

Mental Health and Varsity Student-Athletes in Canada: Is there a Role for Sport Social Workers?

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The profession of social work is an available profession for increasing mental health and well-being across Canadian post-secondary campuses. This research focuses on better understanding the experience of a subset of university students, namely those identified as 'varsity student-athletes' (VSAs). The framework for this pilot study is informed by sport social work, an emerging area of social work practice in Canada. A descriptive survey design was employed, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the experiences of a subset of VSAs attending an affiliated liberal arts university college in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. The survey focused on participants' experiences of seeking and accessing support services while also soliciting their feedback on potential unmet needs and programmatic recommendations to inform the development of a Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN). The authors of this research contend that although only a small sample of VSAs participated in this study, the preliminary findings suggest that there is significant potential to support this population through a sport social work approach. The central objective of this paper, grounding in the principles and values of sport social work, is to assess VSAs untapped and unmet support service needs to explore the potential of integrating a SASN into Canadian post-secondary institutions. The development of a SASN would provide programming to VSAs which moves beyond traditional performance-focused models to one that supports the athlete as a whole person.

Keywords: varsity student-athlete (VSA), mental health, support services, Canada

Introduction

Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in Canada offer a diverse range of professional and foundational programs, support research activities, host extracurricular organizations and recreational sport, and provide employment opportunities. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) reports that there are over 400 public and/or private universities and colleges across Canada's ten provinces and three territories (2025). In Ontario alone, there are 23 universities, 24 colleges, 9 Indigenous Institutes, and more than 500 career-specific institutions (Government of Ontario, 2025).

The challenges faced by students entering the PSI environment are well documented and span practical, social and academic domains, with estimations of roughly 1.2 million youth in Canada requiring mental health support and over half (57%) not receiving the care they require (Chatoor et al., 2023; Dooley et al., 2013; Drolet & Sarabia, 2020; Jack.org, 2024; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2024). Published reports highlight a national housing crisis (Danis et al., 2024), food insecurity (Meal Exchange, 2021), and cultures of sexual violence and misconduct (PACSW, 2023) intersectional to continued rises in reported rates of poor mental health among post-secondary students. These reports include, but are not limited to, an increase in sleep disturbances, stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and suicidal ideation (American College Health Association, 2019; Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, 2022; Universities Canada, 2025; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018). In addition, rates have almost tripled in the reported cases of depression, anxiety, eating-related, psychotic, and comorbid presentation since the early 2000s (Chatoor et al., 2023) while experiences remain particularly precarious for marginalized, Indigenous, and racialized students (CFS, 2022; Hop Wo et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2025; Universities Canada, 2019).

This research focuses on better understanding the experience of a subset of university students, namely those identified as 'varsity student-athletes' (VSAs). A VSA is defined as a full-time university student who competes in an individual or team sport at USports-sanctioned games and events (Gomez et al., 2018; USports, 2025). Studies indicate that the post-secondary experience of a VSA differs significantly from that of non-athlete students in Canada (Adusei et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2019; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018). In addition to the challenges faced by the general student population, VSAs are at greater risk of experiencing mental health challenges at some point in their university career due to their simultaneous commitment to both academics and athletics (Adusei et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2019; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). The uniqueness of the VSA experience lies in the need to allocate time not only for attending classes, studying for exams, and completing assignments, but also for practices, strength and conditioning sessions, nutrition and body composition assessments, travel, video analysis, mental performance training, and, of course, competitive games and tournaments. This "dual-career" commitment (Fahrner & Burk, 2025) requires VSAs to balance their time and energy between athletic responsibilities and maintaining academic excellence.

Research also indicates that the VSA experience is further complicated by heightened exposure to social and internalized stigma, as well as the pressures embedded in sport culture; these factors collectively place VSAs at a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing poor mental health and threats to overall well-being compared to their non-athlete peers (Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2020; Johnston & Frake-Mistak, 2024; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Van Slingerland & Durand-Bush, 2018; Whelan et al., 2024). Existing research has documented the prevalence of

binge drinking, substance misuse, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, body image issues, and suicidal ideation within the university experiences of student athletes (Brown et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2021; NCAA, 2024; Terzis & Beasley, 2022).

Despite the challenging mental health landscape experienced by VSAs, research consistently highlights low rates of help-seeking behaviours within this population as a significant cause for concern (Akesdotter et al., 2020; Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; Gavrilova & Donahue, 2018; Kern et al., 2017). This trend has been attributed to a range of factors, including scheduling conflicts, limited mental health literacy, and negative past experiences with support services (Grubic et al., 2021; Terzis & Beasley, 2022). Van Slingerland and Durand-Bush (2018) identified a socio-cultural conditioning among VSAs that leads to “over-reporting high functionality and under-reporting ill-being symptoms,” a pattern correlated with the stigma surrounding athlete mental health (pg. 162). As a result, studies suggest that VSAs are more likely to seek psychosocial support from external services outside of their PSIs and athletic environments (Akesdotter et al., 2020). This tendency is further compounded by deeply entrenched stigma and a lack of culturally sensitive services attuned to the invisible struggles athletes endure while managing their dual-career commitments (Akesdotter et al., 2020; Bauman, 2016). Kern and colleagues (2017) found that while both varsity-athletes and non-athletes express relatively high willingness to seek psychosocial support services, VSAs’ follow-through is often “met with barriers...reinforced by expectations of toughness, invulnerability, and battling through adversity” (pg. 325). Such narratives foster a belief among VSAs that seeking professional help will be perceived as weakness or failure by teammates, coaches or their institution (Bauman, 2016; Gucciardi et al., 2017).

Importantly, there is a growing recognition of the need for mental health services specifically tailored to the unique needs and experiences of VSAs on Canadian campuses. As a result, national organizations are beginning to promote VSA mental health initiatives across Canada. For example, the USports Mental Health Best Practices provides a framework for PSIs to follow for the “appropriate management” of VSA mental health (USports, 2019). The USports (2019) Best Practices outlines the following recommendations: “(1) ensure access to qualified and licensed mental health practitioners; (2) ensure proper procedures for identification of VSAs with mental health concerns and appropriate referral to relevant practitioners; (3) implement mental health screening into pre-participation examinations; and (4) encourage sporting environments that support mental wellness and resiliency.” Additionally, across Canadian PSIs, a continuum of mental health support services exists for VSAs, ranging from informal help-seeking pathways to more structured access to care via integrated support teams (see Appendix B and C). However, current models largely place the burden of help-seeking on the VSA as opposed to embedding mental health support staff within academic and athletic environments to facilitate regular, direct engagements. Further research is required to evaluate the efficacy, accessibility and responsiveness of these programs in meeting the unique mental health needs of VSAs on Canadian campuses.

The framework for this pilot study is grounded in sport social work, an emerging area of social work practice in Canada. Sport social work, as defined by Moore and Gummelt (2019), “promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the unique needs of athletes at both an individual and environmental level” (pg. 1). Similar to other domains of Canadian social work practice, sport social work operates across individual, interpersonal, group and systemic levels of practice (Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Magier et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2024). In contrast to sport psychology’s focus on optimizing mental skills for performance, sport social work centres

the athlete as a whole person, attending to both internal and external influences (Newman et al., 2019). Moore and Gummelt (2019) argue that “one of the largest challenges facing sport social workers is illustrating how athletes are a vulnerable population who deserve the assistance of social workers” (pg.1). Several studies suggest that embedding social workers within existing PSI support services could enhance the holistic well-being of VSAs as these professionals bring ecological systems knowledge and a person-in-environment lens to their work, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors at play in the lives of student athletes (Adusei et al., 2020; Moore, 2017). The following research presents future programmatic recommendations for implementing a VSA-specific Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN) based off preliminary findings from this pilot project. The researchers coined the term SASN as it identifies untapped potential for specialized, holistic care to VSAs as dual-career post-secondary students potentially managing a plethora of issues in their many pursuits and endeavors. As we present the findings, we aim to demonstrate the critical need to integrate SASNs guided by sport social work across Canadian PSI landscapes to best support the whole person of the VSA.

Methodology

This pilot research study was developed and initiated by a former varsity athlete as part of their Master of Social Work (MSW) degree requirements. The project was informed in part by the student’s lived experience as a VSA and their interest in developing a mental health program that reflects the unique realities of post-secondary life for varsity athletes. A descriptive survey design was employed, using a survey and short answer narrative questions, to gather data with respect to the support needs of a subset of VSAs attending an affiliated liberal arts university college in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. The purpose of a descriptive study is to describe events and conditions by them as they exist (Siedlecki, 2020). The survey focused on participants’ experiences of seeking and accessing support services and solicited their input on unmet needs to inform the development of a Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN). The research was grounded in the values, beliefs and principles of sport social work, while also acknowledging the sociocultural and dual-career barriers that VSAs experience when seeking support (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). This research project was approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of King’s University College at Western University.

Data Collection

The pilot project utilized an online survey (Qualtrics) completed by VSAs enrolled at the affiliated liberal arts university college. The study did not aim for a specific targeted sample prior to data collection. The rationale for this decision was grounded in the reality of the limited pool of VSA registered as students at the site of the research. The study was advertised by the research team virtually through various social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook), as well as through hard copy posters placed in locations where VSAs were likely to congregate, such as outside classrooms, hallways, student unions and the library. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were required to review the letter of information and provide informed consent through the Qualtrics platform.

The survey consisted of three sections (see Appendix A): 1) demographic information; 2) questions using a Likert scale; and 3) open-ended questions designed to solicit narrative responses. Notably, sections two and three of the survey were developed to assess participants’

perceived support needs as VSAs, their awareness of existing on-campus services, and their perceptions of unmet needs that could potentially be met by the development of a SASN. A \$10 Starbucks gift card was provided to participants who completed the survey. Participant anonymity was ensured, and all data stored on password-protected computers, accessible only to the master's student and their faculty research supervisor.

Data Analysis

Demographic data from the survey results were categorized for dissemination purposes, including participants' gender, the specific varsity sport in which they were involved and their year of study. The narratives provided by participants in the short-answer component of the survey were analyzed using a descriptive thematic approach wherein researchers independently reviewed, coded and organized the responses into generalizable themes.

Study Sample

The Qualtrics survey was completed by 31 participants over the three-week period during which it was available. Sociodemographic characteristics collected included gender identity, year of study, and varsity sport represented (see Appendix A). Of the 31 respondents, sixteen (16) identified as female and fifteen (15) identified as male. All participants were undergraduate students: five (5) were in first year, eight (8) in second year, six (6) in third year, eight (8) in fourth year, and three (3) did not respond to this question. Varsity sports represented included football (6), soccer (4), hockey (4), baseball/softball (3), rowing (3), swimming (2), wrestling (2), and one (1) response each for volleyball, basketball, squash, and track and field. Two participants did not indicate their sport. The demographic data presented above highlights the variety of quantitative and qualitative data collected from this pilot project below as there is diversity in the gender, year of study and sports represented. Outside of missing demographic data from which year of study (3) and sport represented (2) participants belonged to, there was no missing quantitative data to report in data analysis, while qualitative data was left optional and most participants chose to answer.

Findings

The responses to the survey provided by the participants yielded several important insights regarding participants' experiences with support services. When asked about their level of *awareness of current supportive services within the College*, one (1) participant indicated "no awareness," five (5) reported being "very aware" and the majority, sixteen (16), indicated they were "somewhat aware." In response to their experience accessing support services (see Appendix D), most participants (55%) reported accessing academic advising, while 16% sought services related to tutoring or academic writing. Thirteen percent of respondents indicated that they had sought individual counselling during the academic year. In assessing participants' perceptions of the *overall quality of current mental health and well-being supports available* (see Appendix E), 64% believed the services met their expectations. An additional 19% of participants indicated the overall quality of these support services exceeded their expectations, 14% believed they needed improvement, and 3% rated them as outstanding. When asked *what types of programs would they be interested in if they had access to VSA-specific mental health*

and well-being programs in the future (see Appendix F), 29% indicated a preference for in-person, on-campus counselling. Other preferences included student-athlete specific wellness presentations (24%), hybrid counselling (21%), peer support groups (10%), virtual counselling (8%), and virtual self-led educational modules (8%). This question allowed for multiple responses, and therefore totals exceeded 31 responses. Finally, participants were asked *how likely they would be to access a VSA-specific mental health and well-being support at the affiliate liberal arts campus*, using a Likert scale where 1 indicated “very unlikely” and 5 indicated “very likely” (see Appendix G). Results showed that 6% of participants were very unlikely, 24% were unlikely, 37% were unsure, 24% were likely, and 9% were very likely to access such services in the future.

When invited to provide open-ended feedback on what they considered important in the development of an SASN, three key themes emerged: (1) a desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs; (2) a need for flexible service delivery models that accommodate game and training schedules; and (3) a limited awareness of available support services and insufficient coach encouragement.

Desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs

Participants expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to connect with other VSAs as a means of support from peers who share similar post-secondary experiences. As noted by several of the participants:

Support groups/athlete mentorship programs would be both beneficial for connecting with other athletes who have faced similar situations as you and could provide support in a positive environment. Sometimes it's hard for people who haven't experienced athletics at a high level to truly relate to your issues and provide realistic support.

Other participants highlighted the importance of building relationships through “events that bring together [University] student-athletes.” The opportunity to connect with and feel mutually supported by others navigating the multiple demands unique to the VSA experience was a recurring theme in participant responses. This theme’s support from participants acknowledges the research’s pursuit to highlight unmet or untapped support service desires by VSAs which could be met through a SASN.

Flexible service delivery models that accommodate game and training schedules

Another theme that emerged from the data was the desire among VSAs for support services to be delivered in a way that acknowledges the unique time commitments associated with being a student-athlete. These include, but are not limited to, practice times, weekend games, training sessions and weight-lifting schedules. For example, many athletes lived off campus, making it difficult to attend in-person counselling sessions. As one participant explained, “I’m not on campus often enough to access it. Because I have practice and appointments at [name of treatment centre] and the varsity clinic, I’m not at [University] physically most of the time.” For some respondents, the need for flexibility was closely tied to the accessibility of services: “I would go to counselling if I could arrange it around my practice and game schedule or when I had an off day. Virtual would be better as going to campus is not

always easy.” These responses emphasize that service delivery models must be flexible in both format (e.g., virtual or in-person) and time (e.g., outside regular hours) to accommodate the demands of student-athlete life. This theme recognizes the researchers' pursuit to understand possible programmatic recommendations for future SASNs; guided by a sport social work approach, we identify a correlation between VSAs support service needs and moving beyond traditional ways of providing care as professionals.

Limited awareness of available support services and insufficient coach encouragement

Participant narratives reflected ongoing barriers to help-seeking within the athletic culture of universities. These included both a general lack of awareness about what services are available and the stigma associated with VSAs reaching out for support. One participant shared, “I think information about mental health support systems should be more accessible to athletes. Whether people choose to take advantage of these services or not, knowing that there are options for support can go a long way.” Another participant highlighted how a lack of awareness of the services available was also an issue. They explained, “For me, the barrier that exists is not even being aware of some of the mental health services that [University] does offer. This survey is the first time I’m hearing about the various counselling options and other services.” Others echoed this sentiment, with observations regarding a “lack of exposure about the services available.” This general lack of awareness may have significant implications for VSAs who are struggling with their mental health but remain unaware of the services available to support them.

In addition to this limited awareness, participants also identified a lack of acceptance from coaches when VSAs seek mental health supports outside of the team environment. As one participant poignantly noted, “I find a barrier I have is that my coaches don’t seem to promote the services or I don’t truly feel they care.” Other related responses included “Having more awareness for coaches and having them understand what they do affects athletes’ mental health,” as well as “Being informed by people who care and not just my teammates but coaches also.” This need for validation and support from coaches aligns with existing research on help-seeking behaviours among student-athletes and underscores the importance of fostering a culture of acceptance within sport environments to reduce the stigma associated with mental health concerns (Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2020; Way et al., 2020).

Discussion

Published research highlights that the post-secondary reality of VSAs is marked by unique challenges compared to the general student population, as they attempt to meet both academic and athletic commitments. The findings from this pilot study reflect several important considerations regarding the provision of support services to help VSAs navigate the terrain of post-secondary education. First, the study highlights that a segment of this population is unaware of the services available to them beyond academic supports, which tend to be emphasized early in their post-secondary experience to assist with improving grades and managing their schedule. This is unsurprising given that academic counselling and advising are typically embedded in general orientation programs offered to first-year students. Without a working knowledge of the broader range of support services available, or how to access them, VSAs may find themselves in the precarious position of having to locate help during a time of crisis or mental health instability. Second, consistent with previous research in this area, there continues to be a stigma

associated with VSAs seeking mental health support for concerns that fall outside the realm of performance-based interventions (Bauman, 2016). This minimization contributes not only to the isolation of VSAs who may be struggling with mental health or other psychosocial challenges but also places them at greater risk of experiencing a range of serious mental health conditions. Third, the findings from this pilot study offer valuable insight for designing and delivering support services to meet athletes' needs. It is clear that these services must not be homogenous; VSAs have diverse needs, and a "one-size-fits-all" approach is inadequate. The development of an SASN must consider multiple delivery formats, including online and virtual options in addition to traditional face-to-face counselling support (see Appendix F). These flexible formats would allow for "on-demand" support tailored to the VSAs' game, practice and training schedules. Virtual models also help preserve anonymity, which may reduce the internal and external stigma associated with accessing support services in visible, campus-based locations. In addition, hybrid options would further empower VSAs to choose the mode of support that best fits their needs. Finally, the narratives shared by participants reflected a strong desire for opportunities to connect with other VSAs as a form of support. Notably, this desire was grounded in a need for shared understanding, being with others "who know what it's like to be a varsity athlete."

The authors of this research contend that although only a small sample of VSAs participated in this study, the preliminary findings suggest that there is untapped potential to support this population through a sport social work approach. The development of an SASN, grounded in the principles and values of sport social work, could result in the development of programming that moves beyond a traditional performance-focused model to one that supports the athlete as a whole person. Firstly, a sport social worker's orientation includes a conscious recognition that a binary approach to supporting VSAs' holistic well-being, one that separates academic and athletic identities, is insufficient. Instead, sport social work promotes a "both/and" perspective that honours the dual role of student and athlete. This includes operationalizing both ecological systems thinking and a biological-psychological-social-cultural-spiritual (BPSCS) framework in practice. An ecological systems theory approach acknowledges that VSAs presenting concerns are not isolated experiences, but rather are shaped by the broader, interconnected sociocultural factors in their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Similarly, a BPSCS framework emphasizes that VSAs must be recognized as whole persons whose biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions are interwoven and shaped by the systems they inhabit (Brown et al., 2020). Any future SASN support service that fails to account for the broader sociocultural and environmental factors in the life of a VSA risks further minimizing the very mental health concerns for which they seek help. Importantly, this framework aligns closely with both the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) scope of practice and the core values and ethics of sport social work (Moore & Gummelt, 2019; OCSWSSW, 2023).

Secondly, any SASN that is developed must recognize that VSAs require more than mental health support delivered solely by social workers; rather, they would benefit most from an interdisciplinary continuum of care. Interdisciplinary approaches to health and well-being are evidence-based practices "designed to forward effective use of professional judgement in integrating information about each client's unique circumstances and characteristics," while drawing on external supporting data (Gambrill, 2019, pg. 22). Social work, in collaboration with psychology, athletic therapy, dietetics and other disciplines, can foster an approach to care that reflects the many needs of student-athletes in a truly holistic manner. Introducing sport social

workers into existing athlete support structures within PSIs would help facilitate meaningful connections between athletes, support personnel and interdisciplinary professionals, ideally throughout the duration of the student's university athletic career and beyond. These considerations would also serve to reduce barriers to care, including both internal and external stigma, that often prevent VSAs from seeking support for the comorbid mental health challenges they face.

Lastly, contributions from the subspecialty of sport social work within Ontario PSIs, as part of an interprofessional team, could promote equitable attention to both athletic performance and mental health. In contrast to the current narrative of highly stigmatized and low help-seeking behaviours among VSAs, Bauman (2016) argues for adaptations to organizational processes so that equal value is placed on athlete "software" as their "hardware." Hardware refers to the athlete's biomechanics and physical functioning, while software refers to mental health and performance psychology (Bauman, 2016). The challenge, and opportunity, lies in closing the gap between the traditional emphasis on hardware and an expanded focus that includes both. Doing so inevitably requires moving beyond the path of least resistance and fostering culturally attuned environments where VSAs can seek support without fear of negative consequences (Bauman, 2016). Given that sport social workers are trained to view an athlete as the whole person, they are well-positioned to cultivate a culture where help-seeking for psychosocial issues is as normalized and valued as physical maintenance, ensuring that VSA mental health issues are neither hidden nor dismissed.

Ultimately, the gap between culturally attuned service provision and VSA mental health support can be narrowed through the integration of interdisciplinary teams. Purcell and colleagues (2019) succinctly capture this imperative: "Any mental health framework that ignores wider ecological factors runs the risk of...potentially pathologizing the individual athlete, when other factors may be more influential in contributing to, or perpetuating, poor mental health" (pg. 3). Updating and augmenting current PSI organizational processes in Canada will be essential to minimizing both internalized stigma and external pressures that inhibit help-seeking among VSAs. Operationalizing an interdisciplinary approach to VSA mental health, one that includes sport social work, holds strong potential for the development of an SASN that supports student-athlete success both on and off the field.

Future Implications for Practice, Education and Research

Professional Practice

The inclusion of sport social work within the Canadian professional social work landscape is still an emerging venture, as it is not fully recognized as a distinct, social justice-driven subspecialty area of practice. At present, few internal or external sport social work networks exist for Canadian practitioners or affiliated professionals working in sport-related contexts. The U.S.-based Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) remains the sole platform offering Canadian social workers access to practice guidance and professional development opportunities. However, differences in regulatory frameworks and national accreditation systems between the U.S. and Canada limit the direct applicability of ASWIS resources in the Canadian context. Therefore, social workers engaged in therapeutic roles within sport must continue to advocate for the formal recognition of sport social work as a legitimate area of practice. The ultimate goal is to position social work as a core discipline within

established interdisciplinary teams to deliver innovative, ethical and equity-focused support services within Canadian university athletics.

Teaching and Practicums

An exciting area of innovation for VSA mental health across Ontario PSIs lies in the robust availability of practicing professionals and trainees in the helping disciplines who are eager to offer support services to this population. In addition to social work students, disciplines such as physical therapy, sport psychology and medicine regularly seek practicum opportunities that could be embedded within a future SASN program offered across Ontario PSIs. These programs would be financially feasible, especially given decreasing government funding to PSIs, by leveraging student practicums and utilizing hybrid and existing campus spaces for service delivery. This model could also help eliminate common barriers to services, such as long waitlists and complex referral processes.

Education

Grounded in both ecological systems and BPSCS perspectives, future education and training would promote conversation with VSAs, coaches, parents and academic administrators that acknowledges the ongoing experienced tension that exists between a student's academic and athletic goals, and the uniqueness of an individual's varsity athletic experience. Education and training for coaches, PSI administrators, and academic personnel's should include developing awareness regarding the difference in VSAs being 'mentally tough and experiencing a variety of intersecting mental health concerns as both can coexist in their lives' (Bennett, 2024, pg. 72). We encourage PSIs to implement psychoeducation and training for both coaches, academic administrators and the athletes themselves, to make transparent the reality of the unique needs and timing constraints intersectional to their invisible reluctance to seek professional help for mental health concerns. Only through increased awareness and education of all involved in varsity athletics will progress be made to create an environment for VSAs that focuses on the health of the whole person, not just the athlete, in a way that is compassionate and destigmatizing in the realm of mental health.

Research

The results of this pilot study highlight the need to develop programs of research that focus on the VSA experience at the micro, mezzo and macro level. This includes but is not limited to the production of research that continues to evaluate VSA experiences across Ontario PSIs, particularly exploring their need for tailored support services considering their tendency for low help seeking behaviors. In addition, continued research in this area will aim to better inform coaches, parents and university educators as to the impact of the dual-career commitment required of VSAs, and the intersecting social and emotional challenges impeding their overall health and wellness. Such programs of research will not only aid in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of VSAs, but also potentially assist in highlighting the important contribution the profession of social work can make in supporting VSAs both in policy and practice.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the findings are based on a small sample of VSAs from a single affiliated college and therefore cannot be generalized to reflect the needs and perspectives of all VSAs across Canada. Second, there is limited published research on the experiences of VSAs within the Canadian context from which the researchers could draw comparisons and/or conclusions. Finally, the primary researcher had lived experience as a VSA, and this ‘insider’ perspective may have introduced bias or assumed knowledge in the analysis and reporting of the data.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that sport social work, as a developing subspecialty within the broader field of professional social work, is well-positioned to address both the challenges facing the general student population in Canadian PSIs and the unique needs of VSAs. This pilot study highlighted several barriers that VSAs face in accessing appropriate mental health and well-being support services. It is evident that more research is needed to assess the needs of VSAs throughout their academic journey. Additionally, there is a clear need for an interdisciplinary approach to supporting VSA mental health and well-being, one that includes the person-in-environment perspective so integral to social work practice. By implementing SASN support services, institutions can shift toward a more holistic model that treats VSAs as whole individuals, not just athletes.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Student-Athlete Support Network (SASN) Pilot Study Survey

1. What year of study are you in?

Answer options:

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th
- 6th

2. What gender do you identify with?

Answer options:

- Female
- Male
- Transgender female
- Transgender male
- Nonbinary
- Other: [textbox]
- Prefer not to answer

3. What varsity team(s) at [University] are you currently a member?

Answer option:

- Name of sport(s): [textbox]
- Prefer not to answer

4. How would you rate your current level of awareness of the various mental health & well-being supports and services at [affiliate College]:

Answer options:

- 1 = Not at all aware
- 2 = Not aware
- 3 = Somewhat aware
- 4 = Aware
- 5 = Very aware

5. Please indicate which, if any, support services you have accessed during your time at [affiliate College] [select all that apply]:

Answer options:

- Academic advising
- Individual counselling
- Crisis supports
- Career counselling
- The Write place
- Campus Ministry
- [Affiliate College] Academic Mentoring Program

6. Overall, how would you personally rate the quality of mental health and well-being supports at [affiliate College] in meeting your needs as a varsity student-athlete?

Answer options:

- 1 = Unacceptable
- 2 = Needs improvement
- 3 = Meets expectations
- 4 = Exceeds expectations
- 5 = Outstanding

7. Are there any support services or programs currently not offered at [affiliate College] that you feel would be beneficial to your success as a varsity student athlete?

Answer option:

- Text box

8. If you had access to a student-athlete specific mental health & well-being program, what type of program would you be interested in? [select all that apply]

Answer options:

- One-on-one counselling:
 - In-person off-campus counselling
 - In-person on-campus counselling
- Virtual one-on-one counselling
- Virtual self-led educational modules
- Hybrid counselling [option of in-person or virtual]
- Peer support groups
- Student-athlete specific mental health & wellness presentations

9. In your opinion, are there any barriers that currently exist in being able to access mental health and well-being services at [affiliate College] for you as a varsity student-athlete?

Answer option:

- Textbox

10. If yes, what do you feel could be done to remove barriers to accessing services and supports for varsity student-athletes at [affiliate College]?

Answer option:

- Textbox

11. On a scale of 1-5, how likely would you be to access student-athlete specific mental health & well-being supports at [affiliate College]?

Answer options:

- 1 = Very unlikely
- 2 = Unlikely
- 3 = Unsure
- 4 = Likely
- 5 = Very likely

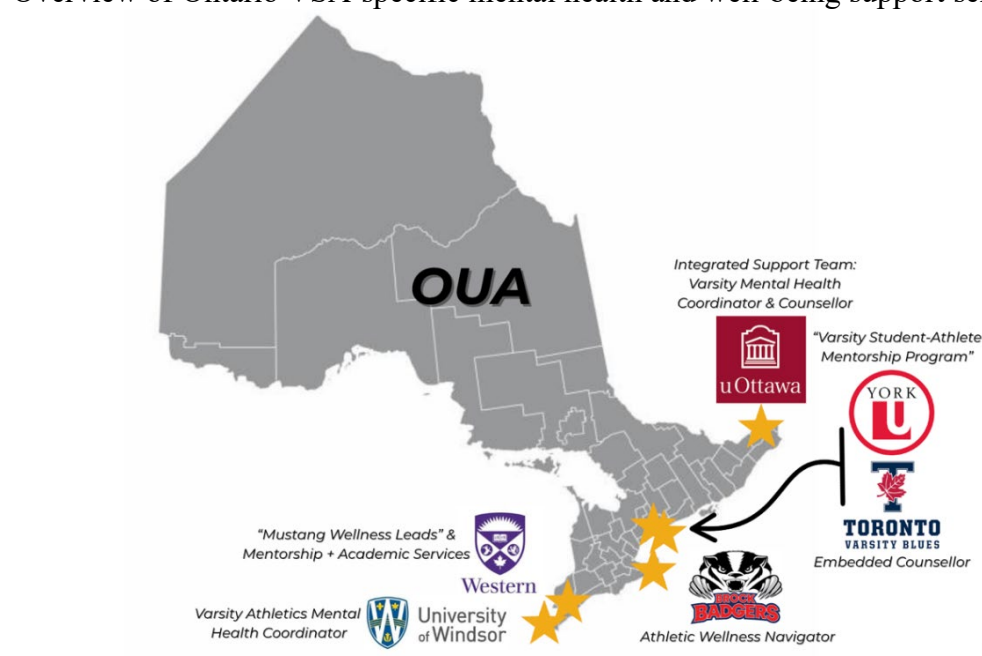
12. Is there anything else about your experience at [affiliate College] as a varsity student-athlete that we have not asked about and would be important for us to know when thinking about future support services for student-athletes?

Answer option:

- Textbox

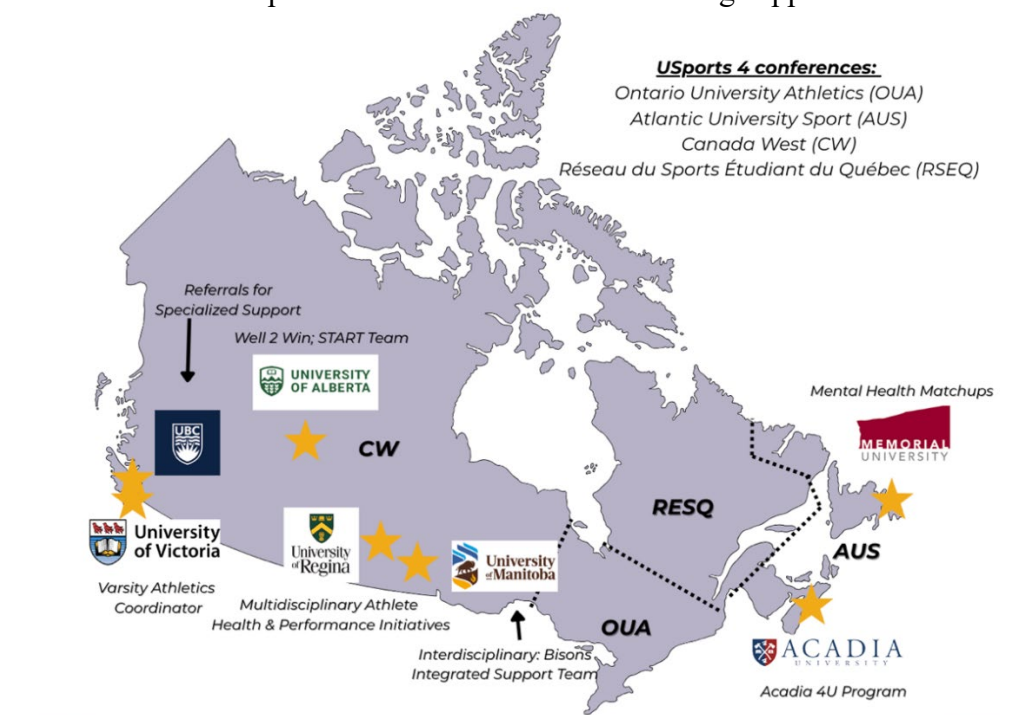
Appendix B:

Overview of Ontario VSA-specific mental health and well-being support services.



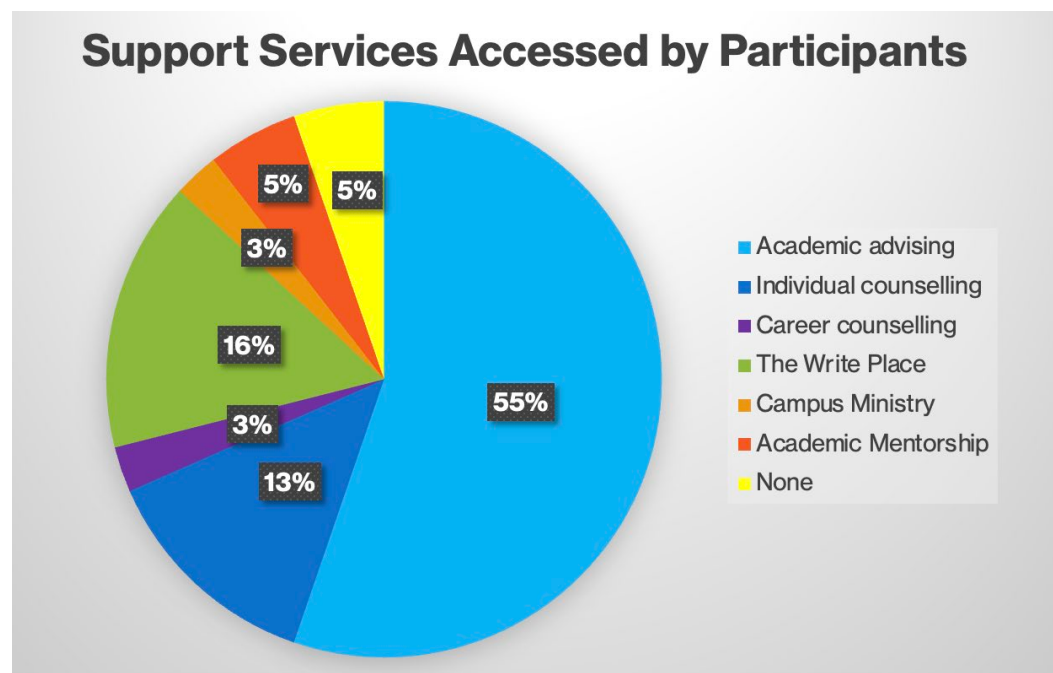
Appendix C:

Overview of VSA-specific mental health and well-being support services across Canada.



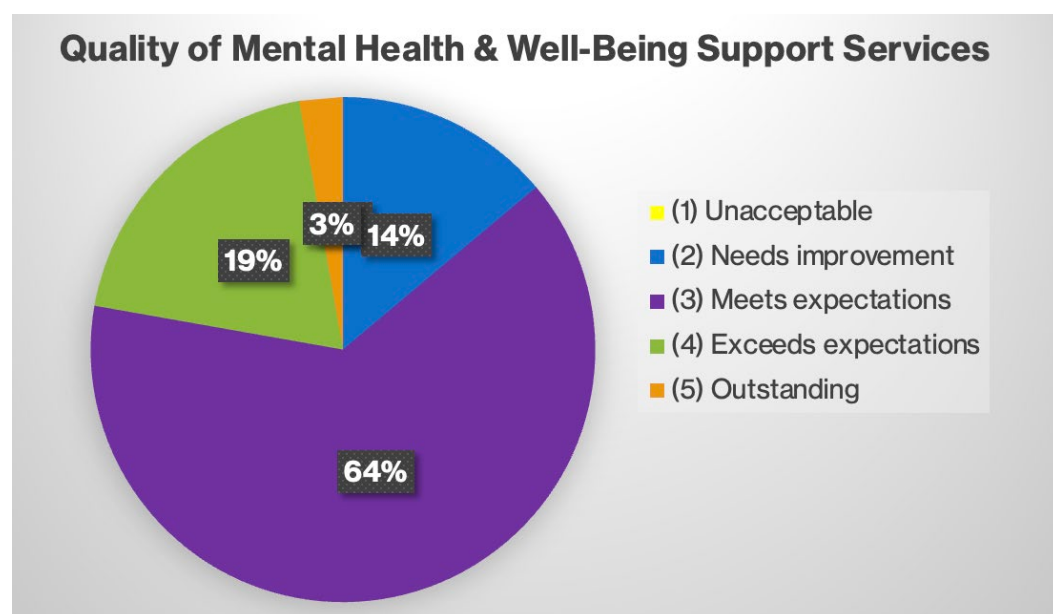
Appendix D:

Previously accessed by mental health and well-being support services by participants.



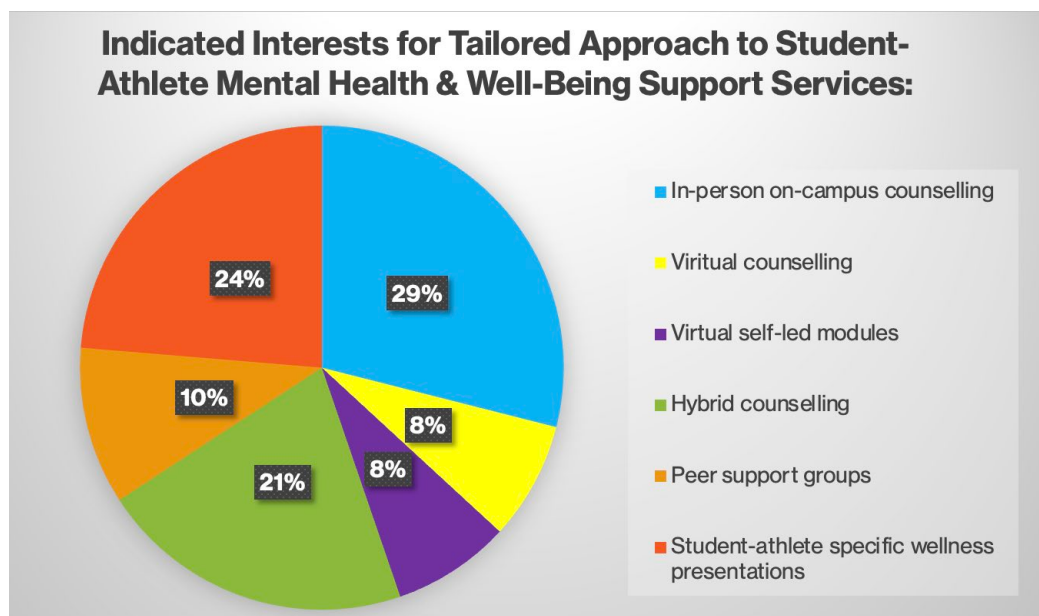
Appendix E:

Reported overall quality of current mental health and well-being support service by participants.



Appendix F:

Indicated interested by participants to have access to a SASN-like program.



Appendix G:

Reported likeliness by participants to access a SASN-like program in the future.

