Sexual Assault Prevention: Rationale, Recommendations and Best Practices for Sport Managers in College Athletics

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Prior to the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, sexual assault, rape, and other forms of violence against women were rarely discussed in public forums, let alone studied in academic settings. During this era of activism, rape crisis centers and other support mechanisms for women were created nationwide, though little research into either victimization or perpetration was conducted (Sable, Danis, Mauzy & Gallagher, 2006). The 1980s began to see general research in the field of violence against women. After a multitude of high-profile athletes garnered media attention for violent acts against women in the 1980s and 1990s (many of which are detailed in Benedict, 1997), researchers in fields ranging from sociology to psychology to higher education took notice and began conducting studies to assess the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women.

Empirical results from the 1990s were mixed. The findings indicated student-athletes disproportionately represented perpetrators of sexual assault (Croset et al., 1996; Fritner & Rubinson, 1993), and disproportionately held attitudes accepting of sexual aggression and rape myths (Boeringer 1996, 1999; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Sawyer et al., 2002). In contrast, one study found that student-athletes were not overrepresented as perpetrators of sexual assault in campus police reports (Crosset et al., 1995). Further, there is a definitive gap in the literature in the 2000s. During the last 15 years, only one study sought to question whether male student-athletes are more likely to perpetrate sexual assault (Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002). Many studies, however, have documented the generally positive effects of sexual assault prevention programming with student-athletes (Foubert & Perry, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McMahon & Farmer, 2009; Moynihan & Banyard, 2008).

Despite the dearth of recent literature, sexual assault continues to be highly prevalent on college campuses nationwide. In 2007, the National Institute of Justice released the Campus Sexual Assault Study. This study found that one in five undergraduate female students were the victims of attempted or completed sexual assault while in college, and the study included recommendations for future campus education and prevention (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). Based upon the findings in this study, the Office for Civil Rights released a “Dear Colleague Letter” (DCL) in April 2011 instructing universities to take more decisive action to combat sexual assault on campus. The legal basis for this letter rests in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which bans sex discrimination in educational settings. The DCL outlined how Title IX may be applied to adjudicate student-on-student sexual assault and further explained the responsibility of institutions to begin taking immediate steps to end violence against women on college campuses (Ali, 2011). While calling for institutions to more appropriately investigate and sanction perpetrators of sexual assault, the DCL also mandates that universities provide overall campus education and prevention programming to reduce the incidences of sexual assault.

Unfortunately, however, universities have struggled with complying with the new requirements set forth in the DCL, as the language of the document is both broad and vague, and many universities lack the oversight, resources, and funding to appropriately comply with the new regulations (Kelderman, 2012). As such, more than 50 schools are currently under investigation by the OCR to ensure proper Title IX compliance in providing safe educational environments for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Many of the institutions under investigation have also been in the media spotlight for incidences of sexual assault involving student-athletes.

While there is concern that student-athletes face unfair scrutiny by the media due to their higher-profile status when compared to non-athletes on college campuses (Coakley, 2009; Melnick, 1992), it remains that student-athletes do commit violence against women (see Atwell, 2014; Lavigne & Noren, 2014). Whether they do so more than non-athletes is not the focus of this presentation; the fact is, student-athletes do perpetrate sexual assault and this needs to be addressed for the safety of student-athletes and other students on campus. Thus, many athletic departments,
administrators, and others in sports management, may have a keen interest in preventing sexual assault in intercollegiate athletics through various educational programs.

These efforts are crucial, given the devastating effects of sexual assault on its victims. According to Brener, McMahon, Warren and Douglas (1999), college women who have experienced sexual assault were more likely than their non-victimized peers to engage in drinking and driving, binge drinking, marijuana usage, and to have thoughts of attempting suicide. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Black, et al., 2011) discovered that victims of sexual assault were more likely than non-victims to report difficulty sleeping, activity limitations, chronic pain, and frequent headaches. Due to these debilitating effects, further study of sexual assault and the implementation of evidence-based prevention activities should seek to eliminate sexual assault entirely to make college sports a better place for the young men and women participating.

Therefore, the purpose of this poster is to review the sexual assault prevention literature and provide recommendations and best practices for sport managers. In addition, these best practices should be incorporated by faculty into course planning to prepare future sport administrators.

Best practices encourage two main tenets: “saturation” and bystander intervention. One, sport managers must understand the “saturation” perspective, as opposed to a “sprinkling” perspective. Saturation provides ongoing prevention programs over a sustained period of time (e.g., programming once a week throughout the semester), whereas sprinkling provides a one-time only prevention program (e.g., a presentation during first-year orientation). Research has shown the effectiveness of saturation, particularly through semester-long programming (see Flores & Hartlaub, 1998).

Two, “saturation” should be combined with other attributes of effective programming. Banyard, Moinihan, and Plante (2007), outlined “the importance of changing attitudes of both men and women as key antecedents to unwanted sexual experiences” and “the efficacy of single-sex groups for programming, the importance of using peer leaders, and the need to use active learning strategies” (p. 464). An innovative approach incorporating the above characteristics is bystander intervention. Bystander education can take many forms, though the overall premise is to educate both men and women to intervene before sexual assault occurs. As potential witnesses or bystanders, they are taught safe and effective ways to intervene in incidents occurring among friends, acquaintances, or strangers (Banyard, et al., 2007).

Thus, one major recommendation is to combine bystander intervention programming with a “saturation” perspective to provide sexual assault prevention education within intercollegiate athletics. Additional best practices and recommendations will be outlined in detail for this poster presentation.