



Power 5 University Football Athletics: Consider Offering Social Work as a Degree Plan for Athletes

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The profession of social work is meaningful – creating agents of change who are not afraid to challenge injustices while developing better communities. As activists, social workers promoted the need for athletes to be recognized as vulnerable due to their unique and definable identity and specific needs. Sport social work continues to expand, now reaching into creating practicum field placements for social work students in athletic departments. This article asks the most prominent universities to consider empowering their football athletes to complete a social work degree. Social work is highly versatile and can be tailored to help the student-athlete who has a goal of opening a non-profit, making policies, or becoming a licensed clinician. Furthermore, this article will discuss equipping student-athletes to help each other and their communities by attaining a social work degree.

Keywords: sport social work, football, Division I football, Power 5, student-athlete, social work degree

College football players experience past, present, and future forms of distinctive and specific pressures, demands, and expectations on and off the field. In addition to the pressure, Power 5 Division I football teams' athletes must be recognized as having their own athletic identity and culture. Student-athletes should be encouraged by support staff to explore career options and not simply a degree. Power 5 Division I conference schools should consider supporting a social work degree for football student-athletes, which can provide a lifelong career that empowers athletes with a purpose, a sense of belonging, and the ability to impact their community once the game inevitably ends.

A Vulnerable Population

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (n.d.) states that the profession's mission is to improve the lives of individuals and communities. The evidenced-based practice profession heavily relies on its code of ethics which dictates a social worker's strength in values

of integrity, cultural humility, social justice, and competence (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Furthermore, the Preamble of the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics (2023) reads, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty." Social work focuses on the person in their environment, can understand their background and know how to apply it to the situation, and can utilize tools and techniques to provide helpful services (NASW, n.d.).

Researchers explain that with the risk of exploitation, unique physical and behavioral health, and identity issues, the athlete population can be considered vulnerable and needs specialized services (Gill Jr., 2008; Bennett, 2022; Harper, 2018; Hruby, 2021). On a micro level, sports can inspire, teach grace and respect for others, and show how to set goals (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). On a macro level, sports can unite community members and tackle physical and psychological social problems (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). While sports have positives, there are just as many negatives, especially on an elite playing level like a Power 5 Division I conference team. Power 5 university teams make millions of dollars in programming from football and basketball, with the athletes targeted for commercial gain (Broughton, 2020; Dodd, 2023). Now that athletes can profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL), they are heavily recruited by both universities and corporate sponsors (Thompson, 2022). High school-student-athletes frequently make long-term and psychologically intense decisions without financial or legal guidance and support (Thompson, 2022).

Athletes should be recognized as a vulnerable population by which social workers can respond to their needs accordingly. With increasing awareness, the subfield of sport social work has gained popularity (Michael, 2023). Sport social work programs and certifications currently focus on but are not limited to, understanding and supporting athletes across their lifespan, helping athletes use their platforms for social justice awareness, and providing mental health services (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). As sport social work continues to emerge, student-athletes could be encouraged to choose the field. Retired athletes can become social workers and gain licensure as clinicians who can care for themselves, each other, and their communities.

Inside an Athlete

Division I college athletes are challenged to find stability between their roles as athletes and students, but internal and external influences can often obstruct the balance. Success in football relies on an equivalent outcome in the classroom, as good academic standing dictates the chance to compete (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Moreover, all student-athletes are unique individuals with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, coming from different stages of personal, professional, and academic development.

Athletes are not invincible to pain, mental health symptoms, or adversarial social situations. Diverse professional backgrounds agree that athletes are vulnerable to mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, and suicide (Houltberg, 2018; Reardon et al., 2017; Ströhle, 2019). Depression and anxiety are common among athletes, especially student-athletes of color and those who report family economic hardships (NCAA, 2022). Covid-19 had a lasting effect on this population, who continue to report up to two times higher rates of anxiety, depression, and mental exhaustion post-pandemic (NCAA, 2022). Mental

health symptoms and disorders, unique social situations, and intense and often life-long pain commonly co-occurs with the athletic population.

College athletes can spend up to 50 hours a week involved physically and mentally in their sport, resulting in positive and negative consequences (Hruby, 2021; Porter, 2019). On the positive side, football coaches can teach values of hard work, respect, honesty, trust, punctuality, personal responsibility, and family (Hughes, 2010). However, hard work and long hours may not be rewarded with an National Football League (NFL) career. In 2019, for Power 5 schools, an estimated 197 athletes out of 1,769 eligible players were drafted into the NFL, resulting in an 11% chance of making it “pro” (NCAA, 2020). These statistics show the intense pressure an athlete has to perform, which can result in anxiety, increasing preseason injury rates (Li et al., 2017).

An athlete’s behavioral health extends outside of traditional diagnoses, as physical injuries, trauma to the body, and watching someone get hurt can also affect one’s mental health. Physical risk factors include concussions, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), bacterial infections, and over-training injuries (Ströhle, 2019). Researchers have found that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be incurred from direct physical injury, abusive power dynamics, and witnessing traumatic events within teams (Aron et al., 2019). PTSD can impact an athlete’s psychosocial functioning and delay recovery from musculoskeletal injuries (Aron et al., 2019). Post-concussion depression can occur in athletes who have had a concussion; however, if neither injury nor depressive symptoms are reported, it is hard to treat the individual (Sarac et al., 2018).

Social work looks into the micro, mezzo, and macro work and will try to understand the athlete’s situational and environmental factors like social justice and racial issues, academic and learning concerns, adverse childhood experiences, and how being away from family members can pose a significant risk to the mental health of a college student-athlete (Harper, 2018; O’Hara, 2020; Reardon et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2017; Agyemang et al., 2010; Williams, 2010). When asked about family finances and mental health, student-athletes reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do (65%), that they felt mentally exhausted because of it (58%), and that they were experiencing sleep difficulties (49%) and anxiety (46%) (NCAA, 2022). Black men reported higher concerns of financial worries (38%) compared to white men (21%) (NCAA Research, 2022). The numbers are less surprising when considering research shows minority men are generally recruited from schools with fewer resources than white men, automatically giving them a disadvantage (Harrison et al., 2006). However, when black male athletes attempt to prioritize academics, researchers have found that sometimes the athletes are discouraged by coaching staff and instead told to focus on the sport (Martin et al., 2010). Sports are often a way out of past circumstances for any individual, particularly people of color and from lower socio-economic backgrounds who spend their entire lives up until this point building a career (Edwards, 2000).

Applicable Theories

Identity Theory

In identity theory, an individual has a role within a social structure they have identified with and belong to and have created for themselves a unique way of presenting and identifying themselves within that structure (Burke & Stets, 2009). Role, group, and personal identities will

form to create one complete identity structure (Burke & Stets, 2009). Additionally, an individual relies on verification from their social group to remain balanced; both positive and negative messages can affect an individual's emotional state (Burke & Stets, 2009). In general, identities are thought to be stable, but can change over time and can include crisis moments (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Burke & Stets, 2009).

The athletic identity is distinct, comes with values, norms, and rules, and can be measured with the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer et al., 1993). This population presents with its own unique set of conditions, and prior knowledge and anticipation can assist. Researchers state that an athlete's expectations often require a refusal to accept limitations, strive for perfection, taking on pain and risk while defining these norms as "positive deviance" (Bennett, 2022). Most athletes begin training young to become elite-level football players, such as those that play for a Power 5 Division I conference school (Haugaasen et al., 2014; Wiersma, 2000). Additionally, research shows that black men are taught from an early age to place sports above education (Harper, 2018). Most elite-level athletes have played their entire lives, training many hours of the day to be able to play at a Division I school.

Furthermore, research shows that retirement from an athletic career could create an identity crisis (Barriopedro et al., 2019). When the time comes to transition out of football, the athletic identity can have a negative effect on the individual, including the avoidance of exploring other career options and comprehensive self-well-being (Harrison et al., 2014; Mathews et al., 2021). However, for many young men, their athletic identity is who they are, and they thrive when others know they are an athlete (Harrison et al., 2014). Researchers know that transitional responses can include psychological distress (anxiety, depression, stress) and lead to college student-athletes being unprepared for life after sport (Mathews et al., 2021).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) aims to explain how academic experiences influence someone's educational and future career choices, thereby gaining personal success through goal setting. The model consists of three cognitive variables in which self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals interact to affect performance and choices (Brown, 2002). As the most researched pillar of the three, self-efficacy allows for the ability to identify career goals and barriers, making transitions easier when necessary (Brown, 2002; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Self-efficacy is a psychological concept that often refers to one's belief in themselves and can influence their confidence, behavior, motivation, and abilities to accomplish tasks and create goals. Research shows that fueling interests through goal setting strengthens competency, which will build confidence and self-efficacy (Brown, 2002). School inevitably ends for all players, regardless of an NFL career, and utilizing the social cognitive career theory model may assist with closing the gap between academic and career development. After a lifetime investment, students with strong athletic identities may need help setting goals outside their competing sport (Lally & Kerr, 2005). SCCT research in sports shows that confident, conscientious, extroverted, and open student-athletes can quickly implement steps and make goals when necessary (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Student-athletes who perceived positive outcomes of career choices had higher self-efficacy, and those who were conscientious had a better understanding of themselves with which to create future career plans (Demulier et al., 2013). Furthermore, research has found that coaches do not directly influence an athlete's

decision but that self-efficacy and internal confidence are the keys to advancing life after sport (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Using SCCT's transition resources to build self-efficacy, manage outcome expectations, and establish career goals, common biopsychosocial barriers among student-athletes are surpassed.

Life After Sports

Activists, researchers, and athletes are asking for more options for life after sports (Harrison et al., 2014; Hruby, 2021; NCAA, 2016; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Football players spend up to 50 hours in football-related activities, so it is crucial to responsibly manage their small academic window of time (Hruby, 2021; Porter, 2019). However, athletes recognize their time commitment to practice, and the game is extensive and directly affects their degree and career choices (Hruby, 2021; Porter, 2019). Consequentially, in a 2016 study by the NCAA, student-athletes, and coaches supported moving toward spending less time in sport-related activities for career and educational development (NCAA, 2016).

General career preparation and planning include exploring alternative career options, experiencing non-athletic activities, and acknowledging there will be a life after football eventually (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Some research has found that at many Division I schools, athletes are forced to choose between football and academics, often resulting in a more manageable or attainable degree than the one they had wanted (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). The top five popular majors at Power 5 schools include communications, social sciences, business, interdisciplinary studies, and arts and sciences (Ferguson, 2016). Social sciences, including sociology, human science, and behavioral sciences, have become increasingly popular choices for football student-athletes (Ferguson, 2016). This suggests choosing a degree to further life after sports is optimal but is only sometimes considered or pursued.

Understanding The Power 5's Impact

In the NCAA, 65 universities comprise the Power 5 conferences: Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Pac-12 Conference, Big 12 Conference, the Southeastern Conference, and Notre Dame. High school athletes hoping to make it to the NFL will likely want to play for one of these larger conference schools as it raises their draft chances. Between 2016 and 2021, 145 first-round draft picks were chosen from the Power 5; comparatively, 14 made it from smaller conferences (Fox Sports, 2021). Furthermore, Power 5 schools can offer better scholarships and (NIL) related initiatives (Bromberg, 2021).

The Power 5 have an immense ascendancy that should be used for the betterment of their football players. In 2015, during the NCAA annual convention, Power 5 universities were granted autonomy allowing these conferences to become a sub-division of Division I schools. The restructuring allowed for Power 5 athletic departments to disperse their resources easier, like monetary allocations to athletes, without smaller schools blocking through votes. With many schools moving conferences, some feel the need for the Division to be restructured again, primarily because of how much each school can afford to offer the athlete for scholarships (Dellenger, 2022). A future convention will likely hear of the requests for restructuring all three Divisions so that each can make its legislation according to the specific needs of their athletics (Dellenger, 2022). With newfound, growing strength, The Power 5's autonomy has created

beneficial laws such as requiring all Division I schools to make mental health resources and services available through the athletic department or a counseling service department (Hosick, 2019). Additionally, the NCAA's Constitution was updated to reflect their stance on athlete's health and overall well-being by adding the term "mental health" into the Constitution. For example, to destigmatize and legitimize mental health, the Constitution now reads, "facilitate an environment that reinforces physical and mental health within athletics by ensuring access to appropriate resources and open engagement with respect to physical and mental health" (NCAA, 2023).

While these changes suit student athletes' mental health, little has changed concerning time off the playing field. Aside from a few general rules, most have remained steady, stating indeterminate education hours, training times, and games allowing dictation by the schools (NCAA, 2023). The undefined terms of the NCAA Constitution could be why smaller Division I schools can offer specialized courses, and larger schools, particularly those with Division I basketball and football programs, push student athletes into less academically challenging programs. Others believe it to be the NCAA minimum academic requirements that allow the coaches to pressure athletes into less marketable degree programs simply to keep up with a player's eligibility standards (Childs Jr., 2021).

Future Considerations

Elite-level football student-athletes face numerous obstacles on their sprint to an NFL career that might not materialize for various factors. Coaches, family, doctors, teachers, and others, can influence decisions. However, the one with all the power to vindicate a player's destiny is themselves. Student-athletes have unique values and beliefs, distinct identities, and specific mental and physical characteristics but are not alone because they have each other. Student-athletes can become social workers, who in turn, can circle back to help raise up the next group of student-athletes because they understand each other best.

Power 5 Division I conference schools should consider supporting a social work degree for football student-athletes. A social work degree provides person-centered growth and professional and interpersonal development. The degree choice can be partnered with the student's athletic identity and the social cognitive career theory model to become successful. Social work provides a career that empowers the athlete with a purpose and a sense of greater belonging once the game inevitably ends. The idea is not revolutionary. For example, the Baltimore Ravens hired a former linebacker to become the team's director of player engagement, who holds a position that educates current players on financial education, community activities, and internships in careers outside of anything sports-related (Smith, 2019). Nevertheless, once again, not every athlete makes it to the NFL, and student-athletes can be equipped to help themselves and their teammates through a social work degree they can obtain while they play their sport in college.

Additionally, as sport social work is a newly emerging area, this paper recommends further research in Division I football as an exemplar for expanding and scaling programs into other athletic venues and as a bridge to further understanding resource allocation in athletic departments. Power 5 football athletic departments are the most well-financed and resourced of all collegiate sports. More research will help understand how these resources can be used to improve lifelong outcomes for all student-athletes.

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