



## **Commentary: Integration, Creation, and Growth: A Path Forward for Sport Social Work Education**

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*The Alliance for Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) represents the social work profession in areas of sport social work practice, education, research, and advocacy, and is leading the way in preparing social workers for practice in sport by offering the first and only Sport Social Work Certificate Program (SSW Certificate Program). Despite the development of the SSW Certificate Program, the demand, need, and interest in sport social work curricula and social impact education is growing. The purpose of this article is to outline a path forward for sport social work education by discussing strategies and practices to (a) integrate sports into existing coursework that imparts social work knowledge, values, and skills; (b) create sport social work courses and field placements; and (c) develop interprofessional specialization tracks that grow the sport social work workforce and platform for advancing social change through sport. Improving access to education and training can strengthen the specialization of sport social work, facilitate interprofessional collaboration through sport, and will ultimately benefit individuals, athletes, families, coaches, teams, communities, and sport organizations.*

*Keywords: sport social work, social work education, teaching, training, social work curriculum, interprofessional collaboration*

Sports fans and the public alike have seen athlete activists and sport organizations spark conversations focused on equity, mental health, and human rights. Collin Kaepernick showed the world, by bending his knee during the national anthem in 2016, that non-violent social organizing can advance policy focused on accountable and anti-racist policing. Moreover, Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka set clear boundaries by choosing not to participate in their prospective sports in 2021; actions that educated the public on the importance of protecting athletes' mental health and prioritizing well-being over sport performance. Similarly, sport

organizations and global governing bodies have leveraged their power and allocated resources to address issues of equity and social injustice. Major League Baseball moved the 2020 All-Star game out of Georgia to protest voter suppression laws (Dimond & Radnofsky, 2021), and the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace was established in 2013 to leverage sport as a platform for social change (United Nations, 2013). These examples demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, shared values among athlete activists, sport organizations, governmental agencies, and the profession of social work.

Social work is a practice-based profession driven by values including social justice, integrity, and competence. Social workers are actively involved in advocacy comparable to the efforts of athlete activists, leaders in sport, and athletic organizations to destigmatize mental health and address complex social injustices. In sports terms, social workers are not on the sidelines but rather "in the game" when it comes to promoting social and economic justice, improving access to mental health services, and challenging individual and structural forms of oppression. To demonstrate, The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) recently reported approximately 715,600 social workers engage in practice "to enhance human well-being" in settings such as mental health clinics, schools, child welfare, and human service agencies, hospitals, settlement houses, community agencies, and private practices (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Furthermore, a five-year impact report assessing progress toward addressing 13 macro-level social issues, such as systemic racism, human rights, and homelessness, revealed the growing impact of social work research, education, and practice in the fight to champion social change (American Academy for Social Work and Social Welfare, 2021). Ultimately, social workers and leaders in sport are those that have the experiences, relationships, and platforms to contribute to local and global social change efforts.

The potential for strong, well-informed, and effective collaborations among sectors of social work and athletics is promising, yet the establishment of a cohesive partnership is necessary for the two bodies to work together toward shared goals. Recognizing the potential for collaboration across sport and social work, the Alliance for Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) was created in 2015 "to promote individual and community well-being through partnerships between the profession of social work and the field of athletics" (ASWIS, 2021). Over the last several years, the ASWIS has grown into a community of over 200 dedicated social work and interdisciplinary faculty members, practitioners, advocates, and students. The ASWIS is actively involved in building partnerships in areas where social work and sports systems intersect, and in strengthening the utilization of sport as a tool to promote individual and community outcomes (ASWIS, 2021). The collective outreach, education, and advocacy of the ASWIS continue to increase awareness of the specialization of sport social work within the social work profession and among interprofessional disciplines (McHenry et al., 2021).

As the ASWIS has grown, so too has the demand for social impact education within institutions of higher education. Students entering colleges and universities across the country are looking to pursue meaningful careers in the social sector yet lack access to interprofessional curricular pathways that harness their creativity, empathy, and insight to address complex social problems. Since its inception in 2015, the ASWIS has worked with professionals across multiple domains of sport to raise awareness about the profession of social work and to develop partnerships that improve conditions for athletes, teams, and communities.

The ASWIS has also led the way in creating a social impact curriculum that seeks to prepare the social workers for practice in athletic settings and engagement in broader advocacy efforts that utilize sport as a vehicle for social change. The ASWIS offers the first and only Sport Social

Work (SSW) Certificate Program for graduate-level social work practitioners with an interest in sport social work (ASWIS, 2021). The one-year, hybrid certificate program focuses on enhancing knowledge and skills relating to sport and social work theory, practice, research, and policy (ASWIS, 2021). The SSW Certificate program has several strengths and weaknesses for students looking to pursue a social impact education.

Strengths of the SSW Certificate Program include the ability to facilitate students' field placements in athletic settings, its online accessibility, and the depth of the program. In addition, the SSW Certificate Program is currently approved for 52 continuing education units by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Weaknesses of the SSW Certificate Program include its high cost (\$2,600), and a lack of formal recognition from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as accredited coursework within social work undergraduate and graduate programs. Without recognition from CSWE, social work students and students with an interest in advancing social change through sport are unable to access meaningful and innovative content, sport-focused coursework, and interprofessional education opportunities that can prepare them for practice with athletes or activism through sport.

Leaders of the sport social work movement are dedicated to growing the specialization of sport social work, developing partnerships with athletic organizations, and contributing to innovations in high-quality social impact education. To date, the SSW Certificate Program is a novel curricular model, but there are opportunities beyond this program to prepare interprofessional students for careers that use sport to advance social change (Beasley et al., 2019; Newman, 2021). With growing opportunities at the convergence of sport and social work, the purpose of this article is to outline a path forward for sport social work education. This commentary aims to describe ways in which the social work profession can (a) *integrate* sports into existing coursework that imparts social work knowledge, values, and skills; (b) *create* sport social work courses and field placements; and (c) develop interprofessional specialization tracks that *grow* the sport social work workforce.

### **Intersection of Sport and Social Work**

Sport is one context in need of practitioners to address mental health concerns, and that intersects with emergent social, economic, and human rights issues at the forefront of public health and international policy debates (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; Moore & Gummelt, 2017). The National Collegiate Athletic Association Sport Science Institute (NCAA, 2016) recently recommended that all athletic organizations hire a licensed mental health provider to support student-athlete mental health and well-being. This advocacy by the NCAA is due in part to increased awareness of the mental health vulnerabilities of athletes and gaps in higher education services to address the needs of athletes (i.e., after-hours care, interprofessional care teams, etc.). Sudano and Miles (2016) revealed only 20.5% of 127 college athletic programs had a mental health provider on their staff, yet recent reports estimate that between 24% to 31% of athletes admit to feeling significantly overwhelmed while balancing college academics and athletics (NCAA Goals Study, 2020). Furthermore, only 37% to 46% of athletes reported feeling very satisfied with the mental health care they receive from their organizations (NCAA Goals Study, 2020). As athletic organizations work to destigmatize support and increase access to mental health services, social workers can expect to see an increase in demand for mental health providers who are prepared for serving on interprofessional teams in athletic settings.

The connection between sport and social work also extends beyond the provision of clinical mental health supports to athletes. Sport has the potential to improve health outcomes and empower and connect people across the world. Laureus Sport for Good (2021) is a charitable company that aims to address six social focus areas of global social change which align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Laureus Sport for Good (2021) funds programs, services, and activities that address health, employability, education, inclusivity, equity, and peace – with a focus on using sport to address systemic inequities and improve social conditions. Beyond the provision of financial support, Laureus Sport for Good (2021) also brings leaders of sport-based youth development programs together from all over the world. The organization encourages participation in learning communities that inform programmatic growth and the exchange of new ideas to help develop best practices in the field of sport for development. For social workers, Laureus Sport for Good’s mission aligns with professional values of social justice, the importance of human relationships, and competence at a global scale.

Sport is also relevant to informing U.S. and international policy issues such as democracy and diplomacy, environmental protection, and human rights. Social, economic, and political justice issues that influence sport and are influenced by sports include, but are not limited to, transgender rights, athlete compensation (i.e., name, image, and likeness policies), pay equity, employment, tourism, and economic development. The United States Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs houses the “Sport Diplomacy Program” leveraging sport and athletic platforms to champion foreign policy priorities and promote mutual understanding of global issues (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The fact is that social workers share similar values with athletic organizations and governmental agencies that use sport as a relational and community intervention to address social issues across the micro-macro continuum.

### **Integration of Sport in Social Work Coursework**

Given the expansive reach of sport and high levels of engagement globally, sport is an excellent platform and tool to cultivate learning and growth across the nine CSWE social work competencies (Bates, under review; Moore & Gummelt, 2017). Currently, social work courses engage students in learning about the social work profession, human behavior and the social environment, diversity and intersectionality, and social work practice (CSWE, 2015a). The integration of sport-focused content into social work courses has the potential to capture students’ attention and help make relevant connections to social issues that influence youth, families, and communities across the macro-micro continuum. By integrating sport content into coursework using low-effort integration strategies that increase students’ exposure to sport, social work students can better understand how to leverage sport to improve social conditions when working in their various micro-, mezzo, or macro-practice settings.

***Introductory social work courses.*** Sport topics can help strengthen students’ understanding of the history of the social work profession. In introductory courses, social work educators have an opportunity to outline the history of sport social work by integrating content focused on the contributions of Jane Addams and other social justice pioneers (Kratz & Rosado, 2021, in press; Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2001; Reynolds, 2017). For instance, social work pioneers such as Jane Addams often used sport, recreation, and play to strengthen social bonds, support positive overall health and well-being, and cultivate a sense of community (Kratz & Rosado, in press). Furthermore, instructors can demonstrate the synergies between sport and social work through

the contributions of activists like W.E.B. DuBois who, although not a social worker, pioneered the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP has long stood in solidarity with athletes protesting and organizing through sport (Henderson, 2009). These examples can provide students with an understanding of how sport cultivates community and contributes to social change.

Introductory courses provide excellent opportunities to highlight diverse employment opportunities for students with an interest in social justice and education, coaching, sport science, or exercise physiology. Instructors teaching introductory courses could invite guest speakers who will expose students to different areas of social work. Sport social workers can speak to students about challenges, ethical issues, and practice innovations in athletic settings or the sport social work profession more broadly (Bates, under review). Bates (under review) invited several sport social workers leading policy and practice efforts in organizations such as the NFL Player Care Foundation and university athletic departments (see University of Michigan Athletes Connected Program, n.d.) to an introductory sport social work course. Students in the introductory courses reported learning from the guest speakers about how social work values and ethics align with employment opportunities in sport organizations (Bates, under review). Further, instructors teaching introductory courses can encourage students with an interest in sport to explore the ASWIS network, subcommittees, newsletters, blogs, and research opportunities. These are just a few of the ways instructors can introduce students to the specialization of sport social work and embed sport-focused content into courses.

***Human behavior in the social environment.*** Sport social work content is also an excellent fit for human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) courses. Sport, play, and recreation are social determinants of health that have a bi-directional relationship with environmental conditions in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of risk factors, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes. Studies show that adults experience an array of positive health benefits and that there is a reduced risk of early mortality if they participate in 150 minutes per week of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Warburton & Bredin, 2017). Along with the broader health implications, social work practitioners need to be able to (a) provide psychoeducation on the influence of physical activity on endorphins and other neurotransmitters which impact mood and stress (Mikkelsen et al., 2017); (b) recognize how sport can cultivate community, belonging, comradery, and social support (Eime et al., 2013); and, (c) understand how sport can teach life and social skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, goal-setting, and social responsibility (Hermens et al., 2017). Understanding the ways sport, play, and recreation influence individuals will enable social work students to assess clients' behaviors and social environment, which in turn can inform the design of prevention and intervention efforts that focus on holistic health and well-being.

***Diversity and intersectionality.*** Sport-focused content has important links to diversity and social justice issues. Sports serve as a universal "hook" that engages millions of people and exposes participants and spectators to new people, relationships, experiences, ideas, social issues, and cultures (Hartman & Kwauk, 2011; Newman et al., 2019). Culturally, athletes, sport teams, and athletics organizations have platforms that reach millions of people around the world, whether via television or on social media. The reach of sport is important for social workers to understand, considering that athletics exposes individuals to diverse ideas, perspectives, and social issues which they may otherwise not be conscious of in their everyday lives. For example,

Emanuel Ocho, a former professional football player, created a series on social media called “Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man” following the death of George Floyd, which increased the focus on the Black Lives Matter movement. This mini-video series and educational outreach has reached millions of viewers and built bridges from the sport community to the public on topics such as systemic racism, microaggression, and issues of diversity and difference. Social work instructors and faculty can utilize these videos in the classroom to build awareness and facilitate discussions about intersectional issues that transcend and influence sport.

Social workers must also remain keenly aware of how athletes from diverse backgrounds experience discrimination and oppression within athletic settings. At the macro level, racial disparities, including disproportionate representation of Black athletes on high revenue teams as against the underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) administrators in sport leadership positions, have persisted over time (Cooper et al., 2017). Social workers need to explore why athletics as a system perpetuates inequities, and the reasons for lower graduation rates among college athletes compared to non-athlete college students (Cooper et al., 2017). A lack of diversity among administrators and inequitable educational outcomes among groups of student-athletes highlight the need for culturally responsive and athlete-centered sport leadership, policy, and practice. These topics are highly relevant to diversity and social justice courses within social work programs. Other relevant macro-level social issues in sport that focus on diversity and inclusion include LGBTQ+ rights, pay equity, and Title IX regulations. Educators can leverage these examples to train social work practitioners to think systemically about issues of diversity and difference in sport.

***Social work clinical practice courses.*** Clinical social work practice coursework utilizes a strengths-based approach focused on the person-in-environment perspective. The target of direct, clinical practice curricula is to equip students with various methods of working directly with individuals, families, and groups (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2017). Courses in clinical social work practice emphasize improving social functioning, strengthening clients’ problem-solving capacity, and best practices in enhancing the coping capabilities of clients (Saleebey, 2011). Embedding sport social work topics into clinical social work practice coursework with a primary goal of assisting vulnerable populations is an area of creative expansion. For example, there are opportunities to train social work students looking to work in youth-serving settings to ask about youths’ experiences in sport and how sport pressures and successes influence family interaction patterns and their school experiences.

Further, local, community, and national issues in sport are relevant to clinical social work practice with athletes. For example, the story of Emmanuel Durón, 19, who is now in counseling after lashing out at a referee at a Texas football game is an example of a clinical case that is relevant to the person-in-environment perspective (Longman, 2021). Durón had a history of challenges controlling his anger, while also living and attending school in the state ranked 51<sup>st</sup> in access to mental health services (Reinert et al., 2021). Moreover, recent high-profile cases and popular media stories focused on Michael Phelps, Simone Biles, and Naomi Osaka have elevated the need for clinical services to support athletes’ mental health (Knight, 2021). With the growing awareness that athletes are not immune to mental health issues, and in fact can be categorized as a vulnerable population (Moore & Gummelt, 2017), social work students can utilize sport-based case studies to simulate practice scenarios and engage in assessment, intervention, and evaluation activities to advance their clinical competencies.

Clinical practice courses in diagnosis and treatment planning can incorporate issues of athletic experiences as well. Courses presenting specific clinical interventions such as motivational interviewing, solution-focused therapy, or various other cognitive behavioral-based therapies, for example, can overlay athlete examples as case studies, with the increasing availability of scholarly articles and reference books on athlete mental health intervention strategies (Moore & Gummelt, 2017; Rollnick et al., 2020). With growing concern regarding substance-related and behavioral addictive disorders, social work courses can include information on the risk and protective factors of mental health literacy and positive coping beyond substance misuse for athletes (de Grace et al., 2017).

***Social work mezzo- and macro-practice courses.*** Sport is highly relational and influences couples, families, and communities, making it an important topic to include in mezzo- and macro-level practice courses. For instance, scholars argue the likelihood of sport participation increases in families with an affinity toward sport (Strandbu et al., 2020). Practice courses focused on family structure and wellness can incorporate the beneficial aspects of sport in course materials, such as improved mental health and general physical capacity and performance (Parnell & Krustup, 2018). Utilizing sport-focused materials can also increase student knowledge of risk factors associated with sport participation, including the impact of injuries on athletes and their families, eating disorder prevalence rates and interventions, and the impact of exercise-induced physical ailments (Kwan et al., 2012).

Another area of direct macro-practice coursework that can involve sport participation is course content related to domestic violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), and sexual assault. Domestic and IPV perpetration research and advocacy efforts as they relate to sport participation are growing (Eitle et al., 2021). Recent high-profile cases involving both college and professional male athletes and assault against women are more than ever in the public discourse (Spencer & Limperos, 2020). Former Florida State University and current New Orleans Saints quarterback Jameis Winston has been in the headlines for years concerning his alleged perpetration of violence against women (Tracy, 2016). In 2014, news headlines revealed the case of Baltimore Ravens' Ray Rice allegedly beating his former fiancée at an Atlantic City casino. Similarly, in 2018, Kansas City Chief Kareem Hunt was presumably caught on video assaulting his partner (Doerer, 2018; Grinberg, 2018). Social work classes focused on domestic and intimate partner violence can pull from this body of sport research to assess environmental risk and prevention measures, and impact treatment options for survivors (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2017; Set the Expectation, 2021).

Human trafficking in and around sport is also a concern at the macro-level (Mission 89, 2021). Two trafficking aspects relate directly to social work practice: the need to protect young athletes from human trafficking in the name of sport, and sex trafficking at large-scale sporting events (Mission 89, 2021). Research, advocacy, and activism in the area focused on child trafficking involves sham agents smuggling children across international borders, promising fame, and escape from poverty through sport (Nkang, 2019). The concern of human and sex trafficking involved in large-scale sporting events such as the Super Bowl can be a focus area for social work students as well (Trujillo, 2021). Human trafficking and its connection to major sporting events are so well known that even Uber drivers and hotel employees are trained on how to identify victims (Lapchick, 2019; Uber, 2020). With thousands attending and tens of millions of viewers tuning in to watch the game, and many more talking about the outcome of the game, students and communities can benefit from an expanded approach that includes a social work

lens to prevent and bring awareness to the trafficking that occurs in and around sport (Lucio et al., 2020; Mahapatra et al., 2019).

**Research and policy courses.** Integration of sport topics in research courses can further support how social work students learn about research, evaluation, and policy analysis. Students with an interest in sport can design evaluation projects that assess the effectiveness of practice innovations in sport settings, such as support groups for injured student-athletes or the removal of drug-testing policies in professional sport settings. Analysis of changes in the sport environment that influence specific populations, such as the rising cost of youth sport and changes in standards for physical activity in schools, is critically important in research courses, given the broader implications for children's health (i.e., rates of childhood obesity, depression, anxiety). By examining innovations in practice or changes in policy at the intersection of sport and health, social work students can learn how to utilize research as a tool for advocacy and social advancement.

Sport is a global enterprise that profoundly influences individuals, cultures, and societies. Sport can divide people and evoke nationalism, corruption, and conflict. In contrast, sport can also serve as a societal tool to resolve social problems by improving health and increasing opportunities for communication, connection, and community (Hancock et al., 2013). As a result, there are additional opportunities for social work students and faculty to engage in policy analysis and community-based research to identify the context of local or global problems and engage directly with community or international partners to uncover culturally appropriate, locally sourced, and sustainable solutions. Moreover, sports stadiums and competitions held in large cities and on television generate large amounts of revenue, create jobs, and increase tourism both locally and globally. Students have opportunities to utilize a sport for development lens to explore how crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, not only influenced policy, organizations, teams, and athletes but also the communities that rely on sports to stabilize their economic infrastructure. Training social workers to critically explore the relationships among sports, economic growth, and social welfare can also inform government relations and policy recommendations. Being that the field of sport social work is relatively new, there are ample opportunities to advance social change through research, evaluation, and policy practice at the intersection of sport and social work.

### **Creation of Sport Social Work Courses and Field Placements**

Scholars and educators recommend social workers “get in the game” when it comes to tackling complex social issues, working to create inclusive environments within athletic settings, and supporting athletes' mental health, development, and well-being (Gill, 2008). To do so, social work educators can engage in medium-effort strategies such as the creation of sport social work curricula and field placements. At the time this manuscript was written, authors and leaders at the ASWIS identified a handful of sport social work courses offered within CSWE accredited social work programs. Existing courses cover a range of topics, from mindfulness, adolescent gang involvement, physical and mental performance, youth development through sport, social justice through sport, and generalist social work in sport courses (Lamar University, 2019; The Ohio State University, 2021; Texas Christian University, 2021; University of Alabama, n.d.; University of New Hampshire, 2021; University of Southern California, 2021; Wichita State University, 2018).



Based on a review of existing syllabi, sport social work courses are often approved as elective courses within social work curricula, but not as core coursework or a part of specializations focusing solely on sport. Magier et al. (2021) found that former students who now work in sport had to advocate to focus their studies on sport topics to pursue their professional growth and learning. Without formalized courses focused on sport, social work students with an interest in sport work independently to integrate sport into their learning rather than accessing training that supports their career goals.

**Resources for curriculum creation.** New resources and tools are emerging to support practitioners, instructors, and faculty in the creation of sport social work courses. *Sport social work: Promoting the functioning and well-being of college and professional athletes* (Moore & Gummelt, 2017) is the first readily available textbook designed to support the training of sport social work practitioners. Of particular significance for those developing sport social work curricula is that Moore and Gummelt (2017) have matched the nine CSWE social work competencies with expected knowledge, skills, and practice behaviors that guide the specialization of sport social work. Social work programs can utilize these competencies to assess student learning and ensure that courses meet CSWE accreditation standards.

Instructors looking to develop or strengthen existing sport social work courses can build upon the topics introduced by Moore and Gummelt (2019) and utilize additional tools and resources outlined in Table 1 to guide curriculum creation and innovation. These resources can inform assignments and in-class activities that will introduce students to current events and topics that transcend sport and encompass issues of diversity and difference, local and global policy, and social and economic justice.

Table 1.  
*Sport Social Work Resources for Coursework Creation*

Resource Type	List of Resources
Textbook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sport social work: Promoting the functioning and well-being of college and professional athletes</i> (Moore &amp; Gummelt, 2017)</li> </ul>
Books	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sport social work (Kratz &amp; Rosado, in press) in <i>Social Workers' Desk Reference, 4<sup>th</sup> edition</i></li> <li>• <i>The Revolt of the Black Athlete</i> (Edwards, 2018)</li> <li>• <i>Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America</i> (King, 1998)</li> <li>• <i>New Arenas for Community Social Work Practice with Urban Youth</i> (Delgado, 2000)</li> <li>• <i>N.F.L.: Not for Long: The Life and Career of the NFL Athlete</i> (Turner, 2018)</li> <li>• <i>What Made Maddi Run</i> (Fagan, 2017)</li> </ul>
Documentaries, Movies, TV Series, and Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Necessary Roughness</i> is about a female sport psychologist working with vulnerable athletes in the NFL (recommended by Dean &amp; Rowan)</li> <li>• <i>Safety</i> (Disney) is an original movie that brings to light several structural, policy, and interpersonal issues faced by a college athlete, Ray McElrathbey, on and off the field while raising and caring for his 11-year-old brother, Fahmarr (recommended by Bates, in press)</li> <li>• <i>Brooklyn Saints</i> (Netflix)</li> </ul>

- *Untold: Malice at the Palace* (Netflix)
  - *30 for 30: Youngstown Boys* (ESPN)
  - *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal* (HBO)
- Reports
- *Mental Health Best Practices* (NCAA and Sport Science Institute, 2016)
  - *Covering LGBTQ Athletes at the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics* (GLAAD and Athlete Ally, 2020)
- Blogs
- Player's Tribute article "*To Anybody Going Through It*" by NBA star Kevin Love (2020)
- Research Centers & Institutes
- Center for Sport & Social Justice
  - Tulane Center for Sport
  - NCAA and Sport Science Institute

***Strategies to create coursework.*** Beyond curricular resources, the creation of sport social work courses can look very different based on instructor expertise and the focus, context, and scope of curricular content. One medium-effort strategy to increase exposure to sport social work content is to have experts from across the country create learning modules that can be embedded into social work courses. For example, sport-based learning modules are relevant to social work courses that focus on youth sport participants, school-aged youth, vulnerable populations (i.e., older adults, veterans, underserved communities), or higher education and organizational practice to encompass college and professional athletes. Learning modules can focus on various populations or emphasize how sport influences overall health and well-being.

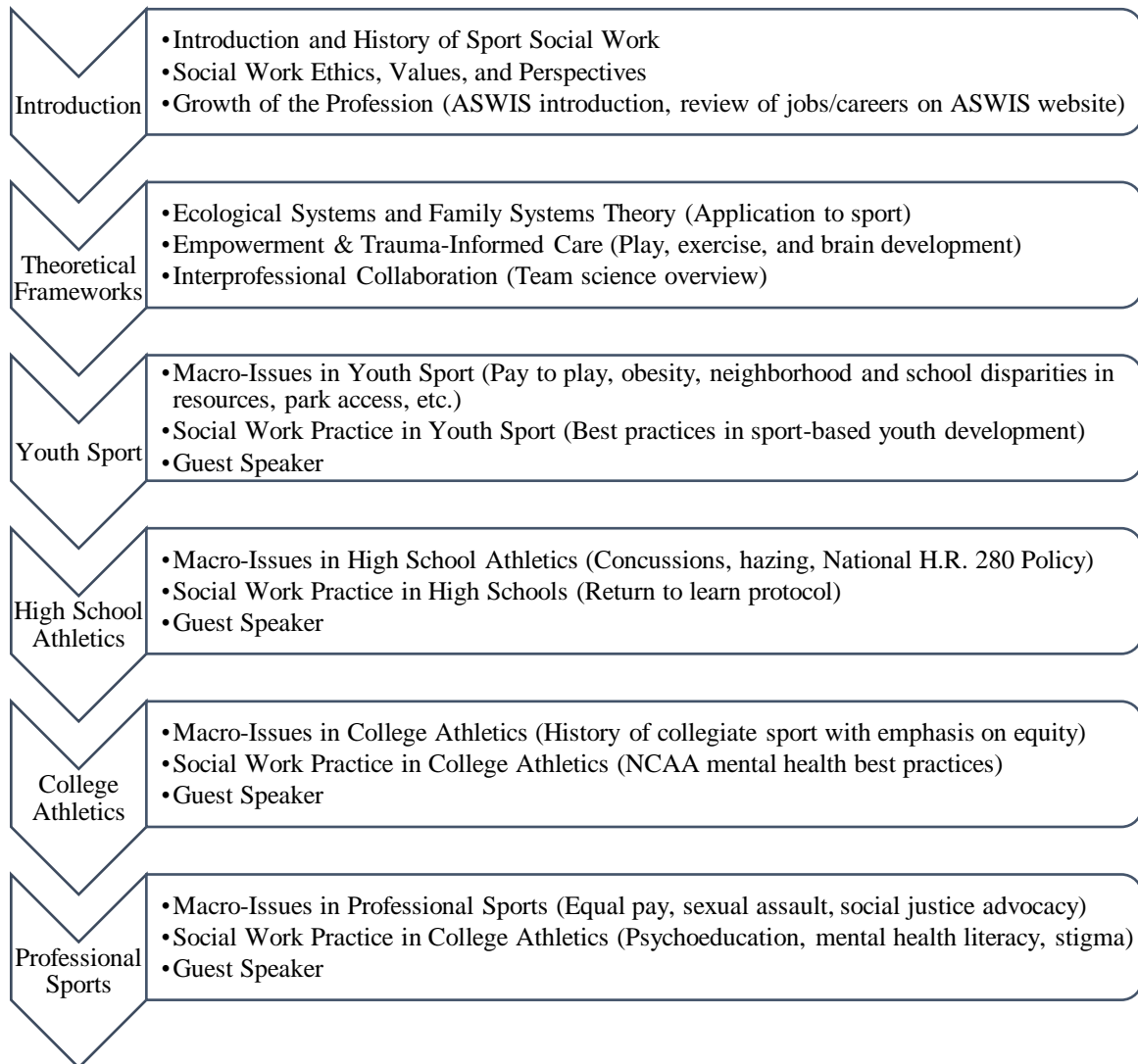
Other medium-effort strategies include leveraging the expertise of faculty to design and create sport social work courses. For instance, faculty experts in the field of sport-based positive youth development at The Ohio State University (2021) developed an undergraduate course entitled *Prevention and Youth Development through Sport, Recreation, and Play*. One half of the course takes place via lecture and discussion and the other part of the course is highly experiential. Students spend half of the course in a gym-like setting learning best practices that guide the design and delivery of youth development programming in sport settings. The course is housed in the College of Social Work within a Youth Development minor designed for students with career interests in education, out-of-school organizations, and community organizations including city governments, parks, recreation centers, and after-school settings. Social work programs can leverage this novel approach to work across academic minors and majors to increase exposure, enrollment, and collaboration amongst campus units that seek to prepare students for careers in sport or with specific populations.

Sport social work coursework can also focus on preparing practitioners for general or clinical practice in recreation or outdoor settings, college or professional sport programs, or broader sport governing bodies, research centers, or global advocacy committees. For example, Bates (under review) developed a hybrid undergraduate *Social Work and Social Justice through Sport* course. Each week, the course sessions introduced students to macro-level issues and current events, then sought to build students' knowledge and skills for generalist practice in sport environments and concluded with a sport social work guest speaker. Bates (under review) found engaging students in topics across the macro-micro continuum strengthened students' understanding of social work competencies and increased students' awareness of the power of sport. To inform the

creation of future sport social work courses, Figure 1 provides a brief example of the macro-micro continuum design of *Social Work and Social Justice through Sport*.

Figure 1.

*Design of Social Work and Social Justice through Sport (Bates, under review)*



**Strategies to create field internships.** Field internships coalescing across sport and social work also are necessary to prepare social workers for practice in sport contexts. Magier and colleagues (2021) found sport social work practitioners now working in the field have difficulties accessing field internships in athletic settings. During their training in formal social work programs, students were tasked with developing their learning opportunities and creating new internships in sport contexts (Magier et al., 2021). Magier and colleagues (2021) are among the first to spotlight gaps in accessing formal educational opportunities for students with an interest in sport.

Despite over 800 CSWE accredited social work programs, the accessibility of sport social work field internships remains relatively small, making it challenging for students to acquire sport-specific knowledge, skills, and competencies. Social work educators, instructors, and

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program directors can look to partner with sports organizations, recreation centers, and athletic committees to develop training opportunities for students which mirror real-world practice settings. The ASWIS also developed a “Sports Social Work Field Placement Guide” to serve as a starting point for field directors could be to partner with athletics programs or sport for social change initiatives on university campuses (ASWIS, n.d.). By increasing formal learning opportunities that turn into jobs for students, the social work profession can increase the number of preceptors who can supervise social work students in their field internships and strengthen training opportunities within the specialization.

**Collective efforts to enhance instructor expertise.** Beyond the creation of courses and field internships, there also are opportunities to strengthen the development and delivery of sport social work education more systematically. Sport social work instructors and leaders of the ASWIS education committee can look to create a repository of syllabi and learning activities to support course development at universities across the country. A newly created website, *Prof2Prof.com*, allows faculty to share resources for teaching, research, and student support services. The site allows interdisciplinary scholars to share resources focused on instruction, curriculum design, and teaching innovations. This resource can help sport social work faculty and practitioners access content to support the development of innovative curricular activities, assignments, and coursework ideas.

As the ASWIS continues to grow, educators and instructors can also look to evaluate their courses and publish their curricular models to inform social work education. To date, the *Journal of Social Work Education* (JSWE) serves as a forum for exchanging creative ideas on trends, innovations, and problems across undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs of study. However, sport social work is not currently recognized as a content area in the *Journal of Social Work Education* when authors go to submit articles for peer-review or publication. This gap likely signifies a dearth of scholarship on sport social work education or a lack of formal recognition from JSWE. Sport social work educators can look to utilize this platform to share pedagogical innovations and publish formative and summative assessments of educational innovations. Strengthening evidence on best practices in sport social work education remains a priority for ASWIS and the Society for Social Work and Research Special Interest Group that is focused on sport social work. Through these collective efforts, sport social work can become more widely recognized and grow the specialization.

### **Growth of Sport Social Work as a Specialization**

**Recruitment.** There are several broad and high-effort strategies that social work students, practitioners, faculty, and interprofessional partners can utilize to grow the specialization of sport social work. As a starting point, leaders and members of the sport social work movement can seek to create a webpage that lists institutions where existing sport social work courses are offered and accessible for students. If a central resource hub existed to consolidate course offerings across the country, students with an interest in sport social work could consider attending institutions that have sport social work faculty or sport social work coursework and field placements. Strengthening the availability of resources on behalf of the ASWIS through social media, advertisements, and other recruitment efforts about sport social work courses, field placements, and informal learning opportunities (i.e., volunteer activities, institutes, university-community partnerships, professional development series, research labs, etc.) also can support the growth of the sport social work specialization.

**Outreach.** In addition, leaders of the sport social work movement can conduct a national survey to understand the state of sport social work. Understanding the reach and scope of the specialization today and recording its growth is paramount to future advocacy efforts. Scholars and national leaders of the school social work specialization distribute national surveys every 5 to 10 years to better understand the training needs, interests, and current practices of school social workers (Kelly et al., 2010). A national survey of sport social work has the potential to (a) describe the diverse practice contexts and interventions employed by sport social workers; (b) better understand sport social work practice considering the gaps or strengths of formal educational opportunities (i.e., courses and field internships); and (c) assess the characteristics of sport social workers (i.e., role, duties, challenges, successes, etc.). As a sub-specialty within the profession of social work, there is a need to gather data on sport social work to help construct the core knowledge, skills, and competencies underlying this growing area of practice.

**Competency-based education model.** To improve professional and informal learning opportunities for students with an interest in sport social work, the ASWIS and interdisciplinary partners in sport can work together to determine a national model of sport social work that is competency-based. The national model of sport social work would seek to address multiple areas to guide curricular design, development, and implementation. CSWE acknowledges several specializations, including child advocacy or child welfare, aging or gerontology, addictions or substance abuse, mental health, and school social work (CSWE, 2020), and has curricular guides that aim to prepare students, using best-practice standards (see Substance Abuse; CSWE, 2015a).

CSWE curricular guides are generated using the Commission on Educational Policy framework (CSWE, 2015b), to cultivate an outcome-oriented approach to curriculum design. Educators and leaders in the profession can utilize CSWE policy and accreditation standards to create a national model of sport social work that is driven by competencies and informed by evidence-based curricular resources, to grow the specialization of sport social work. Once a national model exists, leaders of the sport social work movement can engage in broader advocacy efforts to showcase how the specialization of sport social work builds on generalist practice skills, aligns with the nine CSWE competencies, meets workforce demands, and draws upon evidence-informed practices.

As a specialization within the profession, a competency-based curriculum is critical to promoting this area of social work practice at the national and global levels. Once a competency-based training model is developed, leaders of the sport social work movement can then work together to obtain formal recognition of sport social work as an educational track at CSWE's Annual Program Meeting (APM). Sport social work is not recognized as an educational pathway for social work educators at APM (CSWE, 2021). Recognition by CSWE at APM would help raise awareness of the opportunities in sport within the social work profession, allow for information-sharing about innovations in pedagogy, and help to connect faculty with an interest in sport to one another.

**Reciprocity options and certification models.** Another pathway for growth of the specialization is for universities to create reciprocity options where students can take a course at one institution and have it count for credit hours at their institution. For instance, Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, Xavier, and the University of New Orleans allow eligible full-time undergraduate students to take up to two courses at any one of the schools within the consortium (Tulane University Registrar, 2021). Universities or social work programs that offer sport social work

courses can work to establish reciprocity arrangements to bridge gaps in curricula for students, thereby helping to recruit, educate, and retain students in this specialized area of practice. Taking innovative approaches to offer sport social work courses to students enrolled in social work programs across the country can engage more students in the specialization, especially as universities move toward greater delivery of online or hybrid courses.

Second, opportunities to grow the specialization are through certification models such as the one created by the Network for Social Work Management (NSWM, 2020). The NSWM's certification model is a university partnership program that was designed to advance administrative and leadership competencies among social work graduate students. The NSWM offers a certificate to graduate social work students whose programs offer courses that meet 75% of the NSWM competency performance indicators (NSWM, 2020). To create a similar certification model, the ASWIS can identify specific criteria that demonstrate the competencies of a sport social worker. Criteria may include the following: (a) engagement in sport-specific social work internship; (b) completion of a sport-specific evaluation or research project; (c) enrollment in 6 hours of coursework emphasizing sport (or a % of assignments adapted to focus on sport). Several of these curricular approaches and training pathways can increase teaching and learning opportunities for students with an interest in sport.

***Interprofessional collaboration.*** Social work programs can develop sport social work curricular pathways by leveraging collaborative efforts and interprofessional coursework with other university departments to successfully prepare students for practice in sport. One high-effort strategy to grow the specialization of sport social work is to create new minors and majors that bring together diverse campus entities and embed social work courses in these learning pathways. Examples might include a Mental Health and Sports minor or a Health, Physical Activity, and Sport major. Similar to the Youth Development minor at The Ohio State University, creating cross-disciplinary specialization pathways can expose students to different philosophies, practitioners, practices, and policy issues in sport.

A second high-effort strategy is to offer core sport social work courses within social work programs and supplement the specialization with courses offered in different academic units. Figure 2 depicts a sport social work specialization model where social work students enroll in three centralized sport social work courses in a social work program (i.e., Introduction to Sport Social Work, Clinical Practice in Sport; Social Justice through Sport). In addition, students choose two elective courses within interprofessional majors and minors that enhance their knowledge, skills, and competencies related to sport. Notably, depending on the university, interprofessional elective courses may be housed in health/medical, social science, business, or economic departments.

By developing an interprofessional curriculum, social work programs can create sport social work courses that are open to social work students and students from other disciplines. Students interested in sport social work can supplement their core coursework by taking courses in other departments. For example, a student with an interest in clinical work with athletes in a school setting can take elective courses in psychology, education (early childhood, secondary, or higher education), or counseling. In contrast, a student with an interest in international sport social work could select a course from a department such as sociology, public health, law, or global affairs. The opportunities for students to learn from, with, and among others with an interest in sport have the potential to enhance their interprofessional knowledge and skills, as well as help

educate other professionals about the vast array of skills social workers bring to interdisciplinary teams.

Table 2.

*Sport Social Work Specialization and Interprofessional Coursework Model*

<b>Sport Social Work in Social Work Program</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three core sport social work courses</li> <li>• Field internship with a micro-, mezzo, or macro-focus on using sport to address health and well-being or economic, social, or racial justice</li> </ul>		
<b>Interprofessional Coursework (Elective Courses from Different Pathways)</b>		
<u>Physical Health and Exercise</u>	<u>Management and Leadership</u>	<u>Social Health and Well-Being</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nursing</li> <li>• Exercise Physiology</li> <li>• Athletic Training</li> <li>• Kinesiology</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> <li>• Recreation and Physical Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports Management</li> <li>• Public Relations</li> <li>• Public Affairs</li> <li>• International Affairs</li> <li>• Hospitality Management</li> <li>• Sport Industry</li> <li>• Marketing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling/Education</li> <li>• Youth Development</li> <li>• Outdoor Education</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Psychology</li> <li>• Psychiatry</li> <li>• Sociology</li> </ul>

***Mentoring and coalition-building.*** The growth of the specialization also requires faculty who are leaders of the sport social work movement to mentor doctoral, graduate, and undergraduate students. Faculty will need to lead efforts that contribute to the development of internship opportunities for students and lead service efforts that support the growth of the sport social work specialization. The University of Michigan has a student-led sport social work club (i.e., Michigan's Social Work & Sport Association, n.d.) that educates social work students about opportunities to practice in sport. At other institutions, faculty can help to bring students together to learn more about this specialization area and also advocate to help increase their access to formal and informal learning opportunities in sport.

Additional opportunities exist for leaders of the sport social work movement to develop partnerships at the annual Sport Social Work Symposium, Society for Social Work and Research Conference, a range of interdisciplinary conferences. Additionally, sport social work faculty and practitioners can advocate in partnership with social work deans, directors, department chairs, and leaders of undergraduate and graduate programs to enrich teaching and learning opportunities at the intersection of social work and sport. Cohort faculty hires and employment of adjunct instructors with a background in sport can increase student access to coursework and mentorship in this specialization area. By increasing collaborations, networking opportunities, and relationships among faculty and practitioners within the social work movement, more stakeholders can work together to strengthen learning opportunities for students.

### **Challenges, Limitations, and Barriers**

Integration, creation, and growth of sport social work curricula is an opportunity for universities and colleges to prepare students for the complexities of social impact work. There are multiple ways education at the intersection of sport and social work can equip future generations of social workers for leadership and innovations within athletics, however, the small size of the

specialization may inhibit the implementation efforts presented in this commentary. Low- and medium-effort strategies (i.e., readings, modules within courses, course creation) are challenging based on the sheer number of sport social work articles, instructors, and evidence-based tools available to existing social work programs. Leaders of the sport social work movement can continue to address this challenge by collaborating with other disciplines, cultivating a competency-based curricular model, and contributing to the literature.

In addition, leaders of social work programs and faculty members may not view sport as a meaningful pathway to enhance social work knowledge, skills, and competencies. To overcome this limitation, leaders of the sport social work movement first need to define this practice area more cohesively, similar to how professional psychology specialties must define new practice areas (i.e., clinical, counseling, school, etc.) and then request recognition from the American Psychological Association (APA). To demonstrate, the APA asserts that new psychology specialties are needed as science advances and the world changes, yet formal recognition of specialties within the profession requires validation through a petition to the APA. To date, the advancement of sport social work movement is limited by its lack of recognition from CSWE. A collaborative, thoughtful, and evidence-informed petition to CSWE about the specialization of sport social work is needed to become a formally recognized area of social work practice that is characterized by specific competencies, problems, and populations.

Finally, sport is a unique ecosystem and mental health continues to be stigmatized by sport-adjacent disciplines, athletic organizations, and the broader cultural norms. Growth of sport social work through field placements, interprofessional coursework models, and research partnerships will require the establishment of trust, relationships, authentic conversations, and teamwork among administrators, faculty, students, and sport leaders on campuses to destigmatize mental health treatment and intervention within athletic organizations across the country. Team-based work, however, underscores the cooperative nature of social impact work and interprofessional collaboration. Social workers and leaders across multiple sectors of sport have an opportunity to work together to innovate and create social impact educational pathways for students by leveraging the knowledge of the whole and not just one profession alone.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this commentary was to outline a path forward for sport social work education and specific ways in which leaders of the sport social work movement can integrate, create, and grow the specialization of sport social work. The ideas presented here are flexible, adaptable, and present several steps for social work leaders to create social impact educational pathways that center social change and development through sport. For faculty and practitioners involved in the sport social work movement, integrating sport content into social work coursework can expose more students to the professional opportunities that exist within athletic settings, while enhancing their understanding of how sport is a tool for positive social change. Opportunities also exist to create innovative and competency-based courses that include sport-focused resources, evidence-informed curricular strategies, and interprofessional learning activities. Leaders of the sport social work movement can focus their efforts on engaging more students, partnering with other disciplines to offer sport social work training pathways, and working to achieve national recognition as a specialization within the profession of social work.



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