

Understanding the Role of Family Members in relation to ACC Student-Athlete Mental Health: Preliminary Quantitative Findings

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Abstract

Family members (e.g., parents, grandparents, and guardians - hereafter referred to as parents) play a critical role in student-athlete (SA) mental health. The purpose of this study is to present preliminary findings of the quantitative portion of an ACC Innovation Fund project aimed to investigate parents of SAs within the ACC concerning their awareness and perceived significance of mental health resources offered by the campus and athletic department as well as their involvement. Research questions include: RQ1: How do parents perceive the mental health and wellbeing of their SA? RQ2: How do parents view the importance of mental health services for college athletes? RQ3: How well-informed are parents about university and athletic department mental health resources, and how can communication be improved?

Greater national attention has focused recently on the mental health and well-being of student-athletes (SA). Data have shown that Division I college SAs report elevated levels of depression, higher levels of stress, and other associated behavioral health issues when compared to non-athletes (NCAA, 2022; Wolanin et al., 2015). The increased rates of Division I SAs seeking help for mental health issues led to the term “mental health” being included in the NCAA constitution for the first time in the organization’s 117-year history (NCAA, 2023). Indeed, legislation was unanimously passed at the 2019 NCAA Convention guaranteeing SAs access to mental health services and resources (Burtlag Hosick, 2019).

Support for SA mental health comes from a variety of sources including, but not limited to, mental health professionals, peers, coaches, and parents, with the parental role being the least examined. Parents play an integral component in the SA experience (NCAA, 2017). Once SAs begin their collegiate athletic endeavors, 73% of SAs report they receive emotional support at least once a week from their parents (Lowe et al., 2018). Communication lines between SAs and parents continue throughout college with 58% of SAs engaging in frequent phone conversations with their parents, and 76% in regular contact via text messaging (Lowe et al., 2018). Lowe et al. also note that parents are also more likely to be involved in SA’s “sport” lives versus “school” lives, noting that parents’ involvement extends primarily into the realm of the SA’s athletic pursuits rather than their academic endeavors, highlighting the unique dimension of parent-student interaction in the sporting context. Despite parental involvement in their lives, research has suggested that parental knowledge about mental health resources may be limited (Kroshus et al., 2023).

This study, a collaboration between faculty and sport medicine practitioners at two ACC schools,

will consist of two complementary parts. First, an online survey will be administered in January/February 2024 to parents of current ACC SAs (target N > 250) that will be presented at this conference. Focus groups will also be conducted in late spring 2024. Currently two ACC athletic departments have agreed to help distribute the surveys through their internal databases and five other ACC schools have been contacted through research team contacts. The survey includes perceptions of mental health support, perceptions of their child's well-being, issues they feel impact their child's mental well-being, use of mental health services by their child before collegiate participation, awareness of mental health services offered by the athletic department and frequency of communication with their child. Data from this study will be compared to the NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study that includes similar measures. There are three significant implications. First, the data will provide athletic departments, coaches and sport medicine staff with parental perspectives related to their child's needs regarding mental health support and resources. This could be layered with prior data on this topic, collected from the SA and mental health providers' perspective, providing guidance for more effective interventions. Second, the data may highlight areas related to mental health support that could be factored into the recruitment process. Finally, data from this study could be used to create a guide by athletic departments to better inform parents about the mental health resources and services that can be accessed."