

# The Mental Health Crisis: Junior College to Division I Student-Athlete Experience

Jason Kreinbrink, University of Louisville

Dr. Nicholas Swim, University of Maine (Advisor)

## Abstract

“Mental health has recently become a pressing issue in collegiate athletics (Moore, 2017; Brougham, 2021). Among the current college athlete experience, factors impacting mental health include adapting to the college lifestyle, building relationships, training schedules, practices, on-field performances, and taking higher-level courses (Abrams, 2022; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). A recent NCAA study found elevated levels of mental health concerns for athletes (NCAA, 2022). The leading factors of mental health issues include academic stressors, uncertainty about the future, and financial concerns. Furthermore, the report suggested over 90% of student-athletes felt overwhelmed by all their responsibilities within the last month (NCAA, 2022). While the issues surrounding the mental health of college athletes seem to be evident, a negative stigma is associated with athletes experiencing problems with their mental health (Moore, 2017). Even with the heightened resources some institutions have put forth toward mental health initiatives and services, many students fail to utilize them based on negative perceptions of mental health support (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). This can lead to college athletes experiencing depression, eating disorders and other risky behaviors including substance and alcohol abuse (Moore, 2017).

As such, one of the ways student-athletes may cope with the increased stressors of college athletics is through transferring. For example, in a recent study, mental health was found to be one of the main reasons for both male and female students to transfer (Johnson, 2023). While much of this attention of transfers has focused on four-year to four-year institution transfers, another key area of transfer surrounds two-year to four-year transfer students (Junior College transfers). More importantly, we lack depth in knowledge surrounding the mental health experiences of Junior College athletes. As past studies have shown, Junior Colleges provide wonderful benefits such as a low-cost education and the ability to adapt to the college atmosphere, but it is imperative that these students are ready for the requirements of a four-year institution, especially from a sport participation perspective (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018). With roughly 70,000 participants in Junior College athletics, advancing to the Division I level is one of their main intentions. It is important to understand their experiences, especially considering the resources available when transitioning from a two-year to a four-year school. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the mental health of college athletes upon their transition from a Junior College to a Division I institution.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. This theory is utilized to illustrate how individuals cope with and experience changes during a transition (work, teams, school, etc.). Four of the key variables that outline the transition experience can be explained through the Four S’s: situation, self, support, and strategies (Lindstrom, 2019). This study followed a qualitative research inquiry, which included current Division I student-athletes who transferred from Junior Colleges.

To best understand the experiences, semi-structured interviews will be conducted on transition factors, such as academic and athletic experiences. Currently, this study has two completed interviews, with a goal of reaching five to seven total participants. The results of this study will have practical implications for administrators to better understand important support mechanisms

needed to foster a positive academic and athletic experience for Junior College athletes at the Division I level. This can assist in developing more specific programming for Junior College athletes, as they face differentiating experiences from first-year student-athletes and other traditional transfer students. With a heightened focus on the transfer experiences of Junior College athletes, programs can best meet the needs of all their student-athletes and ensure a more equitable athletic experience.”