

Student Athletes 101



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Student athletes face many challenges in college that other students cannot imagine. According to the article *The Internal Struggles of Being a Student Athlete* by Christina McLaughlin, “In 2013, the National Athletic Trainers Association said the probability of having college athletes on campus with some form of mental illness is a virtual certainty.” While the athletic department contains many resources, there are other resources outside of the “athletic bubble” that athletes are unaware of or even uncomfortable with because it is not familiar. This is especially true regarding resources to work through mental health struggles. Improvements need to be made in our counseling

services for student athletes.

Challenges

On NCAA.org, Chris Carr and Jamie Davidson wrote an article talking about how there are 6 challenges facing student athletes and their mental health. **1)** There is still a strong stigma against counseling within the athletic arena. “Mental toughness” is respected in this community and going to seek counseling services is considered weakness. **2)** Resources are still limited. Some schools can barely cover the minimum costs of having coaches and athletic trainers let alone licensed psychologists. **3)** “Sports Psychologist” does not carry as much weight as simply being a “Psychologist” so, this can be confusing to some athletic departments. **4)** Not all counselors have athletic experience which is necessary to fully understand what the students are facing. **5)** Not many universities offer upper level training to be a “Sports Psychologist”. **6)** Even if the athletic

department is willing to refer students to the counseling center, some of them may not have enough training to properly identify if a student needs help or not. A student could go on struggling without anyone ever recommending they seek out counseling.

Noticing the Signs

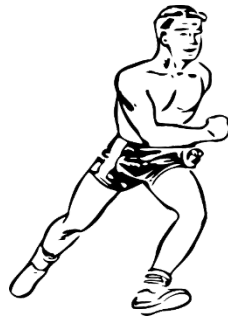
In the article *One Coach's X and O: Pay Attention, Give Permission* by Mark Potter, he encourages paying close attention to the student’s behavior. While it is sometimes necessary to push through mental barriers to achieve fantastic athletic feats, there is a point when the student cannot overcome things by white-knuckling it. Students self-medicating can be a sign that they need to seek out counseling services as well. This can be an indication that they are trying to run from unpleasant feelings. This is when a coach needs to meet the student where they are at and see if they need to seek out counseling. Those that work in athletics needs to give the student “permission” to seek out that help if they do need it.

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Recommendations

There are improvements that can be made in student affairs regarding student athletes. Unfortunately, the divide between athletics and student affairs seems to be like the divide between faculty and staff. What's most important is finding opportunities to create a dialogue between departments about taking care of student athletes. Athletics and academics seem to be the most at odds (Watt, Moore 2001). This necessitates that faculty and coaches speak with each other about the challenges student athletes face on both sides of the aisle. Hopefully, this open dialogue will create understanding of faculty about demanding practice and games schedules while also clueing coaches in to how much classwork their athletes have. Students should also be provided with resources for helping them manage everything. Time management is hard enough as a freshman but adding athletics on top of that can make the juggling even harder. Because of

this, if we want our student athletes to be able to take advantage of counseling services, student affairs will need to be more flexible. Student athletes may need to meet after practice or on a weekend but, as it stands right now, that type of help is not being implemented. Finally, efforts need to be made to network with successful student athletes who possibly could be mentors down the road.



Resources

Unfortunately, counseling services are not always easily accessible to student athletes which requires that the people surrounding them take responsibility for the health of the student mentally and physically. Each student athlete not only has their coach but an academic advisor as well. This advisor can get the

student connected to tutoring and other resources for success in their academics. They also generally have access to athletic trainers and sometimes even a campus doctor which will ensure they are taking care of their physical health as well. Finally, there are the compliance officers which handle most of the paperwork required for student athletes. They will ensure each student meets eligibility standards and that they have turned in all the necessary documents to be on the team. Each of these areas are generally part of the athletic department and are on the front lines when interacting with student athletes. Until colleges/universities start improving counseling services and their outreach to student athletes, the athletic department will need to be more observant so they can locate all the potential issues and refer the student to counseling services when things come up.

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Conclusion

Hopefully, this has raised more awareness about student athletes and the challenges they face in college. With everything they have going on, there is no room for anyone to say that helping student athletes is “not their job”. We all have a part to play in the in health and success of student athletes throughout their higher education journey.

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