

Practice Note: Social Workers, Suit Up! An Analysis of a Practicum Placement within a Collegiate Athletic Department

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Abstract

This practice note presents a case example from a one-semester social work practicum in a Division I athletic department and offers best practice recommendations for future placements in similar settings. Although literature exists on athletic department culture and general practicum standards, there is limited guidance on navigating the unique challenges and opportunities of sport social work placements. This note addresses that gap by offering stakeholder-specific recommendations focused on early cultural immersion, reflective and interdisciplinary practice, and the development of support structures for student-athletes. It also outlines institutional strategies for social work programs, athletic departments, and practicum supervisors to foster ethical, equity-driven, and adaptive learning environments. By drawing from both direct experience and relevant literature, this practice note contributes to the growing field of sport social work and provides actionable insights for building sustainable and student-centered practicum models in athletic contexts.

Stakeholder	Recommendations
Social Work Practicum Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immerse in Athletic Culture Early: Understand the athletic department's structure, language, and values before placement.• Foster Resilience and Reflective Practice: Cultivate self-awareness to navigate role ambiguity and interdisciplinary tensions.• Embrace Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Build relationships with coaches, trainers, and psychologists for holistic student-athlete support.

Stakeholder	Recommendations
Student-Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalize Mental Health Conversations: Engage in open discussions and initiatives around mental health and systemic inequities. • Utilize Available Support: Access services such as counseling, academic support, and financial literacy guidance; recognize social work students as “resource navigators.” • Give Feedback to Inform Services and Programming: Offer honest input to shape responsive and student-centered services.
Athletic Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalize Mental Health and Social Justice Services: Embed social workers to foster well-being and reduce stigma. • Facilitate Orientation and Access: Provide protocols to help social work students integrate into the department. • Support Interprofessional Collaboration: Clarify roles, foster communication, and align services across departments. • Champion Student-Athlete Well-Being Through Partnerships: Invest in permanent roles focused on transitions and biopsychosocial needs.
Social Work Practicum Education Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Formal Partnerships: Establish reciprocal agreements with athletic departments with clear goals and supervision structures. • Develop Site-Specific Practicum Tools: Offer tailored resources and training for students in athletic settings. • Prepare Students for Policy Shifts: Promote adaptability and resilience by embedding reflective and emotional intelligence practices into the curriculum.
Preceptor (Onsite Non-Social Work Supervisor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain Consistent Presence and Guidance: Provide daily support and communicate with off-site practicum instructors. • Foster a Welcoming Environment: Assist students with integration by sharing departmental culture and dynamics. • Clarify Expectations and Scope: Collaborate with practicum education programs to define roles and align activities with social work competencies.
Practicum Instructor (Degreed Social Worker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster Reflective and Ethical Practice: Provide regular supervision emphasizing ethical decision-making and theory-to-practice integration. • Adapt Goals to Site Realities: Revise learning plans based on changing conditions to ensure meaningful outcomes. • Facilitate Cultural Competency: Support students in understanding athletic culture while maintaining social work ethics. • Support and Encourage Advocacy and Empowerment: Promote advocacy and intervene as needed to protect student learning and well-being.

Keywords: sport social work, social work, university athletics, practicum education, student-athletes, social work students, educational development

In recent years, the call for more holistic support systems within collegiate athletics has grown significantly. As student-athletes face increasingly complex academic, athletic, and personal demands, universities are seeking innovative strategies to promote their well-being (Neal et al., 2013; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Social workers are uniquely positioned to contribute to this landscape by addressing the biopsychosocial needs of student-athletes—particularly those related to mental health, transitions in and out of sport, and systemic inequities within collegiate athletic systems (Gill, 2008).

Despite this potential, social work remains an emerging presence in athletic departments. Many institutions lack formalized roles for social workers in sport, and social work education programs have only recently begun exploring practicum placements in these settings (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). As a result, students entering athletic departments often face ambiguity, limited structure, and unclear expectations. These challenges present barriers to integration and supervision, but also opportunities for innovation, advocacy, and interdisciplinary learning (Drolet, 2024).

This manuscript presents a reflective case example from a one-semester social work practicum within a Division I athletic department. Guided by a two-part work plan, the placement highlighted both the potential and limitations of working in this evolving practice area. Key themes included role confusion, limited cultural understanding, and uncertainty in the absence of an on-site social work supervisor. These challenges underscore the importance of cultural immersion, resilience-building, and reflective supervision at every level of the practicum structure.

The following sections offer prac-

tical, stakeholder-informed recommendations grounded in both direct experience and supporting literature. While focused on sport social work, many lessons including interdisciplinary tension, integration into nontraditional environments, and the need for structured support, to a broad range of practicum education innovations.

Athletic Department Culture

Athletic department organizational culture is best learned through an immersive understanding of its creation and management (Slack & Parent, 2006; Singer & Cunningham, 2012). The athletic department is a distinct entity within the university system with a unique culture that requires adequate comprehension before implementing a practicum placement (Singer & Cunningham, 2012). The dynamic and intense ecosystem surrounding competition, teamwork, performance, and bureaucracy is distinctive to athletic departments and teams, contributing to their specific culture. Furthermore, universities have cultural histories associated with their teams, resulting in patterned behaviors and events that are not amenable to alteration (Thelin, 2011). Social workers have a unique role as they are tasked with improving the well-being of humans and their communities while challenging social injustice and driving change for the vulnerable, which can include service and resource acquisition, equal opportunity, and employment-related issues (NASW, 2021).

However, the intricate nature of the athletic department's organizational culture can make it difficult to implement change effectively. For instance, there has been a long-standing debate about whether college sports are a character-building educational activity

for the student-athlete or a funding opportunity for the university system (Thelin, 2011). This highlights the complex and controversial role of a social worker within the complicated establishment. The complexity of the work intensifies when there is a lack of thorough research regarding the diverse values, norms, and perspectives of each team within the department (Schroeder, 2010; Singer & Cunningham, 2012; Beyer & Hannah, 2000). For a social worker, grasping their role within the athletic department's hierarchy—and appreciating the cultural significance of its values and beliefs—is essential. This deep understanding is not just important; it is crucial for effectively facilitating even the smallest changes within the department (Singer & Cunningham, 2012).

At times referred to as 'authoritative,' the athletic department has specific beliefs, values, budgets, and annual reports that are separate from the central system, creating a shared sub-system and culture within the university system (Aron, 2022; Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Frey, 1994; Thelin, 2011). The department strongly emphasizes goal setting, performance evaluations, and competition. The emphasis on measurable objectives and expectations for staff, coaches, and student-athletes can motivate and drive individuals to succeed, but it can also contribute to anxiety and stress due to the paradoxical nature of competition and merit-based performance (Powers et al., 2016). Competition in athletic departments can be a powerful motivator pushing individuals to greatness, and also, when pushed too far, can contribute to high stress and burnout. Furthermore, this same competitive nature that drives coaches, staff, and the athletic department to success can instill destructive leadership qualities when student-athletes are dissatis-

fied with their leadership and lose trust (Powers et al., 2016).

Leadership within an athletic department reflects its organizational culture while shaping the behaviors and attitudes of entry-level personnel, including interns, students, and student-athletes. The athletic department must prioritize interprofessional collaboration, trust, teamwork, and effective communication to alleviate conflicts and address power differentials that may exist among staff and coaches, as collaboration is essential for fostering the overall well-being and mental health of all stakeholders, particularly the student-athletes (Purcell et al., 2019). Without a collaborative environment, student-athletes may experience reluctance to seek support services, as they may perceive doing so as a sign of weakness in the eyes of their peers, coaches, or the broader community (Watson, 2005; Moreland et al., 2018). Therefore, establishing a culture that promotes open dialogue and mutual support is crucial for enhancing the health and performance of the athletic department.

Social Work Students in the Athletic Department

Social workers considering a position within an athletic department can experience numerous inquiries regarding their profession, responsibilities, and intended contributions to the department. Integrating social work within such an organization poses significant challenges, particularly in cases where the department has not previously employed a social worker and lacks an established social services infrastructure (Bates & Kratz, 2022). Research indicates that social workers from diverse backgrounds often encounter difficulties related to organizational structure, professional identity, and hierarchical systems (Am-

brose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Many social workers have described feeling perplexed while working within this system as they advocate for the needs of athletes and their professional interests (Newman et al., 2022). Furthermore, at times, social workers are viewed apprehensively and may not be given a place on the hierarchical pyramid that allows their voices to be heard (Newman et al., 2022). Collaboration can be challenging, as their client-focused approach may sometimes conflict with the institutional framework of the athletic department yet remains essential (Aron, 2022). Developing trusting relationships is critical, as it fosters empowerment and advances client-centered methodologies despite institutional barriers (Bates & Kratz, 2022). By emphasizing relational dynamics, social workers can better address their student-athlete's immediate needs while contributing to developing more responsive and humane institutional frameworks. This emphasis on interpersonal connections ultimately facilitates transformative outcomes for individuals, underscoring the profound impact of nurturing relationships within social work practice.

Social workers are vital members of an interdisciplinary team in an athletic department. They advocate for decisions that affect all members and can contribute to clients' well-being (NASW, 2021). Within the context of athletics, social workers can identify and respond to critical issues such as psychological distress (Moreland et al., 2018), incidents of sexual violence (McCray, 2015), crises and suicide prevention (Rao et al., 2015), career-related and educational opportunity stress (Wendling et al., 2018), as well as social conflicts (Ludvigson, 1997). Through their collaboration with athletic department personnel and coaching staff, social workers provide invaluable resources

and support mechanisms that empower student-athletes to tackle challenges while cultivating effective coping strategies. Furthermore, they are pivotal in advocating for policies and programs that create a healthy and inclusive environment for all participants. Thus, social workers enhance a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting the athletic department and its student-athletes, addressing their diverse needs both on and off the field.

When working with student-athletes, social workers must prioritize authenticity, empathy, and self-awareness to establish trusting relationships (Gummelt, 2018). Social workers must show mutual respect when encouraging student-athletes to share their struggles and feelings. This can be challenging if the social worker does not understand the student-athlete's experiences and environment well (Gummelt, 2018; Bissett & Tamminen, 2022). Participation in athletics often brings additional stressors that can significantly affect a student-athlete's performance, overall health, and well-being. Therefore, building healthy relationships with high trust and respect between student-athletes and social workers takes time but is crucial (Aron, 2022).

To enhance collaboration in providing emotional support, social workers and social work practicum students can work with coaches in an interdisciplinary manner to address student-athletes' needs (Moreland, 2018). Research emphasizes the vital role coaches play in supporting student-athletes dealing with psychological distress, including issues arising from concussions or experiences of sexual violence (Carroll-Alfano, 2017; Kroshus et al., 2014; Kroshus et al., 2018). Due to their close relationships and daily interactions with these individuals, coaches often act as influential leaders and role models and provide

significant emotional support, especially during tough times (Davis & Jowett, 2014; Bissett & Tamminen, 2020). The systems approach theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the collaborative efforts of coaches and staff in creating a structured and supportive environment for all participants (Maher, 2022). This multi-dimensional approach allows the strengths of each profession to contribute to positive outcomes for the student-athlete. However, it is important to recognize that short-term social work practicum students may face challenges building rapport with the coaching staff, mainly due to their strong influence and the difficulty can be heightened without a dedicated, full-time social work practicum instructor, whose presence is crucial for fostering productive interdisciplinary relationships.

Practicum Instructor and Practicum Student Supervisory Relationship

Practicum education is a crucial component of social work students' learning experience, allowing them to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical situations (CSWE, 2015). At times, the term "supervisor" may be used in lieu of "practicum instructor." The practicum instructor is pivotal in guiding and supporting the student throughout their practicum placement, as a mentor, advisor, and supervisor. The practicum instructor's responsibilities include providing practice teaching and feedback on the student's practice skills, monitoring their progress to ensure all competency-based learning requirements, and supporting their professional development. Collaboratively, practicum

instructors and students establish goals and objectives for social work practicum performance evaluation. Students who encounter challenges during the placement can rely on their practicum instructors for support, resources, and expertise. When needed, the practicum instructor can be an advocate for the student's educational experience in the practicum environment to ensure that the learning activities include both the student's learning interests, social work education competency-based expectations, and harmony with the practicum site's goals. The practicum instructor is expected to model the professions and university's best ethical and professional behavior, providing the student with a solid foundation upon which to build their career and guidance as the student develops their social work skills and practice abilities (University of Oklahoma, Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences, Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work [OU Zarrow SSW], 2024).

It is strongly recommended that the practicum student employs the *reflective process* as a best practice, with the guidance and support of their practicum instructor (Brown et al., 2022). This approach effectively enhances the student's learning experience and overall academic performance by engaging in critical self-reflection, allowing practicum students to evaluate their own learning process, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for achieving their academic goals (Boud et al., 1985). The reflective process allows individuals to have enhanced self-awareness and increase their personal and professional learning and development, resulting in better decision-making abilities (Glassburn et al., 2019). As such, the reflective process is a valuable tool that can help practicum students to become more self-aware and empowered learners.

Reflective supervision provides a valuable opportunity for students to discuss situational issues and ethical dilemmas encountered during their practicum placement with their practicum instructors (Glassburn et al., 2019). Scholars have acknowledged practicum instructors' crucial role in students' learning experience and satisfaction (Barlow & Hall, 2007), with on-site supervision resulting in the highest satisfaction ratings (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Transparent communication between practicum students and practicum instructors allows for examining power, privilege, and authority within organizational procedures and relationships, leading to a deeper understanding of the systems that impact the practicum student (Rankine, 2017).

Educational Framework

As part of the degree requirements from an accredited university program, social work students are required to complete practicum course learning wherein they apply knowledge, skills, and cognitive affective processes in community-based settings. At this university, Master of Social Work students experience 900 total learning hours over their 60 credit hour programs divided into two educational levels (foundation and concentration) over a span of four sequential practicum courses. For each level, students seek to demonstrate mastery of the nine core social work competencies and their corresponding practice behaviors under the supervision of a degreed social worker (OU Zarrow SSW, 2024).

Social work students are required to have at least one hour of weekly supervision with a social work supervisor, either on or off-site, who has two years post-graduation experience per accreditation and programmatic standards (CSWE, 2015; OU Zarrow SSW,

2024). While it is highly recommended that students have an on-site social work supervisor due to their ability to provide necessary daily guidance, mentoring, and expert knowledge of the facility and programming (Cleak & Smith, 2012), in cases where an on-site social work supervisor is not available, an off-site practicum instructor is permitted. When the practicum instructor is off-site, it is required to have an on-site preceptor for daily guidance and supervision. This preceptor is not required to be a social worker but must be knowledgeable and participatory in the student's social work educational expectations and learning plan. (CSWE, 2015; OU Zarrow SSW, 2024).

One MSW Concentration Year Practicum Experience

In the subsequent section, an account of the first author's involvement will be provided to establish a framework of the social work field of education program, the placement site, and the common questions received. Throughout this section, the first author will be referred to as the "student." To ensure accuracy, the student maintained daily log documentation and relied on student-athlete log records for all information presented below.

Timeline

This student began the concentration-year practicum in the spring semester, completing approximately 32 hours per week in a block format, totaling 500 hours over 16 weeks. While most hours occurred during standard weekday times, the nature of collegiate athletics meant frequent nights and weekends were also required.

Balancing practicum responsibilities

with external employment, this student coordinated with their employer to use paid leave as needed, ensuring availability for practicum work. Although they attempted to maintain a fixed schedule, the unpredictable demands of the athletic department required ongoing flexibility. Despite these challenges, the students consistently prioritized their education and training.

This experience highlights the importance of clear priorities, time management, and institutional support. The school's flexibility, both in practicum placement structure and faculty guidance, allowed the student to fully engage in a rigorous practicum while meeting work obligations. For other programs, this underscores the value of adaptive practicum models and communication between students, employers, and practicum sites, particularly when students are balancing multiple responsibilities. These conditions did not diminish the student's commitment; rather, they demanded intentional use of every hour and fostered a professional ethic shaped by constraint, focus, and support.

Supervisor and Preceptor

Before the start of this spring semester, the social work practicum instructor and student met with the preceptor to gain insight into the pre-determined sub-department and established the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. The preceptor agreed to provide the student with consistent and reasonable guidance and support to ensure the achievement of all learning objectives. At this time, the preceptor provided the job description to the student and the practicum instructor.

The required supervision sessions between the practicum instructor and student were conducted professionally and with academic focus to ensure the student gained valuable insights into

social work. The social work practicum instructor and the student met weekly for one-hour meetings, off-site, during which they discussed a range of topics related to the athletic department and university policies, ethical considerations, the needs of student-athletes, community initiatives, relevant social work theories, strategies for progress, and the development of a resource fair for the student-athletes. The primary objective of these discussions was to enhance the student's knowledge and skills in the social work field, and provide critical feedback and support, when necessary, all while promoting the welfare of student-athletes. It is worth mentioning, however, that the ambiguity and limited accessibility of the Athletic Department's policies and protocols limited the full understanding and orientation process for both the student and the off-site practicum instructor. Research indicates that the presence of an on-site practicum instructor who is well-versed in the department's strengths and challenges significantly enriches the learning environment, leading to more effective educational outcomes. (Beasley et al., 2023).

Over-All Assignment

In accordance with the guidelines outlined by the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2015), the student was required to complete two educational contracts during their advanced integrative practicum placement. These specific learning plans (referred to as "work plans") were developed to meet the athletic department's expectations and were aligned with the nine competencies of the social work accreditation standards (CSWE, 2015). The student and their social work supervisor carefully selected learning activities based on these competencies, the newly

developed *Field Education Manual* created by the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (2023), and the athletic department's student social work job description:

- Managing the student-athlete Resources Database
- Oversee student-athlete Resource Fair
- Assist coaches in establishing a transcendent culture on assigned teams
- Serve as lead for medically retired and eligibility-expired student-athletes
- Pursue, promote, and secure resources opportunities for student-athletes and necessary support network

The student thoroughly reviewed all relevant documentation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the micro, mezzo, and macro-level practicum requirements associated with their practicum experience. In the first week of January, the student developed Work Plan 1, intended for implementation from mid-January until March 1. Subsequently, a second work plan was created on March 1 to remain in effect until the conclusion of the semester on May 6. Before the semester started, the student had little to no knowledge of the athletic department's inner departmental processes and procedures, so Work Plan 1 was entirely based on the aforementioned generalized sport social work guidance documents.

Educational Contract

Overall, the primary objective was to develop and host a novel Resource Fair for student-athletes in late April, marking the culmination of the semester for both the practicum student and the student-athletes. The development of the Resource Fair spanned both work plans, with specific learning tasks assigned to each plan to align with

progressive practicum competencies and performance goals.

However, concerns about historically low participation rates in non-compulsory events led the student to spend the first eight weeks identifying student-athletes' unique needs, building trust within teams, and recruiting community partners to address those needs. This approach had not previously been implemented at the site. Given that the placement site restricted clinical social work activities, the student's first work plan also involved researching how non-clinical social workers, particularly those working in NCAA Division I athletic departments, contribute to athlete well-being, programming, and departmental culture. This exploration was necessary due to the limited existing guidance on social work roles in athletics outside of mental health care. In addition to this foundational research, the student began establishing relationships with their assigned teams (track and field, gymnastics, softball, and rowing) and learning about the structure, culture, and operational flow of the athletic department.

The student also encountered interrelational and logistical challenges during the practicum. Limited access to student-athletes and staff, combined with the department's intense athletic schedule, made timely introductions and consistent engagement difficult. As a result, orientation to the department and physical navigation of the practicum space was delayed. Furthermore, because social work was a new addition to the department, opportunities to educate others on the profession and its potential contributions were limited, which restricted the range of possible interventions and learning experiences. Despite these barriers, the student successfully scheduled regular meetings with one team, met once with another

team's coaching staff, and was invited, along with another graduate assistant, to attend weekly meetings with a third team. These interactions, though fewer than anticipated, created valuable openings for visibility, trust-building, and role clarification.

Throughout the spring semester of this practicum placement, the topic of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) emerged as a major theme across student-athlete conversations, university policy shifts, and national legal developments. Simultaneously, state-level legislative changes affected campus diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, further influencing the practicum experience. Student-athletes frequently raised questions about financial planning, personal branding, and the evolving definition of their roles within collegiate athletics. These overlapping developments shaped the student's engagement strategies, adjusted learning goals, and informed the broader need for social work advocacy within athletic departments.

Midway through Work Plan 1, the student and practicum supervisor were informed that certain tasks from the original work plan would need to be adjusted or eliminated due to changes in role understanding. One such task involved facilitating a required group for medically retired and eligibility-expired student-athletes. Although this group was initially discussed as a practicum responsibility, the athletics department ultimately determined that it was too closely aligned with clinical therapy and therefore restricted to licensed professionals. While department staff had supported the student's involvement, the Sport Counseling Department advised against it due to its therapeutic nature. Another proposed task, managing the student-athlete resource database, also proved infeasible, as such a database appeared to be non-existent. Given these

limitations, the student prioritized the resource fair, which aligned with their primary learning goals and provided a sustainable, strengths-based way to support student-athletes' transition into post-athletic life. The work plans were subsequently amended to reflect this shift in focus, with additional learning activities added to ensure that practicum competencies were still fully addressed.

Space, Structure, and Supervision

During the student's educational experience, they were assigned to the Student-Athlete Experience office, a sub-department within the athletic department. The office's primary responsibility is to provide direct support to student-athletes by serving as a liaison between the department, the campus, and the surrounding community. Physically, the office is located within the football stadium, on the same floor as the academic arm of the athletic department. This proximity made it easily accessible and familiar to most student-athletes and staff, making it a practical and visible location for a social work presence. While the office does not have a dedicated website, it maintains a strong digital presence through regular updates on social media platforms, particularly when fully staffed. These updates help student-athletes stay informed about current programs and opportunities.

At the time of the student's placement, however, the office was experiencing significant staffing shortages due to turnover. For most of the semester, it was staffed only by a graduate assistant and this practicum student, with limited access to the designated preceptor and reducing the overall capacity of the office. While both individuals worked diligently to support student-athletes, the lack of experienced staff created

challenges in understanding the broader operations of the athletic department.

Responsibilities were distributed among various offices (such as human resources and academic success) each hosting different interns or student workers to meet student-athlete needs across the department. While this department-wide approach helped broaden coverage, high turnover and shifting roles still made it difficult to form and maintain consistent, meaningful relationships with student-athletes. Within the Student-Athlete Experience office specifically, the limited team required the practicum student to take on a high degree of responsibility. Despite these structural challenges, student-athletes' biopsychosocial needs remained central to the office's mission. The student was encouraged to be proactive and creative, using initiative and problem-solving to ensure support remained available and responsive to the needs of the student-athletes.

Work Plan 2

The student crafted Work Plan 2 during the second half of the practicum experience, after spending the first eight weeks gaining foundational knowledge of the athletic department's structure, expectations, and culture. While the plan continued to center around organizing the Resource Fair, it also emphasized deepening engagement with student-athletes, coaches, and staff through more frequent and intentional daily contact.

At the beginning of Work Plan 2, the student had only been able to interact with two spring sport teams due to ongoing competition schedules, delayed introductions, and limited access to coaching staff. Shortly after the development of the second plan, a coach from the university's largest athletics team contacted the Student-Athlete

Experience office to express concern over elevated stress and time demands affecting their student-athletes. While this inquiry ultimately opened a door for deeper engagement, the process of navigating this access point was complex and, at times, fraught with tension. As the social work role within the department was still new and not widely understood, the student encountered subtle resistance and ambiguity regarding their place in the athletic setting. This situation reflects a broader challenge often faced by social workers entering unfamiliar or traditionally insular environments. Although the circumstances surrounding the outreach were difficult, they offered a pivotal opportunity for the student to build credibility, clarify their purpose, and initiate more sustained relationships with student-athletes and staff. This turning point marked a shift in the practicum experience, allowing for growth in collaboration, communication, and professional presence within a dynamic and, at times, uncertain context.

Work Plan 2 was intentionally aligned with social work competencies related to engagement, assessment, and intervention at the micro and mezzo levels. A macro-focused goal was also developed based on earlier observations. During Work Plan 1, the student had identified the absence of a system for documenting and responding to the biopsychosocial needs of student-athletes. In response, the student designed and implemented a case management log to track incoming student-athlete requests, the nature and urgency of those needs, and the teams involved. This data-informed tool helped identify trends, resource gaps, and potential event ideas tailored to common concerns, ultimately shaping the structure and priorities of the Resource Fair.

As the practicum progressed, the Resource Fair remained the capstone project and was successfully hosted in late April. The event was attended by student-athletes, campus partners, and community organizations, and provided student-athletes with access to services related to financial literacy, mental health, nutrition, career planning, and life after sport. The event also allowed the student to demonstrate key competencies related to planning, advocacy, community engagement, and program evaluation.

During the practicum evaluation period, the student's learning contract was reviewed in consultation with their practicum instructor. It was determined that the student successfully met all required competencies outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015). The practicum experience offered a dynamic and evolving learning environment, requiring flexibility, creativity, and professionalism. Despite initial access barriers and role limitations, the student completed the advanced integrative placement with a strong understanding of social work's role in non-clinical athletic environments and demonstrated the ability to translate social work values into action in a complex, interdisciplinary setting.

Overarching Practice-Informed Observations

This manuscript reflects the insights and outcomes from a two-semester social work practicum placement within a collegiate athletic department. While every effort was made to develop comprehensive best practice recommendations, this project's scope was inherently shaped by the placement's structural limitations—specifically, its limited

duration and the absence of an on-site, full-time social worker.

In a more ideal scenario, a longer-term placement alongside a dedicated social work professional embedded within the department could have allowed for a broader and more nuanced exploration of integration strategies. As such, the recommendations presented are drawn from the authors' direct experiences and observations. They are offered in the spirit of advancing ongoing conversations about embedding social workers in collegiate athletic settings, and with the hope that they will serve as a starting point for future placements, programming, and research in this emerging area of practice.

Practicum Supervision and Ethical Guidance

Social work is based on ethical principles that focus on clients' well-being and maintaining the integrity of the practice. An onsite practicum instructor is vital for social work students in host agencies, as it facilitates essential social work guidance, support, and oversight (Dodd, 2007). However, there are instances where such supervision may not be consistently available, which could raise significant ethical concerns and considerations. The largest concern this practicum found was power imbalances between the agency and the student. Without an onsite practicum instructor, students may feel isolated and uncertain about their roles and responsibilities (Dodd, 2007). Regular supervision helps students deal with complex ethical problems and make decisions that align with core social work values like service, social justice, and respect for individuals (Vito, 2015; CSWE, 2015).

When learning about organizational cultures and ethical standards, social work students recognize power imbalances in many areas of practice

and operations. Specifically, in this experience, the power differential was noted between the program and the student and contributed to challenges of access and relation building for effective practice. Host organizations have significant power, which can overshadow or enhance a student's developing professional identity and overall well-being (Hodge et al., 2021). Students may encounter pressure to conform to the agency's practices, even when such practices may conflict with ethical standards or best practices in social work. This pressure can lead to ethical compromises, as students might prioritize the agency's expectations over their professional judgment or student-athletes' needs (Dodd, 2007). The absence of adequate supervision can significantly increase the vulnerability experienced by students. They could hesitate to question agency policies, especially if they seem ethically problematic (Dodd, 2007). Without the support of a qualified supervisor, students may feel inadequate and experience imposter syndrome, which can make it difficult for them to advocate for themselves and their student-athletes (Apgar & Zerrusen, 2024). This situation can create a culture of silence, where ethical concerns go unaddressed, putting student-athletes' welfare at risk and harming the integrity of the social work profession (Vito, 2015).

Encouraging open discussions about ethical concerns can empower students to express their worries and seek help, fostering a culture of ethical practice in the agency. Collaboration between educational institutions and host agencies is essential to ensure students get the support they need to uphold ethical standards in social work. By focusing on ethical considerations during student placements, future social workers are better equipped to handle the complexities of the field with integrity and

confidence.

Building Resiliency for the Practicum Student

Research indicates that social work students frequently encounter considerable stress arising from academic, personal, and relational responsibilities (Kinman & Grant, 2011; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Establishing practicum placements can exacerbate this stress due to various factors, including family dynamics, financial burdens, and student debt (Hemy et al., 2016). Building resilience is an essential aspect of supervision in social work education, as it fosters safe and productive practice environments while reducing the risk of burnout among social work students (Beddoe et al., 2013). Consequently, nurturing resilience is vital for managing stress and effectively navigating complex situations.

To enhance resiliency, social work students should improve their problem-solving skills, strengthen their social support networks, and refine their self-regulation abilities (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Resilience is a process characterized by various personal attributes, including emotional intelligence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills, all of which contribute to an individual's capacity to thrive in the face of challenges (McMahon, 2006). Within social work education, emotional intelligence, social confidence, and reflective practices are significant factors associated with resilience to stress (Grant & Kinman, 2012).

Addonizio (2011) conducted a mixed-methods doctoral dissertation, which revealed that American social work students employing effective coping strategies exhibited significantly lower levels of stress and psychological distress in comparison to their peers. The results of this study illustrate the

significant impact of practical and organizational coping skills—such as the development of realistic goals, proficient planning, effective time management, and the pursuit of social support—on enabling students to manage the inherent demands of their academic curriculum (Benson et al., 2009; Mosimege, 2006; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). This approach emphasizes the importance of fostering resilience among social work students to enhance their well-being and promote academic success.

Navigating NIL and Social Work Practice in a Shifting Policy Landscape

In 2025, the evolution of college athletics, catalyzed by the introduction of NIL legislation, has transformed the landscape by empowering student-athletes to monetize their personal brands and potentially participate in revenue sharing (National Collegiate Athletic Association (*NCAA v. Alston*, 2021; *House v. NCAA*, 2020; *Hubbard v. NCAA*, 2022; *Carter v. NCAA*, 2023; Sullivan Jr. et al., 2024). This development has prompted critical discussions and concerns regarding student-athletes' employment rights and the necessary support systems to navigate this complex environment (National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) 2021; Deubert, 2024). As student-athletes transition toward potential employment opportunities, social workers play an instrumental role in guiding them through these challenges, ensuring they remain informed, supported, and equipped for long-term success.

As NIL continues to evolve, social work is inherently aligned with promoting social justice, ethical standards, and inclusive practices in collaboration with institutions such as the NCAA (Wright, 2024; NASW, 2015). The NASW

has established ethical principles that emphasize the importance of sensitivity toward cultural and social factors while advocating for competence and humility in working with individuals from varied backgrounds (NASW, 2015). Social workers are expected to engage in political and social action that advances fairness and human rights while advocating for policies and programs that protect the dignity of all individuals (NASW, 2015). Similarly, the CSWE has outlined competencies that guide social work students to demonstrate knowledge and skills aligned with ethical and person-centered practices (CSWE, 2015; CSWE, 2022). Within athletic departments, social workers provide mental health services, identify systemic barriers to opportunity, develop education programs, and facilitate support groups that empower student-athletes to share their experiences and access resources. These efforts promote a healthy and respectful environment for all athletes.

NIL presents a unique opportunity to financially empower student-athletes while posing challenges to equitable access and outcomes. It allows athletes to gain financial stability that can be used for education, training, and essential needs—benefits that are often vital and difficult to forgo (Kahler, 2025). Student-athletes who previously lacked financial support can now benefit from partnerships and digital platforms. These opportunities also help amplify the voices of underrepresented athletes, challenging traditional narratives and expanding representation within collegiate sports (Philippou, 2022). Female athletes, particularly those in less-publicized sports, can leverage NIL to gain financial backing and recognition, contributing to efforts addressing gender-based disparities in collegiate athletics (Crabtree, 2024; Shaw, 2023).

However, NIL benefits are not always distributed equally. Student-athletes in high-revenue sports, such as football and basketball, often receive greater compensation than those in less-prominent sports (Wittry, n.d.). Larger institutions may provide more robust NIL support through collectives and specialized resources, while smaller institutions may face challenges in offering similar levels of preparation and assistance (Henderson, 2023; Kahler, 2025). NIL participation may also pressure athletes to focus on personal branding and social media engagement, potentially detracting from academic and athletic commitments.

The ability to generate income allows student-athletes to support their families, invest in their futures, and build personal brands. However, it also introduces challenges, including financial management, contractual obligations, and risks of exploitation (Sadek & Greene, 2023). Many student-athletes may lack experience in financial literacy, making them vulnerable in NIL negotiations. Social workers can collaborate with financial advisors to educate student-athletes on budgeting, taxes, and contract basics—equipping them to make informed decisions. Within athletic departments, social work professionals are well-positioned to help athletes manage these complexities while maintaining focus on their mental health and overall well-being.

As of the publication date, some states have enacted legislation that removed specific institutional initiatives and federal guidance related to Title IX and related programs (Bushard, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). These changes impacted the practicum education experience of one social work student whose original work plan included serving on a campus athletics committee focusing on inclusive

initiatives. Midway through Work Plan 1, this role was removed due to changes in state policy. In response, the student engaged in alternate learning experiences aligned with the goals of student support. To comply with updated state policies, the student revised their second work plan to meet educational competency standards while focusing on permitted activities. This included forming relationships with the campus Gender & Equality Center, Student Life Center, and external organizations to provide services that promote the overall well-being of student-athletes. During this period of transition, state universities were also required to remove specific terminology from hiring materials. The student participated in research with Athletic Department Human Resources staff to develop updated media content aimed at supporting recruitment and retention under the new guidelines.

Recommendations for Social Work Practicum Models

The following recommendations are grounded in the direct experiences of the student during a two-semester practicum within a collegiate athletic department, as well as insights drawn from relevant sport social work literature and emerging best practices. Each stakeholder group includes a brief contextual note connecting these recommendations back to the case example, helping to demonstrate their practical relevance and origin.

1. Social Work Practicum Students

During this practicum, the social work student encountered significant ambiguity in role clarity, access to student-athletes, and departmental expectations, particularly in the early weeks. These recommendations for future practicum

students reflect learning gained through navigating those uncertainties and building trust over time.

- **Immerse in Athletic Culture**
Early: Prioritize understanding the athletic department's unique culture, including its structure, language, and values, before starting the placement.
- **Foster Resilience and Reflective Practice:** Develop strong self-awareness and reflective habits to navigate ambiguity, role confusion, and interdisciplinary tensions effectively.
- **Embrace Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Engage actively with coaches, trainers, and psychologists to build trusting relationships that facilitate holistic support for student-athletes.

2. Student-Athletes

Student-athletes responded positively to personalized outreach and peer-normalized engagement around mental health and support services. These recommendations for student-athletes emerged from patterns observed in feedback, attendance, and participation in campus and department-based events.

- **Normalize Mental Health Conversations:** Participate in programs and initiatives to foster a culture where mental health is openly discussed and de-stigmatized to develop awareness, express personal narratives, and challenge systemic inequities in collegiate sports.
- **Utilize Available Support:** Take advantage of support services and resources provided through social work integration, including counseling, stress management, and academic transition support, that can assist in navigating personal, academic, and NIL-related pressures, especially regarding financial literacy and mental health. Recognize social work practicum students

as bridges, or “resource navigators,” on campus and in the community aimed at supporting holistic development, especially during transitions out of athletics.

- **Give Feedback to Inform Services and Programming:** Contribute honest feedback to social work practicum students and practicum instructors to help shape athlete-centered and responsive services, thereby ensuring they align with real student-athlete challenges and aspirations.

3. Athletic Department

The practicum took place amid leadership transitions and staffing gaps. These recommendations for departments considering engaging with social work practicum students are informed by firsthand observations of how structural challenges, limited onboarding, and a lack of social work integration affected service delivery and relationship-building.

- **Institutionalize Mental Health and Social Justice Services:** Integrate social workers into athletic departments to support student-athlete wellness and inclusion. Actively work to reduce stigma around help-seeking by fostering a culture where all staff and students feel safe discussing mental health and personal challenges.
- **Facilitate Orientation and Access:** Provide structured departmental protocols, including introductions to staff and the physical space to better integrate social work students into the department culture.
- **Support Interprofessional Collaboration:** Create a clear plan for how social work roles, specifically practicum students where a social work supervisor is not on-site, will integrate within existing department structures, including outlining

responsibilities and lines of communication. Encourage collaboration between social workers, coaches, medical staff, and academic advisors to foster a transcendent culture and improve holistic care models.

- **Champion Student-Athlete Well-Being Through Partnerships:** Invest in the integration of permanent social work roles that focus on post-athletic transitions and biopsychosocial needs, especially where clinical services may not be applicable.

4. Social Work Practicum Education Program

The practicum occurred without an on-site social work supervisor. The student relied on an off-site practicum instructor and self-directed learning strategies. These recommendations for social work practicum offices reflect the critical need for stronger structural and curricular support for non-traditional placements like athletic departments.

- **Build Formal Partnerships:** Develop formalized, reciprocal relationships with athletic departments that include clearly defined roles and mutual goals for practicum experiences. Strive for placements that include on-site social work supervisors to maximize learning outcomes and student satisfaction.
- **Develop Site-Specific Practicum Tools:** Ensure students and practicum instructors are equipped to navigate less conventional practicum environments, such as athletic departments, through specialized training and guidance by providing tailored templates or guidance for creating competency-based work plans in emerging fields like sport social work. Offer specialized training for students entering athletic settings to prepare them for the competitive and hierarchical nature

of sports culture.

- **Prepare Students for Policy Shifts:** Prepare students for policy shifts, by encouraging adaptability and proactive engagement with alternative learning opportunities. Support resilience-building as a core competency by embedding reflective practice, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies into curriculum.

5. Preceptor (e.g., On-Site Non-Social Work Supervisor)

The student worked closely with a graduate assistant and had limited contact with the designated preceptor due to departmental turnover. These recommendations can guide preceptors to close the gap in support and communication that impacted supervision and professional development.

- **Maintain Consistent Presence and Guidance:** Even in non-social work roles, offer reliable day-to-day support and communicate the student’s progress and needs to the off-site practicum instructor.
- **Foster a Welcoming Environment:** Help the student integrate into the athletic department culture by offering context, introductions, and insights into team dynamics and values. Bridge departmental knowledge gaps by serving as a conduit for practicum students to understand the inner workings, schedules, and structures of the athletic department to ease integration and maximize productivity.
- **Clarify Expectations and Scope:** Collaborate with the practicum education program to clearly define what a social work student can and cannot do within the practicum. Advocate for the inclusion of learning activities that align with social work competencies while maintaining department functionality.

6. Practicum Instructor (Social Worker Providing Supervision)

Weekly reflective supervision became essential in processing complex experiences and reconciling social work values with a competitive, hierarchical athletic culture. These recommendations for a practicum instructor may inform how to enhance the supervision process and reduce challenges faced throughout the placement.

- **Foster Reflective and Ethical Practice:** Offer regular supervision that focuses on role clarity, ethical dilemmas, and the tension between client-centered social work and institutional priorities. Promote weekly supervision that emphasizes critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and integration of theory with practice, even in non-traditional environments. Encourage reflective supervision that supports students in processing their experiences, addressing imposter syndrome, and developing professional identity.
- **Adapt Goals to Site Realities:** Work flexibly with the student to revise learning plans as site conditions evolve, ensuring meaningful and achievable learning outcomes.
- **Facilitate Cultural Competency:** Help students understand and respect the nuances of athletic culture while maintaining core social work values and ethics.
- **Support and Encourage Advocacy and Empowerment:** Encourage students to advocate for themselves and the athletes in ways that align with social justice and systemic

change principles. Advocate for placement quality and student well-being, intervening when necessary to ensure educational competencies are met amid institutional disruptions.

While grounded in one case example, these recommendations offer transferable insights for athletic departments and practicum education programs working to embed social work within collegiate sports contexts. Many of the challenges highlighted, such as supervisor availability, unclear role expectations, and access limitations, are not exclusive to sport settings. However, this manuscript illustrates how they manifest uniquely within the culture and structure of collegiate athletics.

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