affect their likeliness to seek help. Stakeholders in the student-athletes' experiences, specifically coaches and athletic department staff have the opportunity to play a critical role in increasing student-athletes' likelihood of seeking mental health treatment. Through this professional development opportunity created, stakeholders can increase their mental health literacy and recognize what additional action is needed to create cultures within their commutes that are supportive of mental health. These supportive environments created by stakeholders positively affect the attitudes and intentions of student-athletes towards mental health encouraging mental health help seeking practices.

Plans for Implementation

The implementation of this project will require buy-in from various student-athlete stakeholders to be successful. To begin implementation, this project will be shared with Grand Valley State University's Athletics Health Care Administrator. Previous conversations with Grand Valley State University's Athletics Health Care Administrator has illustrated the need for

additional mental health literacy opportunities for coaches and athletic department staff. It is my hope that through the collaboration of athletics health care that this project can be implemented as professional development for the Grand Valley State University Athletic Department. Additionally, this project will be shared with the athletic staff in the LAKER Academic Success Center at Grand Valley State University who work closely with student-athletes. This office can play a vital role in encouraging mental health help seeking through the mentorship of student-athletes in an inclusive environment at this institution.

It is important to recognize that all institutions' resources and needs regarding student-athlete mental health are not all the same. This project may need to be adapted prior to implementation to better support the outcomes of stakeholders creating inclusive mental health cultures.

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Appendix A

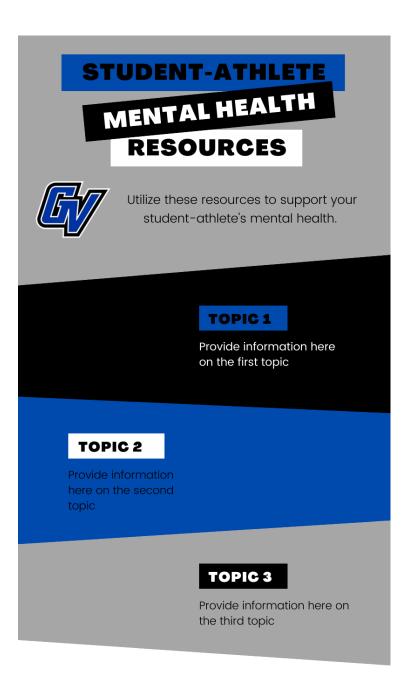**Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics Pre-Workshop Survey**

Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics Pre-Workshop Survey

Please take a few minutes to share your experiences with student-athlete mental health prior to the Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics workshop in order for the facilitator to adapt the workshop to the needs of the participants.

* Required

Name (You may remain anonymous if desired)

Your answer

Do you know any student-athlete mental health stigmas that exist? *

○ Yes

○ No

If you answered yes to the previous question, please explain them here.

Your answer

Please describe your team, office, or department's culture surrounding mental health. *

Your answer

Please rate your level of confidence in your ability to provide your student-athletes with adequate mental health support. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Confident	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely Confident

What is your perceived level of knowledgeable on student-athlete mental health? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Knowledgeable	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely Knowledgeable

Are you aware of the mental health resources available to refer student-athletes to in emergent and nonemergent situations? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ Other:

Please provide any comments or concerns around student-athlete mental health and supporting this population of students.

Your answer

Appendix B

Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics Workshop Handout

Template

STUDENT-ATHLETE
MENTAL HEALTH
RESOURCES

Utilize these resources to support your student-athlete's mental health.

TOPIC 1

Provide information here on the first topic

TOPIC 2

Provide information here on the second topic

TOPIC 3

Provide information here on the third topic

TOPIC 4

Provide information here on the fourth topic

Emergency Resources

- If a student is having a mental health emergency during business hours have them drop The University Counseling Center for an urgent consultation.
- Ottawa County Local Helpline 24-Hr. Emergency Assistance: 1-866-512-4357
- Call 911

Appendix C

Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics Post-Workshop Survey

Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics Post-Workshop Survey

Please take a few minutes to share your experiences from the Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics workshop in order to evaluate the effectiveness of this workshop and improve it for the future.

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

* Required

Name (You may remain anonymous if desired)

Your answer

Please identify at least one barrier to student-athletes seeking mental health resources within their community. If unable to, please answer with N/A. *

Your answer

Please give examples of at least two stigmas surrounding student-athlete mental health. If unable to, please answer with N/A. *

Your answer

Please list at least one emergent and one non-emergent resource available for student-athlete mental health on your campus. If unable to, please answer with N/A. *

Your answer

Please list at least 3 signs of mental health issues that could develop in student-athletes. If unable to, please answer with N/A. *

Your answer

Please list at least two ways participants can improve their cultures to be more encouraging of student-athlete mental health help seeking. If unable to, please answer with N/A. *

Your answer

What are your main takeaways from the Addressing Student-Athlete Mental Health in College Athletics workshop? *

Your answer

How likely are you to implement the new strategies for fostering more support mental health practices for student-athletes in your community?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Likely	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely Likely

Do you believe the The Addressing Mental Health in College Athletics workshop increased your mental health literacy and ability to provide adequate mental health support to student-athletes? *

○ Yes

○ No

○ Other:

How likely are you to recommend this workshop to other stakeholders? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Likely	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely Likely