

## The “Whole” Student-Athlete: Addressing the Importance of Mental Health

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this short communication discussion is to bring the topic of mental health and well-being of student-athletes to the forefront on the intercollegiate landscape. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes are faced with a multitude of pressures and time constraints, and mental pressures daily. The NCAA has recognized the need to address this topic by approving legislation to require all Power 5 conference schools to make mental health services and resources available throughout the athletic department. This discussion will continue with addressing best practices and showcase a model that many schools have undertaken in hiring a full-time or part-time sports psychologist to assist with student-athlete mental health and well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Mental health, well-being, NCAA student-athlete, Sport Psychologist.*

### INTRODUCTION

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a governing body that has generated over \$1 billion of revenue in consecutive years of 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 (Cameron, 2019). As the NCAA grows stronger, so does the Power 5 conferences (SEC, ACC, Big 12, BIG 10, and PAC 12) and the new construction of stadiums, arenas, performance centers, etc. As these student-athletes have access to unlimited gear, state of the ark facilities, strength and conditioning weight rooms; considerations are being taken to address the mental health and well-being of student-athletes. What has the NCAA accomplished to recognize that there is a need for emotional and mental health support to be present with thousands of student-athletes?

### DISCUSSION

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 there has been a breakthrough recognizing the need for mental health services within the Power 5 Conferences of NCAA Colleges and Universities. With a unanimous vote of 80-0, new legislature has officially been adopted to promote mental health in which student-athletes

are guaranteed access to mental health services and resources adopted at the 2019 NCAA Convention (Hosick, 2019). The legislation states the following:

The legislation requires all schools to make mental health services and resources available through the athletics department or the school's health services or counseling services department. In addition, schools must distribute to student-athletes, mental health educational materials and resources, including a guide to the mental health services and resources available at the school and information on how to access them (NCAA, 2019).

Erik Price, associate commissioner for compliance in the Pac 12 stated that, “this is the No. 1 issue facing our student-athletes on campus today. There is no school in this room that hasn't already recognized this” (para. 5, Hosick, 2019). As most schools already offer mental health counseling as a resource to students, this legislation confirms the need and to legitimize mental health concerns and bring it to the forefront of encouragement to NCAA student-athletes. In a recent research publication conducted by the American

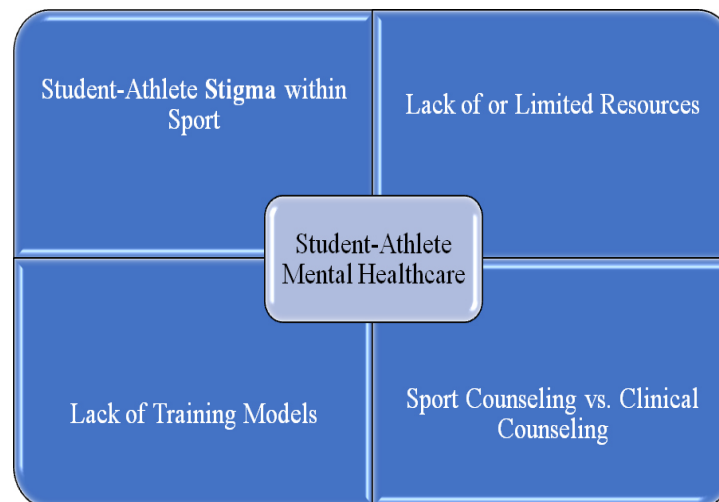
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Psychiatric Association (2018), results of a 10-year study indicated that over 155,000 students across 196 campuses showed significant increase in mental health diagnosis being up from 22 to 36 percent and treatment being up from 19 to 34 percent.

Through the NCAA Sport Science institute, a seminal publication was developed in support of collegiate student-athlete mental health and wellness. Student-athlete mental well-being is defined as a collaborative process of engaging all campus and community resources which can include athletics, campus health, counseling, and community agencies (NCAA, 2017). The four best practices for student-athletes mental well-being include the following: 1) Clinical licensure of practitioners providing mental health care; 2) Procedures for identification and referral of student-athletes to qualified practitioners; 3) Pre-participation mental health screening; and 4) Health-promoting environments that support mental well-being and resilience. Each of these four areas should be present within a college or university to serve as a protocol

and awareness to better encourage and promote student-athlete wellness.

As this overview has discussed the breakthrough of mental health awareness and legislature by the NCAA and its autonomy conferences, it is important to discuss the challenges and best practices model that must be recognized when discussing mental health and well-being of student-athletes. The pressures that student-athletes face when it comes to an array of items such as: time demands, competitions, full academic course load, strength and conditioning programs, rehab appointments, not to mention the social pressures and relationships that take a back seat to the athletically related challenges (Carr& Davidson, 2018). With these challenges, Sports Psychologists are employed through Colleges and University athletic departments as a resource for many of these athletic teams and individual student-athletes, however, are these positions still employed and up to date on the challenges being faced in today’s culture. First it is essential to layout the challenges related to the growth of psychologists in student-athlete mental care:



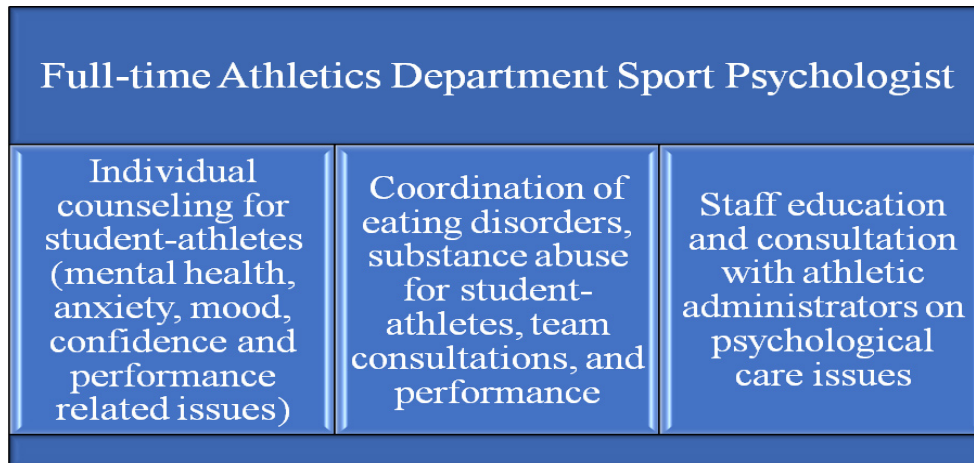
The student-athlete stigma that is coherent in a sport culture describes athletes as being “strong”, “tough”, which as a result student-athletes do not want to show signs of “weakness” as they feel admitting to struggling with mental health would indicate (Carr& Davidson, 2018). Many universities and athletic departments have the resources to employ numerous athletic trainers, strength coaches, and even dieticians, but not many programs employ full-time or even part time licensed psychologists (Carr& Davidson, 2018). Student Services is usually who a student-athlete will be referred to, however that campus counselor may not fully encompass the daily struggles a student-athlete

faces that differ from a traditional student. Thirdly, it is important to note the lack of training models that are available for a sport setting. The NCAA and its recent legislation has begun the push for awareness of mental health counseling of student-athletes in which hopefully the next step will be to create a training model for these athletic departments to follow. The fourth challenge is the difference between sport counseling and clinical counseling. It would be advantageous for a counselor to have prior experience as a student-athlete him/herself or previously in a role within an athletic department as a coach or advisor (Carr& Davidson, 2018).

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There are several major universities that have undertaken a model to exhibit and promote mental health and well-being of its student-athletes. These include: Oklahoma, Virginia, Ohio State, Virginia Tech, Arizona, Southern California, Washington, Iowa, Arkansas, Louisiana State University (LSU),

Missouri, Kansas, and New Mexico (Carr & Davidson, 2018). These schools are representative of each of the Power 5 conferences. The following is a diagram that indicates the need for a full-time Sport Psychologist and the performance expectations and areas to address (Carr & Davidson, 2018).



These positions are housed within the athletic department either within athletics, academic services, or sports medicine. It is important to note that this is not the typical model that all universities go by, but simply a summative resource to indicate the areas of attention for a sport psychologist.

Mental health and the well-being of student-athletes is a necessity as more and more of these young adults are struggling with it in today's culture. The NCAA has taken a proactive step to address the necessity and issues being faced, however this is a college/university wide alliance that must take place with all constituents. Going forward, universities need to understand three additional best practice areas that will assist in improving the issues. First, financial support must be made by the university in order to hire a sport psychologist or sport counselor and there must be an institutional strategic plan developed to address the need for mental health and well-being. Secondly, disability services and reasonable accommodation must make a connect between athletics and student-services. And lastly, communication strategies are to be developed to the extent of: 1) initial screening, signs of need for mental health counseling; 2) protocol in the event of a situation or critical incident involving a student-athlete; 3) key institutional stakeholders to advise and assist (NCAA, 2019). Through the employment of these best practices and the legislation of the NCAA, colleges and universities must employ

a mental health and well-being strategy to offer its student-athletes that are in need.

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