

Review Article

Stopping Mind Games: Supporting the Whole College Student-Athletes

Melanie S. Poudevigne¹, Comfort N. Obi²

¹Health & Fitness Management Department, Clayton State University, Morrow, Georgia, U.S.A.

²School of Nursing, Clayton State University, Morrow, Georgia, U.S.A.

¹Corresponding Author : mpoudevigne@clayton.edu

Received: 15 February 2024

Revised: 21 March 2024

Accepted: 03 April 2024

Published: 19 April 2024

Abstract - There is growing attention toward mental health challenges faced by athletes, with prominent figures like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka sharing their struggles. This article examines actions addressing the mental health conditions of U.S. collegiate student-athletes by analyzing data from various sources to understand challenges and available support systems within this community. The authors evolve in public health and examine contemporary actions addressing the mental health conditions of American student-athletes, focusing on governmental initiatives, resources, and support services offered by organizations like the NCAA and the advocacy of university professors and mental health consultants. While these efforts are beneficial, disparities persist, particularly for marginalized groups like women, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC athletes. Recommendations include stress management programs, coach education, tailored interventions, collaborative efforts involving legislation, agencies, and funding organizations, improved mental health screening, enhanced awareness campaigns, and systemic changes to address discrimination and equity issues. The implementation of initiatives like the Social Work Interstate Compact Model Bill may improve access to mental health care for student-athletes, with a focus on addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups.

Keywords - AASP, Certified mental performance consultant, Community observation, Mental health, Student-athletes.

1. Introduction

The mental health of sportsmen and women has, in recent times, attracted more attention, and the vulnerability this group faces has been brought to light by notable people. It is typical to ascribe sportsmen and women as possessing physical strength and prowess and invincible; however, the struggle of Olympic gymnast Simon Biles and tennis champion Naomi Osaka, which played out in full glare worldwide, are just a few incidents that highlight the mental health challenges faced by sportsmen and women.

The mental health of student-athletes is a critical aspect of their overall well-being, influencing not only their academic performance but also their athletic achievements. This community observation aims to shed light on the actions currently taken to address the mental health conditions of American student-athletes, drawing upon a combination of existing community data and observations. Through collaboration with various sources, including government agencies, professional organizations, and universities, this narrative seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and support systems that may be available within this selected community.

2. Contemporary Actions Addressing Mental Health of U. S Student-Athletes

2.1. Governmental Efforts

Arkansas Senator John Boozman and New Jersey Senator Cory Booker have introduced the Targeting Emotional Mental Stability (TEAMS) Act to expand federal grant programs for mental health initiatives aimed at college athletes. Drawing from their own experiences as former student-athletes, they highlight the unique pressures athletes face, exacerbated by factors like social media, name, image, likeness deals, and the transfer portal. The legislation proposes allowing colleges and universities to access funding for mental health programs specifically tailored to athletes, such as peer counseling and crisis lines. Emphasizing the need for such support, they reference a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) survey indicating high rates of mental health issues among college athletes and a reluctance to seek help. The bill has garnered bipartisan support and endorsements from organizations like the NCAA and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.[1]. The data presented below reveals a correlation between the demanding schedules of student-athletes and potential stressors related to balancing academics and sports commitments. The TEAMS Act would allow for GLS Grant Program funding to be used in the creation of



school-based mental health programs such as Mental health care services, peer-to-peer counseling, 24/7 crisis lines, training for students and staff on how to respond to students exhibiting signs of mental distress, and campus-wide measures to address the stigma associated with seeking help.[2].

2.2. Social, Health, and Recreation Agencies

Associations like the NCAA play a crucial role in offering support services. Analyzing their activities provides insights into the available resources and outreach programs aimed at promoting mental health within the student-athlete community. The demand for creative mental health initiatives and support systems tailored to college athletes is rising. According to a survey conducted by the NCAA, student-athletes are increasingly reporting heightened levels of mental health issues such as increased mental fatigue, anxiety, and feelings of depression.[3]. Furthermore, the research revealed that fewer than half of student-athletes feel at ease seeking assistance for their mental health from campus professionals, a notable finding showing the varying quality of accommodations available to student-athletes, potentially influencing their mental well-being. The NCAA Sport Science Institute offers colleges resources focused on mental and physical health, safety, and performance. These resources aid colleges in fostering environments that prioritize both mental and physical well-being for student-athletes while also

working to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health services. Among these resources are educational materials such as the NCAA Mental Health Best Practices, with an updated version set for release in 2024, videos, educational modules, and access to the latest data and research in the field. In 2023, the NCAA reported that 23,272 student-athletes participated in a mental health evaluation study.[3]. The student-athletes, especially the males, reported that their mental health problems had improved since 2020, as reflected in the results in Figure 1.

Contrarily, results in Figures 2 and 3 show that women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ student-athletes still reported high rates of mental health concerns.[3]. Beasley and Hoffman, in a comparative study, measured the mental health knowledge, experiences, and attitudes of 205 undergraduate student-athletes and another 205 non-student-athletes.[4]. They found that students of color experienced higher rates of mental health issues than their white peers, while men had more negative perceptions of mental illness than women.

The 2024 NCAA report on Figures 4 and 5 highlighted the main concerns student-athletes had, which included worrying about academic performance and planning for the future. [3].

Mental Health Concerns
(Percentage of Men's Sports Participants Who Endorsed "Constantly" or "Most Every Day")

	COVID-19 Well-Being Studies			Health and Wellness Study
	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	2022-23
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	31%	27%	25%	17%
Experienced sleep difficulties	31%	18%	18%	17%
Felt mentally exhausted	26%	21%	21%	16%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	14%	11%	11%	9%
Felt very lonely	22%	12%	12%	8%
Felt sad	17%	11%	11%	7%
Felt overwhelming anger	11%	6%	6%	6%
Felt a sense of loss	21%	8%	8%	5%
Felt things were hopeless	11%	10%	10%	4%
Felt so depressed it was difficult to function	7%	5%	5%	3%

Green indicates a decrease of 5 percentage points or more from Fall 2021

Note: The spring 2020 survey asked, "As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you..." and was in the field approximately a month after the pandemic led to the cancelation of winter and spring championships (Mar. 12, 2020) and the closure of most campuses. The fall 2020/2021 and 2023 surveys asked, "Within the last month, have you..." Spring 2020 survey N=15,148 men's sports participants; Fall 2020 survey N=8,799; Fall 2021 survey N = 3,137; 2023 survey N=14,001. Sources: NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Studies (2020 and 2021) and NCAA Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study (2023).



Fig. 1 Mental Health Concerns of Men's College Student-Athletes

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention public slide deck.[25].

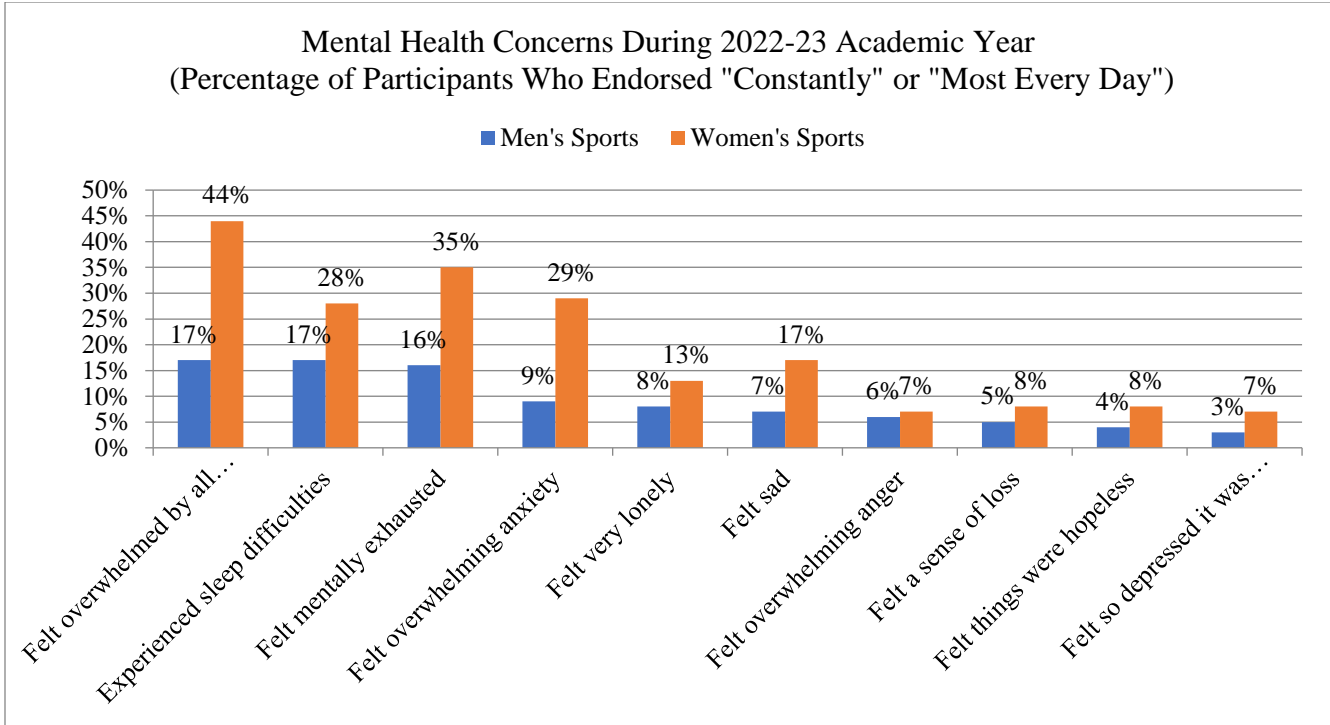


Fig. 2 Comparative responses of college student-athletes mental health concern

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention publicly available slide deck.[25]

Mental Health Concerns
(Percentage of Women's Sports Participants Who Endorsed "Constantly" or "Most Every Day")

	COVID-19 Well-Being Studies			Health and Wellness Study
	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	2022-23
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	50%	51%	47%	44%
Experienced sleep difficulties	42%	28%	28%	28%
Felt mentally exhausted	39%	39%	38%	35%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	27%	29%	29%	29%
Felt very lonely	33%	21%	16%	13%
Felt sad	31%	22%	19%	17%
Felt overwhelming anger	11%	8%	8%	7%
Felt a sense of loss	31%	13%	11%	8%
Felt things were hopeless	16%	16%	10%	8%
Felt so depressed it was difficult to function	9%	9%	9%	7%

Note: The spring 2020 survey asked, "As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you..." and was in the field approximately a month after the pandemic led to the cancellation of winter and spring championships (Mar. 12, 2020) and the closure of most campuses. The fall 2020/2021 and 2023 surveys asked, "Within the last month, have you..." Spring 2020 survey N= 22,472 women's sports participants; Fall 2020 survey N= 18,100; Fall 2021 survey N = 8,863; 2023 survey N=9,271. Sources: [NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Studies](#) (2020 and 2021) and NCAA Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study (2023).



Fig. 3 Mental Health Concerns of Women College Student-Athletes

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention slide deck.[25]

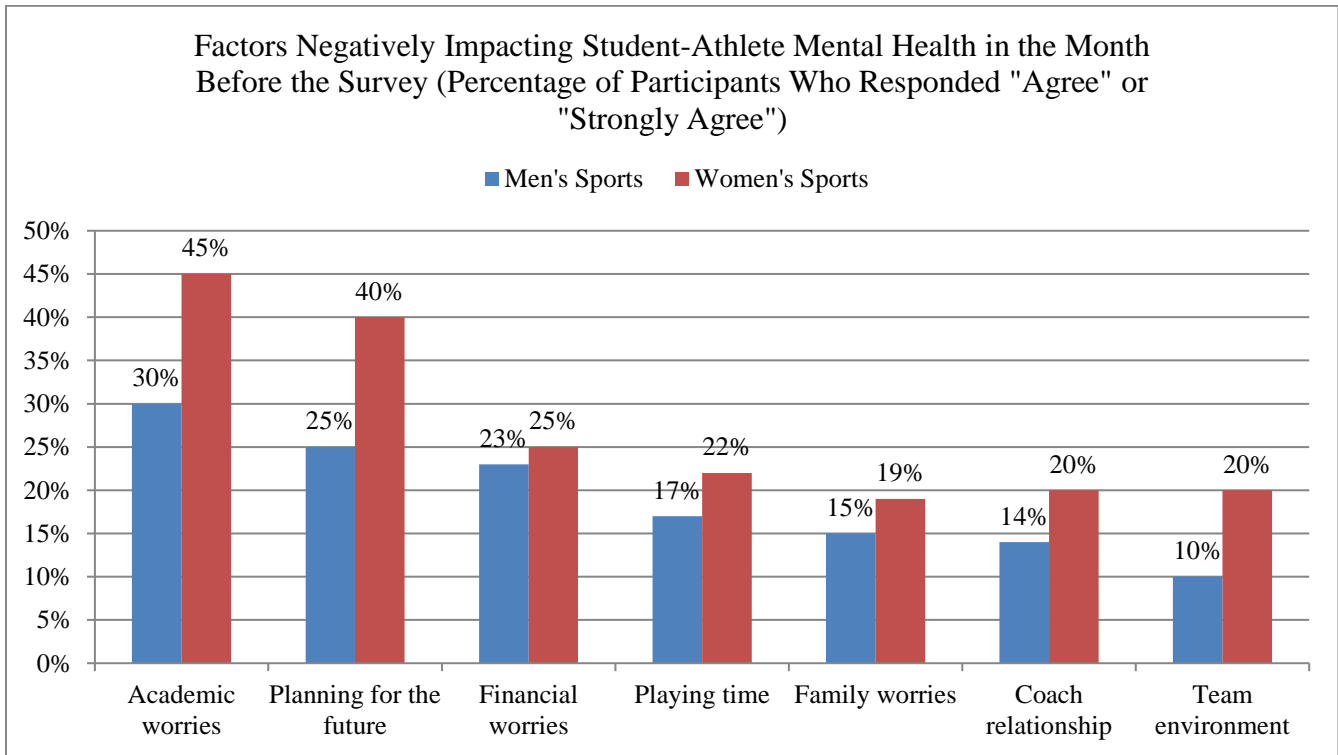
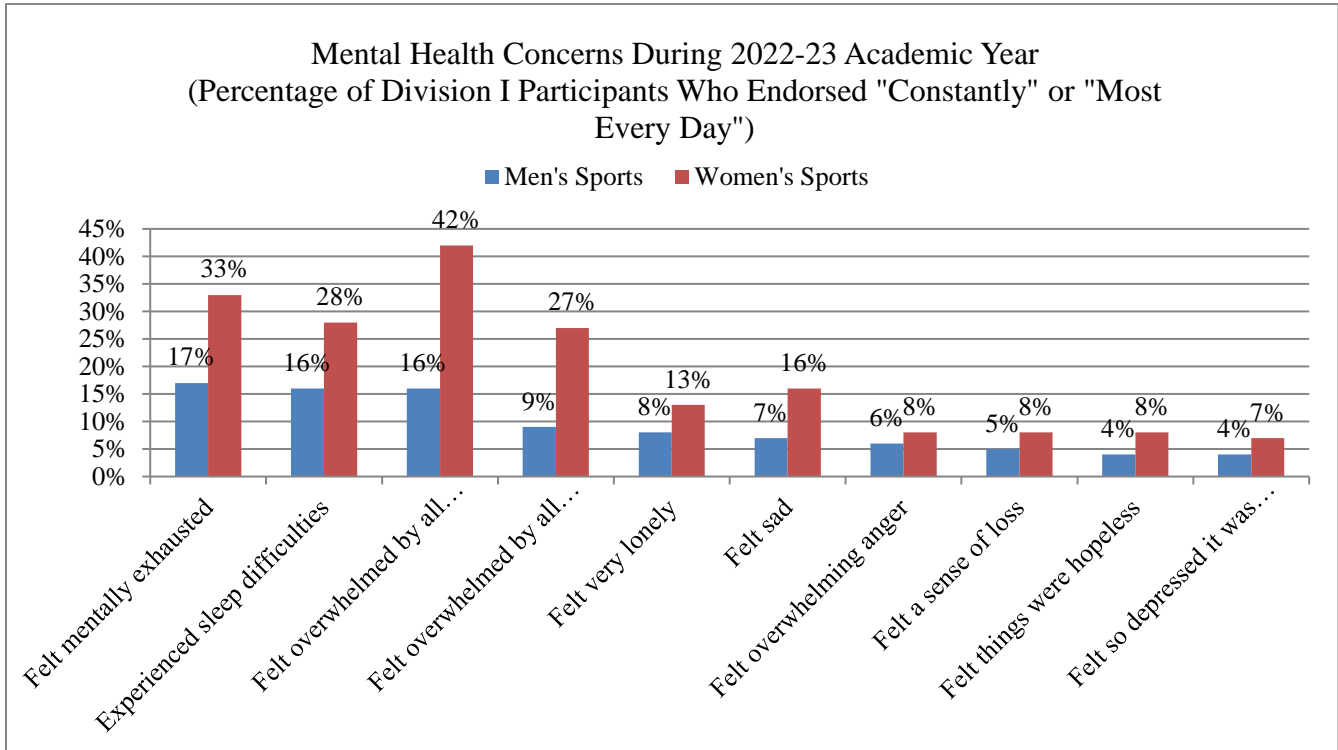
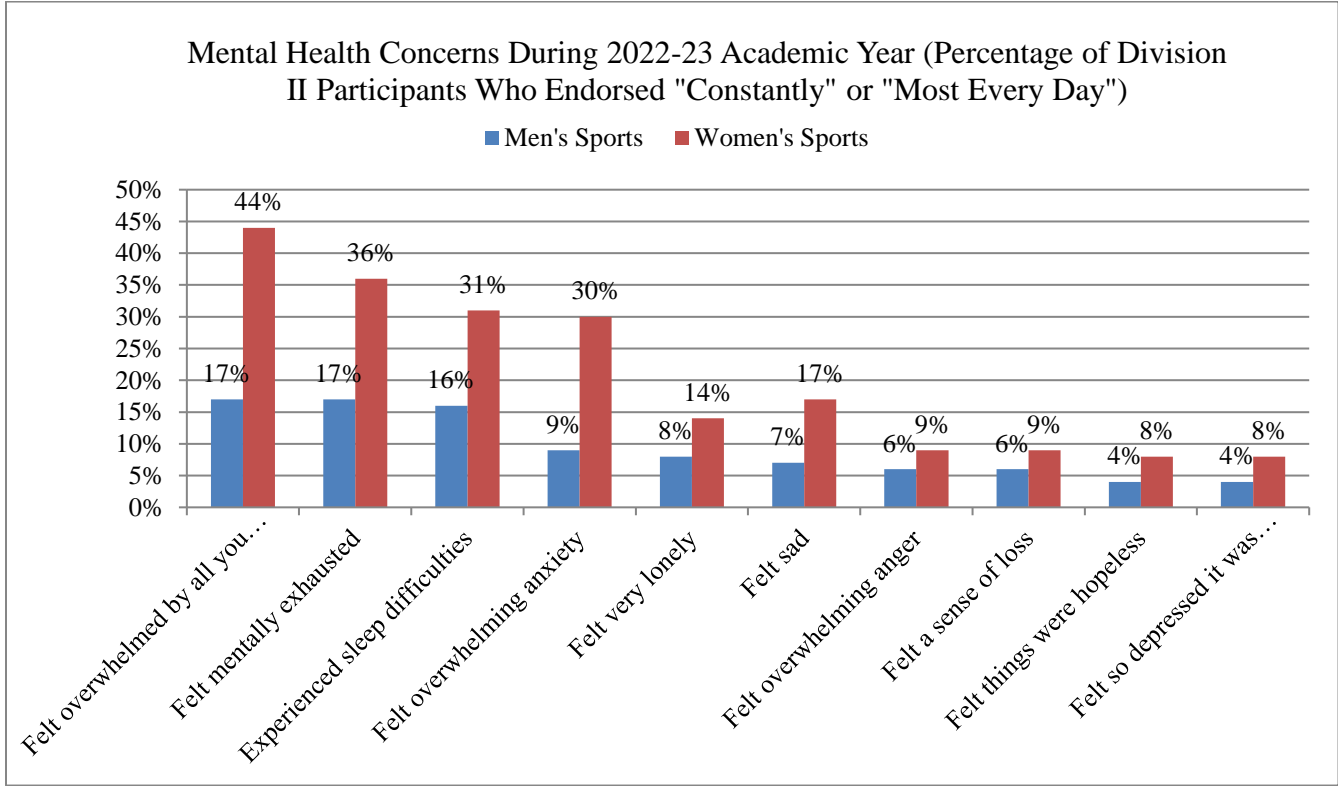


Fig. 4 Factors Negatively Impacting Student-Athletes

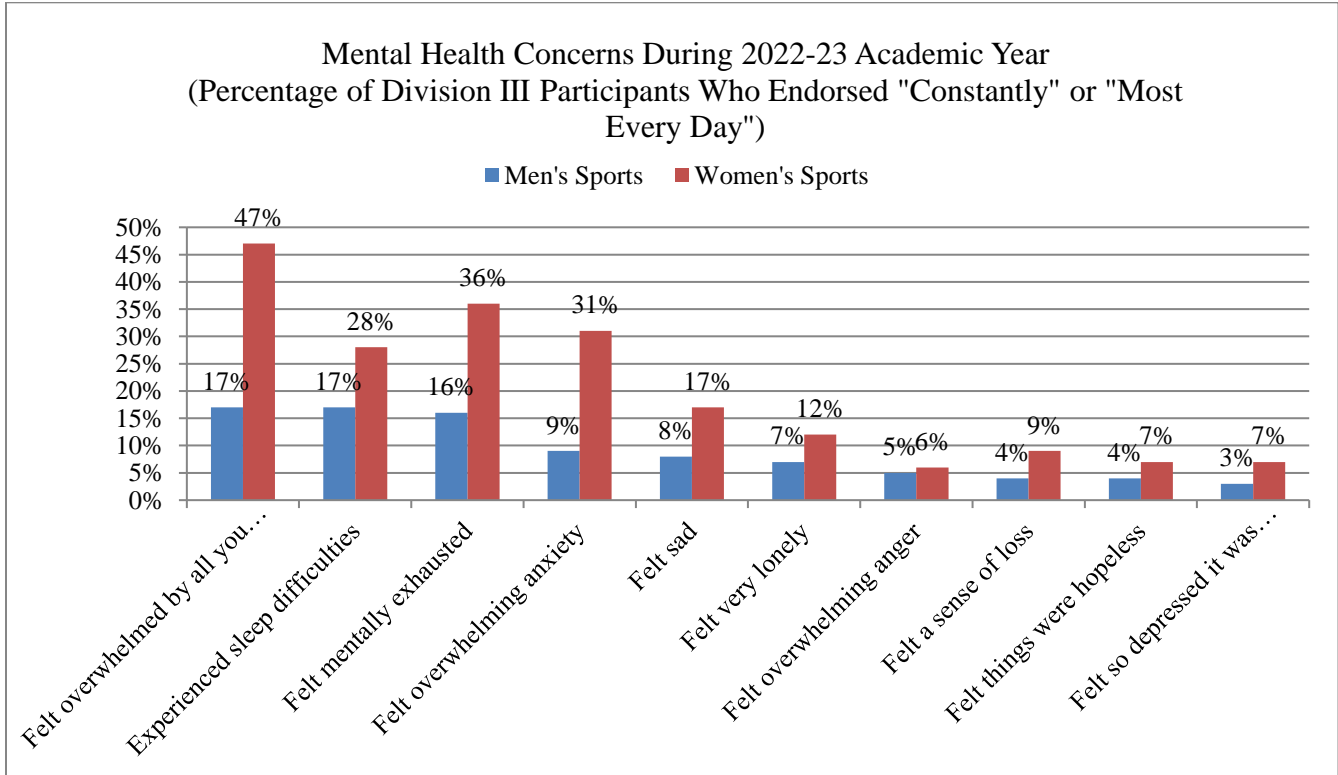
Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention public slide deck.[25].



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig. 5 Mental Health Concerns of Athletes of Various Divisions During COVID: (a) Division I (b) Division II (c) Division III
 Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention public slide deck. [25].

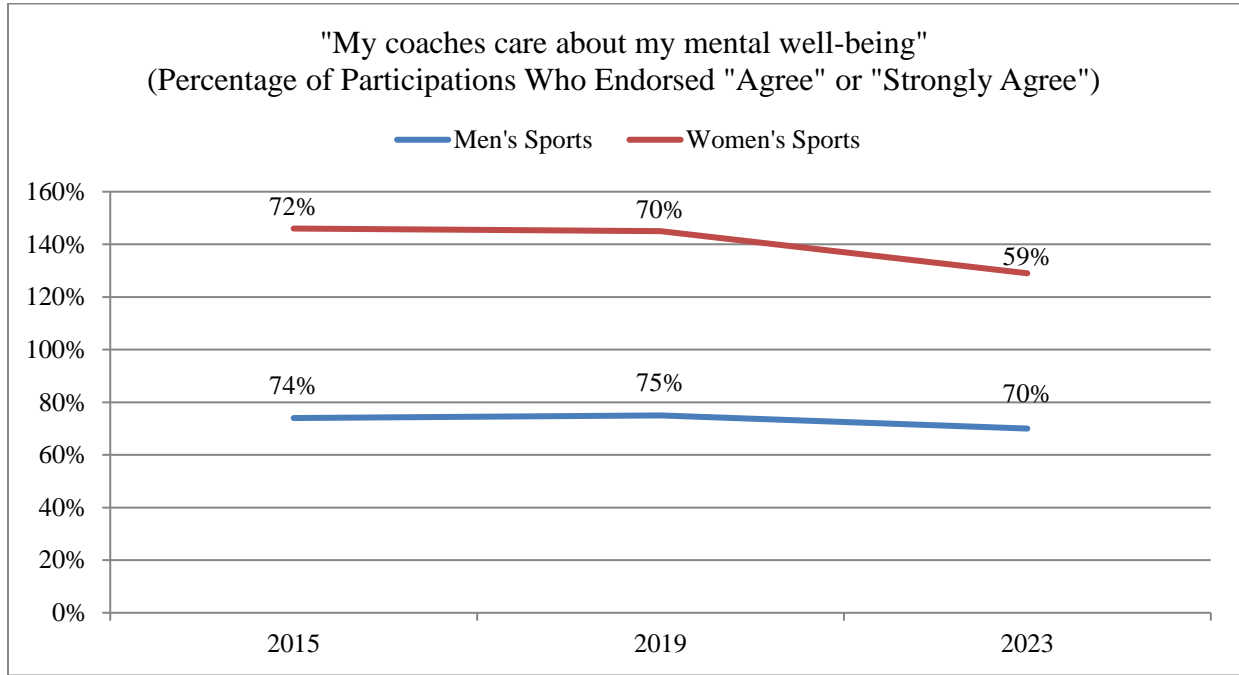


Fig. 6 Perception of Care about Mental Health from athletes by coaches

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention publicly available slide deck.[25].

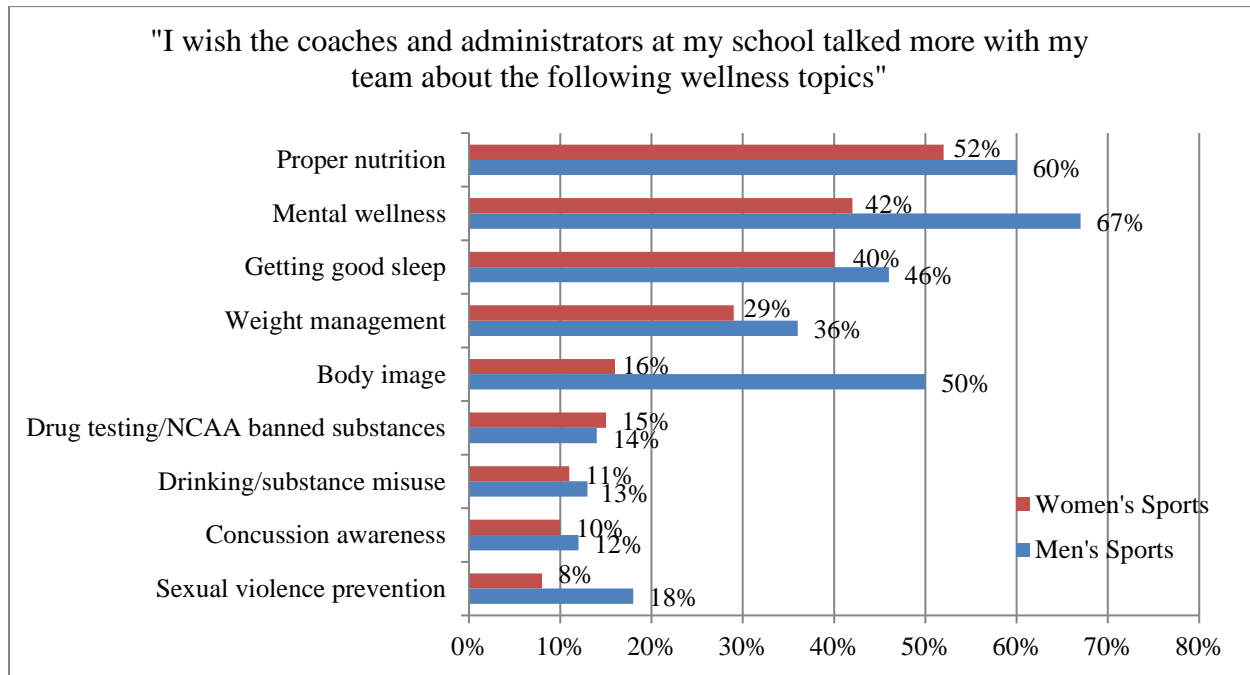


Fig. 7 Desired Wellness Topics by student-athletes

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention public slide deck.[25].

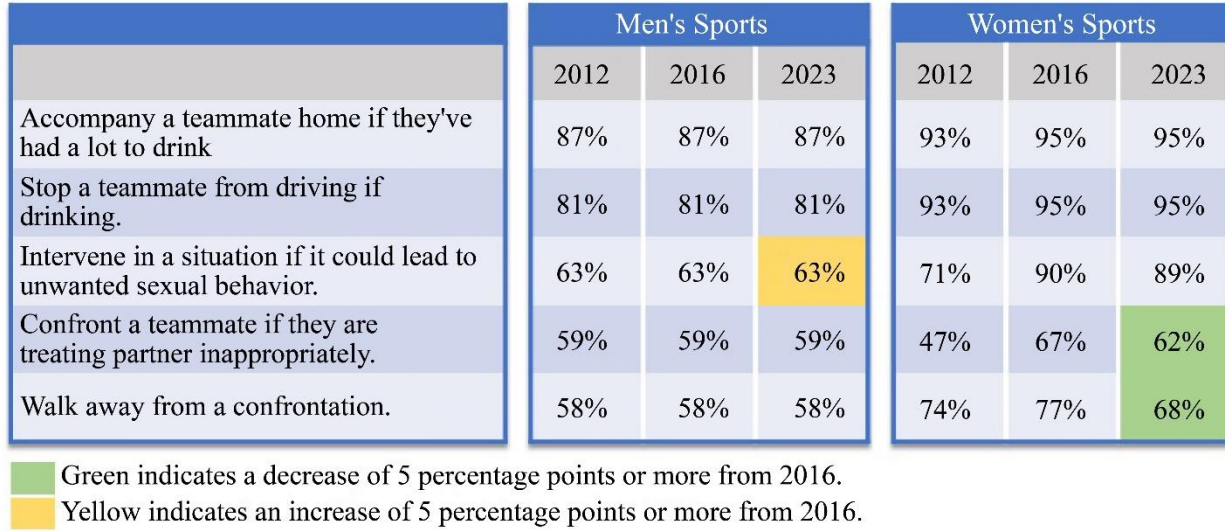
Their symptoms were feeling overwhelmed, poor sleep quality, exhaustion, and anxiety across all three divisions, with women and LGBTQ+ experiencing the worst symptoms [3].

In terms of feeling supported, the student-athletes reported, as shown in Figure 6, that 70% knew where to go and who to trust to get the mental health support they needed. [3]. However, only 50% reported being at ease with seeking help on campus.[3]. The main concern was the lack of trust in sharing their mental health struggles with coaches.

The wellness topics that student-athletes need addressing are shown in Figure 7 and include nutrition and weight management, mental wellness, sleep quality, unwanted sex, and body image. [3].

When it came to the willingness to intervene and support a teammate, the NCAA report in Figure 8 shows that the percentage of women student-athletes involved declined since pre-pandemic. Women reported that they would readily walk away from confrontation. This should be addressed with novel initiatives moving forward.

Willingness to Intervene
(Percent responding "Likely" or "Extremely Likely")



Note: Endorsement of top two points on a 5-point scale. Sources: NCAA Social Environments Study (2012, 2016); NCAA Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study (2023).



Fig. 8 Willingness to Intervene

Reprinted from NCAA 2024 Convention public slide deck. [25].

2.3. Faculty Scholars’ Observations

Certified Mental Performance Consultants with the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) and Exercise and Sport Psychology College Professors and Scientists may offer a holistic approach to addressing personal health and wellness in student-athletes. Partnerships between athletic departments and academic affairs with faculty members whose expertise taps into social work, public health, and exercise psychology may be key to improvements in mental performance for student-athletes. Enrolling student-athletes in a university course for credit towards their graduation should be able to address these concerns swiftly with success. This specialized course would contribute valuable data on the prevalence of mental health issues among student-athletes. One trend assessed in the course, yet lacking comprehensive documentation, is the phenomenon of 'loneliness'. [5]. Meta-analysis results correlate with the findings from the NCAA study. For example, a recent meta-analysis from UNC Chapel Hill found that coaches, trainers, and clinicians play pivotal roles in bolstering the mental health of women student-athletes. Their duties encompass

incorporating mental skills training, educating on sleep hygiene, and conducting routine evaluations. [6]. Another meta-analysis by Chan et al. synthesized 12 studies. It revealed that transgender athletes encounter social discrimination and inequity in their participation in sports, leading to mental health issues and elevated rates of suicide.[7]. Out of a total cohort of 21,565 participants across the studies, 7,152 individuals (33%) experienced discrimination in both sports participation and healthcare, with an estimated rate of 0.61 (95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.35, 0.81). Conversely, transgender athletes who felt accepted and supported by their respective teams represented a rate of 0.39 (95% CI: 0.19, 0.65). These findings highlight significant disparities in the treatment of transgender athletes compared to their experiences in sports participation. [7].

3. Need for Improved Mental Health Support

3.1. Existing Support Systems and Their Impacts

Various organizations and initiatives are working to address the mental health needs of student-athletes. The NCAA offers colleges resources focused on mental and physical health, safety, and performance, including

educational materials, videos, and access to the latest research. The NCAA statistics reveal most athletes now report mental health issues, especially related to academics, performance, sleep, and planning for the future.[3]. However, significant barriers to care remain. Only 50% of athletes feel comfortable accessing campus mental health services. Applying the social justice framework, disparities exist for women and LGBTQ+ athletes in mental healthcare access, mirroring broader societal inequities.[8]. The intersectionality perspective highlights the cumulative stress minority athletes face. While the NCAA has shared guidelines, few comprehensive interventions address root causes like systemic discrimination. Athlete mental healthcare remains siloed from academic/student affairs. A social-ecological approach addressing factors from policy to individual levels is needed.

The NCAA provided recommendations for addressing mental health conditions, the very necessary resources, and the education of athletic staff on identifying signs and symptoms of mental health issues in athletes.[9]. These recommendations encourage universities to develop policy statements and procedures to identify and refer student-athletes with mental health concerns to qualified healthcare professionals and counselors. Previous data has revealed that nearly two-thirds of Athletic Trainers (ATs) with clinical responsibilities at NCAA member institutions have routine or emergency mental health policies. While all of these policies require formal evaluation or treatment, only one-third have procedures for referring symptomatic or at-risks, and 64% lack written procedures for managing suicidal ideation.[9]. Student-athletes would benefit nationwide from David Jobes' approach of assessing suicidality and *combating* it with the assistance of Certified Mental Performance Consultants (CMPCs), social workers, clinical psychologists, mental health nurse practitioners, or mental counselors.[10]. It is of great importance to note that only credentialed, licensed mental health care professionals are to legally evaluate, diagnose, treat, and classify a student-athlete with a mental illness. The credentialed mental health care professional should perform that medical-legal duty and not a non-credentialed individual, no matter how caring that person may be. [11].

Despite the best practice recommendations from the NCAA and the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), the stigma surrounding mental health and the utilization of available resources persists among student-athletes. Some colleges have initiated mental health campaigns, which have been found to have increased mental health knowledge and awareness; however, they have not translated to decreasing mental health stigma.[4]. While the NCAA and NATA have made efforts to address mental health among student-athletes, there is a need for further action to reduce stigma, improve access to resources, and develop comprehensive policies and procedures for identifying and supporting student-athletes with mental health issues.[9].

Additionally, more research is needed to understand student athletes' perspectives and experiences related to mental health to inform effective interventions and support systems.

One of the crucial avenues for bolstering mental health support for student-athletes lies in government legislation. A notable example is the proposed TEAMS Act championed by Senators John Boozman and Cory Booker in 2023, which is designed to broaden federal grant programs dedicated to mental health initiatives tailored specifically for college athletes. By allocating resources and funding towards mental health services, the TEAMS Act underscores the recognition of mental well-being as an integral component of student athletes' overall health and success. The TEAMS Act signifies a significant step forward in addressing the unique mental health challenges faced by college athletes. It acknowledges the growing awareness of the importance of mental health support in the athletic community and seeks to provide tangible resources to meet these needs. Moreover, by proposing targeted initiatives aimed specifically at college athletes, the legislation demonstrates a commitment to understanding and addressing the distinct pressures and stressors that student-athletes encounter within their academic and athletic pursuits. In doing so, the TEAMS Act not only aims to enhance the mental well-being of individual athletes but also to foster a culture of support and inclusivity within collegiate sports programs that are much needed to deal with disparities in race and gender in this population.

In addition to the support systems available, the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) emerges as a pivotal player in bolstering mental health resources for athletes. Renowned as the premier sports psychology organization globally, AASP offers a specialized certification in Mental Performance targeted at licensed counselors, social workers, and clinical psychologists keen on catering to the mental health needs of student-athletes. This certification equips professionals with the expertise necessary to address the multifaceted psychological challenges inherent in athletic performance. AASP distinguishes itself by providing an extensive array of resources tailored to various stakeholders, exemplified by its comprehensive section dedicated solely to mental health resources on its website.[12]. Among its offerings, AASP maintains a curated roster of Certified Mental Performance Consultants (CMPCs), advocating for athletic departments and student-athletes alike to readily seek assistance from these highly trained specialists in times of need. However, recognizing the evolving landscape of mental health support in collegiate athletics, a more proactive strategy involves fostering direct collaboration between athletic departments and CMPCs. By establishing partnerships, athletic departments can facilitate in-house mental health assessments and interventions, thereby streamlining access to crucial support services for student-athletes. Moreover, it is imperative to underscore the invaluable contribution of CMPCs, many of whom possess not only clinical expertise but

also extensive research backgrounds. Leveraging this dual proficiency, CMPCs are uniquely positioned to spearhead data collection efforts aimed at gauging the efficacy of policies instituted by governing bodies like the NCAA in addressing the mental health needs of student-athletes. Through empirical research and data-driven insights, CMPCs play a pivotal role in informing evidence-based practices and shaping future policies to better support the mental well-being of athletes at all levels of competition.

3.2. Problem Etiology and Community Readiness

Mental health programs and support have increased in intercollegiate athletic departments. This is a welcome development because a 2022 Mantra Health and National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics study of allied institutions revealed that 90 percent of them do not have enough training or mental health support services for athletes.[13]. An area the intercollegiate athletic department can address is policy related to mental health. Prior research has addressed how many universities offer mental health resources.[14]. Additional research has used qualitative interviews with college athletes about mental health support resources, finding that while these athletes view those resources as helpful, they can also include barriers to support, such as the limited range of those services and the institution's conflicting interests as stakeholders and employees.[15]. In Hatteberg's study, qualitative interviews were conducted with student-athletes to explore their utilization and perspectives on support services.[15]. The findings revealed that most athletes availed themselves of these resources. Yet, they also identified obstacles to accessing support, including concerns about whether the services prioritized their well-being, issues regarding confidentiality, and doubts about the efficacy of the support provided in meeting their actual needs. Examining athletic department policies on mental health is important as these policies can frame how the athletic department values mental health, which may influence college leaders, coaches, and athletes' perceptions of the supports and resources available for mental health. Additionally, previous research identified that policies may contain mixed messages for college athletes [16], and policy analysis may help in addressing how athletic department programs align with or depart from stated policies. Communication of resources can be the first step toward receiving support, which makes examinations of mental health policy and communication strategies a vital area of study. Regarding the presence of mental health resources in college athlete handbooks, universities should dedicate specific sections to provide clear and accessible information on available mental health services. The data indicates that only 40% of universities currently include such a section, which could make it challenging for student-athletes to find the necessary information and resources.[17]. Furthermore, universities should be mindful of the messaging surrounding mental health concerns, avoiding any language that directly ties these issues to athletic performance. While winning is undoubtedly a

priority in collegiate athletics, student-athletes who are experiencing mental health challenges may not share that same focus. Their primary concern should always be to prioritize their well-being and recovery rather than solely focusing on their athletic performance. Therefore, messaging around mental health should reflect this shift in perspective, demonstrating that the athletic department cares about the student-athlete as a whole person, not just their role as an athlete. By adopting a more compassionate and understanding approach, universities can create an environment where student-athletes feel supported and encouraged to seek help without fear of stigma or repercussions to their athletic careers. [18,19]. The inclusion of dedicated mental health sections in athlete handbooks and the careful consideration of messaging can go a long way in promoting awareness, reducing stigma, and ensuring that student-athletes have access to the resources they need to prioritize their mental well-being.

Indeed, the findings from a community readiness assessment standpoint indicate a lack of awareness regarding the severity of the issue, with coaches and universities only just beginning to acknowledge and address mental health concerns.[20]. While media coverage of athlete suicides has contributed to some level of awareness, stigma surrounding mental health persists, and access to appropriate services remains limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of evidence-based interventions tailored specifically to the unique needs and barriers faced by athletes. Conversations with campus counseling centers reveal a shortage of resources and training to effectively address athlete-specific issues such as identity foreclosure, which certainly affect vulnerable populations documented in the NCAA report.[3]. Looking ahead, it appears inevitable to assess coaches' readiness to address mental health issues in their athletes. Coaches' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding mental health, often referred to as mental health literacy (MHL), significantly influence the mental health climate of teams and impact the identification, referral, and treatment of athletes' mental health issues. Therefore, evaluating collegiate coaches' MHL and factors contributing to their development is imperative.[20]. The NCAA report shows that student-athletes lack the required trust to share their mental health struggles with coaches.[3]. The percentage of women student-athletes declined since pre-pandemic studies and must be addressed with novel initiatives moving forward.

Dr. Jessica Bartley, leading the mental health services at the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), emphasizes the paramount importance of fostering trust in all initiatives provided for athletes.[21]. Bartley, alongside fellow members of the USOPC's Mental Health Task Force, openly acknowledged that their endeavors to enhance the mental well-being of all athletes could only succeed if trust is established as a foundational element. Kirst-Ashman and Hull mentioned the importance of trust in their

textbook on several occasions, notably in the sections dealing with community assessments to characterize effective teams, ethical behaviors, managing diversity, constructing a culture of care, and overall total quality management.[8]. Trust is a central element in the change agent system that could be enhanced by adopting Dr. Alan Chu's compassion framework in athletic performance. [18].

4. Recommendations to move forward

4.1. Stressors in Balancing Academics and Athletics

Student-athletes face significant stressors related to balancing academic and athletic commitments. This finding emphasizes the need for targeted interventions, such as stress management programs, academic support services, and student affairs support services. The targeted interventions would be beneficial if initiated as early as possible during the onboarding process. Stress management programs should emphasize a peer-support initiative that encourages a healthy discussion of any mental health issues, thereby reducing the stigma.

4.2. Coach Education

Discrepancies in the accessibility of coaches to discuss mental health concerns highlight the importance of increasing awareness and promoting mental health resources tailored to the unique needs of student-athletes with coaches as part of their annual professional development. Coach education should also focus on increasing their awareness of the necessity for student-athletes to have time for rest. In a highly competitive world where winning means a lot, some coaches work student-athletes to the extreme without the opportunity for relaxation during the playing season. The NCAA mandates one day off in a week. However, some coaches use this as a travel day, thereby increasing the mental and stress levels of some vulnerable athletes.[22].

4.3. Need for Tailored Interventions

The findings underscore the importance of developing tailored mental health interventions for student-athletes. Collaboration between the Senate, universities, agencies such as AASP and NCAA, and funding organizations is crucial in implementing effective programs and funding mechanisms. To advance mental health equity in sports, it is imperative to implement comprehensive mental health programs tailored to the unique needs of women and LGBTQ+ student-athletes. These programs should consider various determinants like injury, health, and social factors, thereby ensuring holistic support. Public awareness campaigns, supported by newspaper articles and community events, are recommended to destigmatize mental health challenges among student-athletes and encourage open dialogue. Understanding the socio-economic risk factors such as race/ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation is recommended to move forward with care efforts for athletes. The odds of being screened for mental health are lower among Black students due to the stigma

attached to the service utilization and/or previous negative experiences. Mental health literacy will help with removing barriers to treatments. Hamstra-Wright, Coumbe-Lilley, and Bustamante propose a checklist to promote mental health among student-athletes from diverse backgrounds [23].

5. Conclusion

To better serve the student-athlete's needs, changes are required across multiple levels. One of the changes has been enacted by the NCAA Division I Board of Directors who voted to expand health care coverage and academic benefits for college athletes.[24]. The board voted unanimously to implement a new series of standards aimed at improving health care and academic support for Division I college athletes, set to take effect in August 2024. Under the new policy, all Division I schools must offer medical coverage for athletically related injuries for at least two years after an athlete's graduation. It would be beneficial to the other divisions to welcome such expansion. Some conferences already had similar requirements. Universities will be responsible for covering out-of-pocket medical expenses for athletes during their playing careers. Athletes who have been on full athletic scholarships will have access to funds to complete their undergraduate degrees for up to 10 years after ending their playing careers. All Division I athletes will have their scholarships protected from being revoked for athletic reasons, a protection previously only in place for some conference athletes but not all. Division I program must provide mental health services in line with the NCAA's best practice guidelines. Schools must abide by concussion protocols and provide counseling/education on topics including mental health. The changes represent a significant expansion of health care coverage and academic benefits for Division I athletes across the NCAA aimed at better supporting their overall well-being during and after their collegiate careers.

Improved mental health screening, psychoeducation, and crisis services tailored to athletes should be implemented campus-wide. Reducing stigma through athlete testimonials and raising mental health awareness among athletic departments and coaches is crucial. Enhanced collaboration between athletic training, in-house counseling services, and health promotion with academic affairs teaching staff and scholars must exist to foster coordination. Policies should support appropriate mental health staffing and facilities for athletes. Lastly, addressing systemic discrimination and equity issues in sports is vital to support minority athletes' well-being. A comprehensive approach focused on the student-athlete experience is essential and much-needed moving forward. As such, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is preparing for the implementation of the Social Work Interstate Compact Model Bill.[25]. The bill will expand opportunities for social workers to provide services in multiple states. The proposed Social Work Interstate Compact

Model Bill aims to address the shortage of mental health providers by facilitating practice mobility for social workers across multiple states. This initiative has received funding and recognition from the Department of Defense, emphasizing the importance of social workers in healthcare and community services. The compact will allow social workers to provide care remotely and/or to underserved areas, removing barriers such as the time-consuming and expensive process of obtaining licensure in each state where social workers need/want to practice. Once enacted by several states, the Compact Commission will be established, marking a significant step toward improved access to mental health care for student-athletes and others in need. Social workers are often better equipped to address the needs of queer, gender, and race disparities in student-athletes. Social workers are trained to consider the broader social, cultural, and systemic factors that contribute to disparities in marginalized communities. They take a holistic approach to addressing issues, considering not just individual mental health but also environmental and structural factors that impact well-being. They are trained with a social justice perspective, which

emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for historically marginalized groups. This perspective enables them to better understand and address the specific challenges faced by queer, gender-diverse, and racially marginalized student-athletes. Social workers have knowledge of and connections to community resources and support networks that can assist student-athletes in accessing culturally competent care and support services tailored to their specific needs. Finally, they are skilled in understanding the intersectionality of identities, recognizing that individuals may (have) experience(d) multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. This understanding allows them to provide more nuanced and effective support to student-athletes who may face intersecting forms of discrimination based on their race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Finally, they are trained in advocacy and empowerment techniques, enabling them to advocate for policy changes and institutional reforms to address systemic barriers and promote equity and inclusion within sports organizations and educational institutions.

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