

Intercollegiate Athletics as a Post-Pandemic Strategic Enrollment Tool

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Abstract

"The mental health crisis in college athletics is meeting a crosshead. Specifically, as college athletics has evolved into a billion-dollar industry, scholars are starting to question the impacts of this on college athlete well-being (Rao et al., 2015; Stull, 2014). Over the past few years, multiple high-profile athletes have tragically taken their own lives over struggles with mental health (Hensley-Clancy, 2022). These heartbreaking losses have created heightened media attention over the issue of mental health in college athletics, especially regarding the access college athletes have to proper mental health services on their campuses. While a growing number of athletic departments are providing access to an in-house psychologist, a large number of athletes are required to seek help themselves or utilize university run programs for the entire student body (Way et al., 2020). With the heightened demand on college athletes to perform on the field and in the classroom, they represent a population quite susceptible to mental health issues (Brougham, 2021; Edwards et al., 2022).

College athletes have also historically been a group that has not utilized the mental health services on campus based on negative stigma of seeking help and their perceptions that these services might not be equipped to handle their issues (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018; Lopez & Lezy, 2013). With the lack of internal support for the mental health of college athletes, athletic department staff represent key stakeholders to support college athletes. While coaches, operations/video coordinators, and athletic trainers act as leadership and support for on-field success, the academic advisor often spearheads academic support. As Brewer (2022) suggest, one of the biggest struggles for college athletes is their identity outside of sport. Academic advisors play a key role in this development as they represent a central point of contact for athletes away from their athletic endeavors and are key to the college athlete experience (Watkins et al., 2022). As the nature of the athletic academic advisor position is to monitor and assist college athletes through their semesters, they often have numerous encounters that can lead to relationship building. While Watkins et al. (2022) identified the importance of the academic advisor role for academic success and overall student experience; our study seeks to explore the under-researched relationship between the athletic academic advisor role and college athlete mental health.

Using a phenomenological qualitative design (semi-structured interviews), this study will explore the perceptions of 15 athletic academic advisors at the Division I level regarding their role and experiences supporting college athletes' mental health. Additionally, this study seeks to explore the professional development and training opportunities these advisors are afforded, and the impact of these opportunities or lack thereof when handling mental health conversations.

We are currently in the data collection phase but will finish data analysis prior to the conference. This study will provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field. Theoretical contributions will include expanding our knowledge on the role of athletic academic advisors within

college athletics in both an academic and educational capacity. Additionally, this research will provide us with an alternative perspective of college athlete mental health. Further, the practical contributions will include ways in which college athletic departments can better support staff to ensure they have the necessary support and education to handle all facets of their role.”