Promoting Mental Health, Resiliency, and Life Skills among Student-Athletes

Policarpio DeCano, University of Washington
Clayton Cook (Advisor), University of Washington
Chris Daikos, University of Washington

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Sports management is an important aspect of a well-running collegiate athletic system. Personnel in sports management are responsible for delivering a variety of valuable services that include, but are not limited to, providing goods to teams (e.g., uniforms, equipment), establishing a positive brand name for the athletic program, and organizing services to enable student-athletes to maintain sports eligibility. Despite these and other valuable services, there is an existing void in the current collegiate athletic system that the field of sports management should be cognizant of and can help address. This void, which represents the topic of this presentation, is a dearth of supports student-athletes receive to promote their mental health and resilience and teach life skills that help their successful transition to life after sports.

Within every collegiate athletic system are a significant proportion of student-athletes who exhibit social, emotional, and academic problems, that negatively impact their sport performance and places them at risk for adjusting to life outside of sports. Student-athletes have been shown to be more susceptible to developing these problems than other college students given unique stressors associated with navigating the collegiate athletic system, including high expectations for athletic performance, competition for playing time, increased exposure to outside negative influences (e.g., sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drug use, pressure from family, money from donors or agents, etc.), coping with a debilitating injury, and challenges faced with balancing academic and athletic demands. Student-athletes who do not possess skills to manage these stressors are likely to be at risk for developing a range of mental health problems.

In addition to student-athletes’ susceptibility to the above-mentioned stressors, which can result in mental health issues, some enter college with mental health problems. Potential mental health problems can include difficulties managing anger, depressive tendencies, anxiety that results in avoidance of important social and academic activities, and overall poor decision-making. Scientific research indicates that roughly one out of every five college students suffers from a diagnosable mental health problem. Moreover, many student-athletes are likely to come from low-income, disadvantaged environments. This presents a unique challenge to collegiate athletic systems because, according to research, students from low-income and disadvantaged environments have an increased likelihood of social-emotional and academic problems that are likely to create problems on and off the field of play (e.g., delinquent acts, socially irresponsible behaviors, addictive behaviors, domestic violence). The story of the young athlete who gets into trouble because of drug problems, physical altercations, or some other rule violating behavior has been repeatedly played out in the media and a plague to universities. If untreated, these student-athletes are on a stable trajectory towards negative life-long outcomes and colleges are susceptible to attracting negative publicity.

The above discussion paints a clear picture that a significant proportion of student-athletes are at risk for a host of problems including poor sports performance, failure to complete college with a degree, difficulty managing life stressors, and/or being unable to transition successfully to life after sports. Considering these factors, it is clear there is a need to better support student-athletes in areas that extend beyond their academic performance in the classroom and physical performance on the field.

Currently, there is no service delivery model in place for providing student-athletes with the mental health, life, and resilience skills to offset the challenges inherent to the student-athlete experience, adequately preparing them for life beyond sports. The need for assistance surpasses existing supports provided to student-athletes in the areas of (a) academic tutoring to maintain eligibility and (b) sports medicine to ensure athletes are physically recovered and fit to play. What is needed is a parallel system that delivers a range of mental health and life-skill supports. Sports management can play an important role in helping advocate, organize, and deliver services that promote student-athletes’ mental health and resilience and, ultimately, prepare them to be successful in life after sports.
The purpose of this symposium is to bring attention to the need for improved services within collegiate athletic systems for student-athletes to promote their mental health, resilience, and life skills. To accomplish this, two presentations will be delivered as part of this symposium. The first presentation will discuss mental health and life adjustment issues of student-athletes. The point will be made that the existing model of collegiate athletics does not adequately support student-athletes, and many of them are ill-equipped to adjust to life once sports are no longer a primary focus. This presentation will help establish the context for the symposium overall, as well as build the case for the second presentation.

The second presentation will focus on how to develop and implement umbrella programming that targets mental health, resiliency, and life skills among student-athletes. Specifically, a multi-tiered service delivery model will be presented. The foundation of the multi-tiered model is the universal level of supports that all individuals receive. The goal of universal supports is to promote mental health, resilience, and life-skill development among all student-athletes thereby preventing problems from emerging in the first place. Even with the best universal supports, there will be some people who will exhibit problems and need additional supports. The selected, or secondary, level of supports is intended for those student-athletes who have been proactively identified as at-risk via a screening process. The goal of the selected level of supports is to reverse emerging problems and minimize student-athletes’ risk of experiencing negative outcomes. Last, the intensive, or tertiary, level of supports represents individualized treatment services that are provided to those who are demonstrating chronic problems or consistent symptoms associated with a disorder, with the aim of managing or producing recovery from the disorder.

Attendees will be empowered with a greater awareness of the need for mental health services in collegiate athletics. They will learn about the prevalence of student-athlete mental health issues that are often overlooked due to the lack of adequate mental health supports and services for student-athletes. Attendees will learn about a multi-tiered service delivery model, which promotes mental health, resilience, and life skills among student-athletes. Ultimately, attendees will gain information that will broaden their perspective of the role they can serve to support the full range of student-athletes’ needs.