The Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments: Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture

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Prior to the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, 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 the women’s rights movement, rape crisis centers and other support mechanisms for women were created nationwide, though little research into either victimization or perpetration was conducted during this time (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 specifically 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 (i.e., Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, & Benedict, 1996; Koss & Gaines, 1993).

Empirical results regarding the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women from the 1990s were mixed, and, as such, were subject to criticisms from the field (see Crossett, 1999). Further, there is a definitive gap in the literature in the 2000s. In April 2011, however, the Office for Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague Letter” as a call for universities to more swiftly and adequately address incidences of sexual assault by students, though there is little current research on student-athlete populations (Ali, 2011). In the wake of this “Dear Colleague Letter” (DCL), universities must have a fuller picture not only of student sexual assault in general but also of student-athlete involvement as they begin implementing or revamping programs to reduce sexual assault on campus. Due to the lack of current research, and considering past criticisms on methodology and theoretic frameworks, it is imperative to study the nature of sexual assault within intercollegiate athletics to adequately address the problem.

This study fills a gap in the literature on sexual assault within college athletics. Additionally, following Lather’s (1986) research as praxis, its use-inspired research will further the work of universities and athletic departments in preventing sexual assault from occurring. As such, this study contributes to bettering the lives of student-athletes by preventing and reducing sexual assault through an evaluation of athletic department culture. Additionally, through understanding of the impact of sexual assault, this study contributes to the implementation of the DCL and President Obama’s calls to create and maintain effective prevention programs and will thereby reduce the occurrence of sexual assault within athletic departments.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which former student-athletes understand sexual assault, as well as their perceptions of their athletic department’s response to occurrences and prevention. Drawing upon a grounded theory methodology, one goal of this research was to learn more about what student-athletes know sexual assault to be, so that practitioners and researchers alike can work toward creating and implementing more effective programs, ultimately leading to sexual assault-free college sports.

Semi-structured interviews were completed with 15 former intercollegiate student-athletes from big-time athletics departments. Findings indicated three major themes: (1) Participant Knowledge of Sexual Assault; (2) Sexual Assault Within the Context of College Athletics; and (3) Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture, leading the creation of the Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments. Recommendations for athletic departments and universities suggested policy changes, including use of the curriculum for a model sexual assault prevention education program, A Zero Tolerance Approach: Sexual Assault Prevention Education for Student-Athletes (SAPES). This presentation will focus on the study’s third major theme, Creating Change Athletic Department Culture, with an emphasis on the Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments. Implications of these findings will also be discussed.