

Exploring Student-Athlete Development as a Career for Sport Social Workers

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Abstract

Student-athlete development and sport social work are both relatively new fields in intercollegiate athletics. This article aims to highlight the synergy between these two spaces and promote student-athlete development as a career pathway for sport social workers, particularly in NCAA Division III. After conducting an informal internet search, there were only 6 social workers on the athletics staff across 433 NCAA Division III Institutions. Results found that three social workers worked in clinical services, one worked in administration, one worked in student success, and one in student-athlete development. While most social workers pursue a career in clinical work, it is important to recognize roles like student-athlete development that not only closely aligns with social work values and goals but also opens more opportunities in a niche subfield of the profession.

Keywords: Student-athlete development, sport social work, intercollegiate athletics, career paths

Introduction

Student-athlete development is an increasingly prominent area within intercollegiate athletics. Student-athlete development focuses on enriching the student-athlete experience and preparing student-athletes for life after sport. The core standards for student-athlete development programming include personal enhancement, Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, career development, leadership, civic engagement, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals, 2022). While student-athlete development is a staple unit in many larger, well-funded NCAA institutions, it is not as widely available to student-athletes at NCAA Division III schools due to smaller athletic departments and budget constraints. NCAA Division III schools may partner with campus resources to deliver similar programming; however, these events are likely tailored to the general student body and lack attention to the student-athlete experience.

Sport social work is another rapidly growing subfield. Applying the person-in-environment perspective (Kondrat, 2013), sport social work centers on addressing the unique needs of athletes (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). There are many parallels between student-athlete and sport social work in that they both use a holistic approach to serving the sports community and helping athletes build their identity outside of sport. Over the last decade, sport social workers climbed their way into different athletic settings, including intercollegiate athletics. Yet few sport social workers venture into student-athlete development despite its synergetic relationship. The goal of this article is to promote opportunities for sport social

workers within intercollegiate athletics and, more specifically, raise awareness of student-athlete development as a potential career pathway.

NCAA Division III Student-Athlete Experience

NCAA Division III (2024) is the largest division of membership institutions with over 430 schools and 37.3% of student-athlete participation. At the NCAA Division III level, student-athletes maintain the purest form of amateurism and simply play for love of the game, as they are not offered athletic scholarships or exorbitant Name, Image, and Likeness monetary deals. The NCAA Goals Study (2019), which draws a picture of the student-athlete experience across all three divisions, found that Division III student-athletes spend 28 hours per week in athletics and 40 hours per week on academics. Moreover, 24% of males and 27% of females felt difficulties were piling so high they could not overcome them, demonstrating a concern on stress and time management. As far as career readiness, Division III student-athletes were more prepared for life after sport. Most juniors and seniors secured an internship during college, which was higher than Division I and II. Additionally, most seniors intended to work or attend graduate school upon graduation. Data from the 2019 GOALS Study validates the continued need for student-athlete development at Division III institutions to better support student-athletes as it relates to balancing their demanding schedules while in school but also preparing for life after college given their vested interests.

Student-Athlete Development

Research and programming on student-athlete development has become more prevalent over the last few decades. The NCAA Life Skills Program was introduced in the 1990's and founded on academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and community service (Murdock, 2010). Since then, student-athlete development evolved into focusing on personal enhancement, leadership development, social responsibility, and career development (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Other scholars call for a more integrated approach to student-athlete development to incorporate personal development, performance psychology, and team leadership, which each play a role in helping the student-athlete reach their full potential in life and sports (DiPaulo, 2017). In 2022, the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) released a white paper with recommended best practices for athletic professionals to build programming on personal enhancement, identity development, mental health and wellness, student engagement, transferable skills, effective communication, civic engagement, and career development. These skills are vital to helping student-athletes successfully transition out of college.

Student-athlete development varies widely based on departmental capacity (Navarro et al, 2020). Although there is no standard curriculum, Williams and colleagues (2024) argue that programming must be flexible to address different student-athlete populations, demographics, and contextual factors. Programming involves workshops, training, and experiential learning from subject-matter experts and professionals in

the field (Navarro et al., 2020). Topics run the gamut from time management to study skills, resume writing to interviewing skills, transitioning to college to adjusting to life after sports, bystander intervention to social justice, and so much more. All student-athletes should have access to programming (Navarro, 2015). Some topics may be targeted to a specific class year based on need or skill; however, it's important for programming to be readily available to everyone throughout their college career.

Student-athlete development programming is integral to supporting student-athletes during their college careers. Literature documents a number of positive benefits from participating in student-athlete development programming. A program developed for first-year student-athletes to support their transition from high school to college yielded successful results, as participants noted that active and collaborative learning resulted in psychosocial growth and smooth transition (Pierce et al., 2021). Similarly, interviews with student-athletes who were given the chance to attend professional conferences for the first time expressed their appreciation for developing autonomy to explore their professional interests, building confidence to pursue those interests, and navigating how to better perform in professional settings (Williams et al., 2024). In another qualitative study that evaluated a mentoring program with 15 Black student-athletes at a predominantly White institution, participants illustrated the importance of connecting with professionals with similar interests and backgrounds because of their ability to have honest conversations about navigating race, privilege, and advocacy (Bimper, 2017). Despite limited program evaluation published on student-athlete development programming, these studies justify

administering learning opportunities for student-athletes.

Sport Social Work

Social workers have transferable skills that can translate into working with student-athletes. As guided by the NASW Code of Ethics, sport social workers address a host of vulnerabilities affecting student-athletes, challenge social injustices within the athletic culture or campus, recognize and celebrate cultural and diverse identities within athletics, build relationships with other student-athletes and athletics staff, and advocate for social work values and ethics to maintain integrity within athletics departments (Beasley et al., 2021b). In the field, social workers practice respect, empathy, and genuineness to effectively build rapport with clients; provide clinical interventions for athletic injuries, sexual assault, eating disorders, substance use and abuse, retirement, and mental health; and influence policy changes that promote the safety and well-being of student-athletes at organizational and governmental levels (Moore & Gummelt, 2019).

There are a myriad of ways social work can be practiced within athletic settings. Sport social workers operate in different capacities on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The *Field Education Manual* published by the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (n.d.) solidified the connection between sport and the three levels of social work: micro practice is offered directly to individuals or groups within athletics in case management and supportive counseling or service roles; mezzo practice involve implementing programs and policies within an athletic group, organization, or community; and macro practice affects policies and societies through advocacy, community organizing, and social justice programming.

Based on their professional values, ethics, and skills, sport social work naturally ties into the goals and objectives of student-athlete development. Many professionals with a social work background carry out similar work in different settings, whether in higher education or their community. For instance, social workers provide academic support, community connections, education and training, healthy decision-making, mentoring, program development, risk reduction, social justice advocacy, and so forth. Unfortunately, student-athlete development is not currently mentioned in sport social work literature. Thus, this project sets out to explore the number of social workers working in NCAA Division III athletic departments as well as the number of social workers in student-athlete development roles.

Methods

An informal internet search was conducted to identify the number of professional social workers in NCAA Division III athletic departments. Using the online directory of NCAA Division III Institutions (2024), a research team of graduate social work interns reviewed the athletics staff directories for 433 schools. The research team created a spreadsheet that documented the number of social workers at each institution. Professional social workers identified based on their educational background (BSW, MSW, or PhD in Social Work) and/or social work licensure. Job titles were also recorded in order to categorize those roles into career fields.

Results

There was a total of six social workers, each at different NCAA Division III institutions. Three of the identified social workers were licensed mental health professionals who provided

Table 1*Number of Social Workers in NCAA Division III Athletics Departments*

Role in Athletics Department	Number of Social Workers
Clinical Services	3
Administration	1
Student Success	1
Student-Athlete Development	1
Total	6

counseling and case management. One person worked in administration as a Senior Associate Director of Athletics. Another held a BSW and focused on student success, mainly academic support. Only one licensed social worker worked exclusively in student-athlete development.

Discussion

Career Pathways for Sport Social Workers

These findings highlight several key career fields for sport social workers. Half of social workers found working in NCAA Division III institutions were, not surprisingly, in clinical services. Approximately 60% of social workers registered through the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) in 2023 held a clinical licensure (as cited in Lombardi, et al., 2024). Moreover, a report created for The Council of Social Work Education and National Association of Social Workers determined that 82% of recent social work graduates in the United States provide clinical or direct services to clients (Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity, 2020). The growth of clinical social workers reflects the increasing demand of mental health professionals. Since 2013, the NCAA recognized the need to prioritize mental health of student-athletes with

the creation of the Mental Health Task Force and later blossomed into robust resources, research, and organized dialogue through the NCAA Sport Science Institute. In fact, the NCAA's Mental Health Best Practices: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Health (2024) recommends that athletic departments collaborate with licensed mental health providers to address the mental health and wellness of student-athletes. Sport social workers with a clinical focus can offer their services through mental health counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, performance enhancement, wellness programming, and much more.

Outside of clinical services, there was one person with an undergraduate degree in social work who worked in athletics administration. Traditionally social workers tend to work their way up from a clinical position to a managerial position as a natural progression in their career. Yet few start out with the goal to be an administrator. Social work management combines the valuable knowledge and skills of both social work and administration in order to effectively lead human service organizations (Arnold, 2023). That said, having a social work background helps lay the foundation for administrators seeking a role within a people-serving profession. Athletics administration is a fit for social workers with experience

in sport management or business and interested in managing daily operations of an athletics department. Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, facilities oversight, game-day operations, fundraising and marketing, budgeting and financing, strategic planning, policy development and enforcement, and personnel management.

Another person with an undergraduate degree in social work was responsible for student success. Student success supports the student-athlete experience in the classroom from college transition to degree completion. Lowe (2023) explains that student success differs by institution but broadly encapsulates retention, academic achievement, employability, and accessibility. Student success professionals may advise on course selection and major requirements, organize programs to enhance study skills or test-taking strategies, advise student clubs and organizations, etc. Similar to student-athlete development, student success includes many of the same core components to bolster the student-athlete experience but seldom touches upon preparation for life after college. Student success is another viable option for social workers, as they often use a person-centered approach when working with students in higher education to meet their individual goals and needs (Anghel et al., 2023; An & Loes, 2023; DeClercq et al., 2017).

The one and only social worker in student-athlete development was licensed with PhD in Social Work. Although athletics departments may coordinate a handful of life skills workshops, academic support, or community service projects, these services are not always referred to as student-athlete development or offered as comprehensive, regularly scheduled programs. In addition, these services are rarely implemented by a social worker despite the synergy between student-athlete development and sport social work.

Student-Athlete Development Model with a Social Work Lens

Findings from this study indicate the lack of social workers in intercollegiate athletics, which may be due to overall unfamiliarity of the sport social work profession (Beasley et al., 2021a). This is particularly true for student-athlete development. The only known student-athlete development model implemented with a social work lens at the NCAA Division III level was discovered at Kean University's Department of Athletics and Recreation. Located in Union, New Jersey, Kean University's Department of Athletics and Recreation has 24 teams with approximately 700 student-athletes. Under the leadership and vision of their Director of Athletics, Kean's student-athlete development model was created to address the holistic needs of student-athletes that intersects with athletic training, recreation, and athletic operations. Kean's student-athlete development model encompasses:

1. *Academic Support.* GAMER (Graduation, Athletic Matriculation, Enrollment, and Retention) seeks to increase retention and graduation rates in the department. Each team is assigned an Athletics Academic Liaison for academic support. Athletics Academic Liaisons primarily

meet with student-athletes who have a 2.5 GPA or lower throughout the semester to check-in on their academic performance and refer out to learning support services, registrar, counseling, etc. Under GAMER, The Starting Line was originally designed to help first-year student-athletes transition into college with a weekly study hall and/or tutoring requirement. In Fall 2023, The Starting Line expanded to non-freshman with a GPA between 2.0-2.9 to ensure they receive the necessary academic support.

2. *Leadership Development.* CLAWs (Cougar Leadership Academy Workshops) equips student-athletes with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and life after sport through a series of workshops and activities. Building on Navarro and Malvaso's (2015) student-athlete development model, applicants accepted into CLAWs participate in workshops based on their class year with a specific focus. The first-year workshops focus on transition to college (i.e., study skills), second-year workshops hone in on social responsibility (i.e., bystander intervention), third-year workshops prepare student-athletes for life after sport (i.e., financial literacy), and fourth/fifth-year workshops concentrate on career development (i.e., interviewing skills). Workshops are facilitated by athletics staff as well as campus partners from Career Services, Center for Leadership and Service, Cougar Connections Center for Social Work, Gourmet Dining, Kean Wellness Center, and more. Student-athletes can also serve as leaders on the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) and take advantage of opportunities to attend national conferences or

participate in community service events.

3. *Career Preparation.* As an extension of CLAWs, Kean University's Department of Athletics and Recreation offers numerous opportunities to jumpstart their careers. The Jacqueline Towns' Women's Empowerment Series is funded by Karl-Anthony Towns in honor of his mother, Jacqueline Towns. To support women's pursuit of success on and off the court, the Jacqueline Towns Women's Empowerment Series invites influential women in the sport industry to speak about their experiences rising to the top in a male-dominated profession. The Department also collaborates with the Office of Alumni Engagement and Career Services to organize their annual Student-Athlete/Alumni Speed Networking Event. During this event, current student-athletes connect with student-athlete alumni through timed interactions and guided questions. Moreover, Kean University has partnerships with several professional sports organizations for internships and networking including the National Football League, New York Jets, Red Bulls, and New Jersey Devils.

4. *Mental Health and Wellness.* In addition to comprehensive support offered by the University to address mental health and wellness, (Counseling Center, Kean University Behavioral Intervention Team, Cougar Connections Center for Social Work, and UWill), Kean's Athletic Trainers are trained in Mental Health First Aid and well-versed in responding to student-athlete concerns and crises. Further, the Department collaborates with Kean's Community Wellness and Counseling Center (CWCC) to

Figure 1

Kean University's Student-Athlete Development Model with a Social Work Lens

Academic Support	Leadership Development	Career Preparation	Mental Health and Wellness	Community Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University's learning support services • GAMER • The Starting Line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLAWs • SAAC • Participation in national conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacqueline Towns' Women's Empowerment Series • Student-Athlete/Alumni Speed Networking • Internship and networking opportunities with professional sport organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University health and wellness support services • Mental Health First Aid for Athletic Trainers • One-on-one counseling with sport social worker • Athlete Mental Health Link • Healthy nutrition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KUBS • Write on Sports • Team IMPACT

offer one-on-one counseling with a sport social worker. Student-athletes also have access to the Athlete Mental Health Link, a mobile app with athlete-centered education, tools, and resources. Within the app is an voluntary daily self-assessment that measures the user's emotional, mental, and physical state. Users can opt to share those overall wellness results with their Athletic Trainer to address any immediate concerns. Nutrition workshops and cooking classes led by the campus dietitian are also offered to student-athletes to help them make healthy food choices.

5. *Community Engagement.* Student-athletes are encouraged to learn about philanthropy and give back to the Kean community by participating in local community outreach programs. Kean University Building Stronger Urban Communities (KUBS) was created to build a pipeline to higher education for neighboring communities. Student-athletes are invited to participate in clinics and sport-

ing events organized by KUBS to mentor youth. The Department of Athletics and Recreation joins forces with non-profit organizations as well where student-athletes can volunteer with after-school literacy programs for middle school students through Write on Sports or lead team activities and games for children with serious illnesses and/or disabilities matched by Team Impact.

Implications

There are several key takeaways from this informal research project. As a growing field, sport social work needs to recognize student-athlete development as a potential career path. In general, sport social work lacks a clear career path and training in intercollegiate athletics (Beasley et al., 2021a; Beasley et al., 2021b). Literature recommends that current sport social workers complete formal education, engage in informal learning opportunities, and draw on experience from personal athletic participation (Magier et al., 2023). Social

work education at both the bachelor's and master's levels should incorporate sport social work into course curricula to educate students on the needs of student-athletes. Furthermore, social work education should organize special events such as bringing in guest speakers, organizing tabling events, or collaborating with professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports to bring awareness of sport social work to college campuses. Identifying field placements within athletic departments is also imperative to give students first-hand experience working with student-athletes. Understandably, the lack of social workers in athletics departments is a barrier to field placement opportunities due to supervision requirements. One alternative is partnering with a social worker in another department on campus with related responsibilities as a field supervisor, and assigning a staff member in the athletics department as a task supervisor.

Misconceptions remain about what social workers can offer athletics departments (Beasley et al., 2021a). By advancing sport social work as a profes-

sion, athletics departments will catch on to the advantages of hiring sport social workers. Sport social workers are trained to design services and programming that truly meet student-athletes where they are at and evaluate the effectiveness of those programs. Sport social workers can help bridge the gap between athletics and the campus community to support student-athlete development and capitalize on an integrated athlete well-being model (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Research suggests that student-athletes should engage with the wider campus community as a way to remove them from a siloed athletic department and ultimately help them better prepare for exploring new environments (Navarro et al., 2015). In doing so, sport social workers can open lines of communication between faculty, staff, and other students to better integrate athletics into the greater campus community and vice versa. As advocates, sport social workers could advocate for student-athlete needs on and off campus by connecting them to essential resources in the community and recommending policy changes. Some sport social workers even have exceptional grant writing skills that can help bring money

into the department for additional programming or staff positions.

Limitations

Since the methods of this informal internet search were not executed with a rigorous research design or Institutional Review Board approvals, there are several limitations that should be taken into consideration. It is possible that some social workers were missed in this search if their position or credentials were not listed on the school's online staff directory. For example, an hourly staff member or volunteer social worker may not be listed on the website. There could also be social workers working primarily with student-athletes in another department outside of athletics (e.g., Counseling Center). The search process did not involve data cleaning, or an in-depth review of the athletic staff directories for accuracy, which opens the results to human error. There are likely additional social workers working on the NCAA Division I or II levels that were not included in this review. A more formal research study should be implemented to truly determine the number of social workers working in

student-athlete development and athletic departments within the NCAA as well as other collegiate athletic governing bodies (i.e., National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA)).

Conclusion

While there are many career paths social workers can choose, sport social work is rife with opportunities. This article discovered several roles for sport social workers in NCAA Division III athletic departments including mental health and wellness, administration, student success, and student-athlete development. Most notably, student athlete development is an area of untapped potential for sport social workers given its nature to support the holistic development and empowerment of student-athletes. Student-athlete development ties into many tenets of the social work profession, making it an innate career path for those interested in working at the mezzo or macro level.

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