

From the Supporters' Perspective: How Collegiate Athletic Department Personnel Navigate their Institutional Role Responsibilities and Support of Athletes

Sarah Hatteberg College of Charleston

Abstract

Studies of intercollegiate athletics highlight the personal, emotional, and academic strains collegiate athletes experience as a result of overwhelming and often conflicting role expectations they face (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020; Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000; Madrigal & Robbins 2020; Ryan, Gayles, & Bell, 2018). More recently, research has identified athlete mental health as a growing and urgent concern on university campuses (Menaker, North, & Curtis, 2023), and this concern is heightened by evidence that college athletes are less likely than their non-athlete student peers to seek support for mental health difficulties (Edwards, Froehle, & Fagan, 2020; Giovannetti et al., 2019). In an effort to reduce barriers to and increase use of support resources, scholars have explored athlete utilization and perceived efficacy of institutional and social support resources within this population (de Groot, Weaver, Brown, & Hall, 2018; Hatteberg 2020, 2021).

While the majority of this research considers these questions from the vantage point of athletes (for an exception, see Beasley, Hardin, and Palumbo 2022), there remains a gap in our understanding of the support role athletic department staff members perceive themselves as playing to assist collegiate athletes who may be navigating emotional or mental health difficulties. Thus, the purpose of this study is to shift the perspective from the lens of college athletes to the lens of institutional support personnel to explore how personnel in different areas of athletics perceive themselves to fit within the athletic department's institutional support system and to examine their perceptions of the support they provide.

To meet these objectives, qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 60 athletic department staff members at NCAA Division I institutions within the Big Ten Conference. Participants, which included coaches, athletic medicine personnel, academic service personnel, and mental health professionals, were recruited via email using a combination of IRB-approved systematic random sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified and are being coded following an inductive approach to capture emergent themes.

Preliminary findings suggest that while the majority of respondents believed the provision of support to be among their primary role responsibilities, there was less consensus as to whether support for emotional or psychological difficulties should be a primary role obligation for athletic department staff members, with respondents reporting a variety of nuanced reasons for their respective responses. Furthermore, in recounting their experiences supporting athlete mental health and describing their institutions' processes for delivering such support, many respondents expressed concern about the limitations to the support they could provide and a desire for more intensive training and professional development opportunities related to athlete mental health. Finally, respondents pondered the overall support system, expressing thoughts they reported not having previously considered and volunteering potentially innovative

strategies for improving support for athlete mental health. These findings are discussed in the context of sociological research on the structural organization of collegiate athletics and the implications they may have for enhancing the provision of support within college sport and other similarly organized institutional contexts are explored.

References

Cutler, B. A., & Dwyer, B. (2020). Student-Athlete Perceptions of Stress, Support, and Seeking Mental Health Services. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

Beasley, L., Hardin, R., & Palumbo, D. J. (2022). Athletic Trainers' Perceptions of their Role in the Mental Health Care of Student-Athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

Edwards, B., Froehle, A. W., & Fagan, S. E. (2021). Trends in college student-athlete mental health in the National College Health Assessment (NCHA), 2011–2019. *Journal of athletic training*.

Hatteberg, S. J. (2020). Collegiate Athletes' Use and Perceptions of Institutional Sources of Support for Role-Related Stressors. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

Hatteberg, S. J. (2021). A tale of many sources: The perceived benefits of significant other, similar other, and significant and similar other social support. *Sociological Perspectives*, 64(1), 37-57.

Humphrey, J. H., Yow, D. A. & Bowden, W. W. (2000). *Stress in college athletics: Causes, consequences, coping*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Half-Court Press.

Madrigal, L., & Robbins, J. E. (2020). Student-athlete stress: An examination in United States collegiate athletics. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 14(2), 123-139.

Menaker, B. E., North, E. H., & Curtis, A. K. (2023). Examining the Likelihood of Employing Mental Health, Mental Performance, and Ministry Professionals in Intercollegiate Athletic Department Staffs. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*.

Ryan, H., Gayles, J. G., & Bell, L. (2018). Student-athletes and mental health experiences. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2018(163), 67-79.