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Examination of the Impact of Substance Use on Sport Training and Competition in Collegiate Athletes

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Abstract

Objectives: There is a need to psychometrically develop self-report measures of substance use in athletes, particularly those that assess the impact substance use has on sport performance. *Method:* In this study, a four-item measure assessing the extent to which alcohol and illicit drug use interfere with sport performance in training and competition, validated measures of psychiatric symptomology and substance use frequency, and a structured clinical interview assessing substance use diagnostic criteria were administered (N=285 athletes). *Results:* One-week test-retest reliability of the four-item measure was good, and positive relationships between this set of items and validated measures of psychiatric symptomology, substance use frequency, and age were found. Males demonstrated higher scores on the four-item measure, and its scores were not influenced by ethnicity and athlete type (NCAA, club, intramural). In a sub-sample of 74 participants who reported substance use and interest in pursuing psychological intervention, there was a non-significant trend for participants who were diagnosed with a substance use disorder to demonstrate higher scores on the four-item measure of substance use interference with sport performance than participants who were not diagnosed with a current substance use disorder (p = .08). *Conclusion:* Results suggest the developed four-item measure may be helpful in determining the extent to which substance use impacts sport training and competition in collegiate athletes.

Keywords: athlete, sport, mental health, substance use, assessment

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Studies of drug and alcohol use in collegiate athletes have chiefly focused on the assessment of substance use prevalence rates, usually comparing rates among sub-populations of elite collegiate athletes utilizing non-validated surveys (Buckman et al., 2011; Martens et al., 2006; NCAA, 2013). Research examining the negative consequences of alcohol and drug use in collegiate athletes' life outside of sports is emerging (NCAA, 2022). However, the impact of substance use on collegiate athletes' performance in sports training and competition has yet to be explored (Donohue et al., 2018).

Accurately assessing substance use can be a challenge (van den Berg et al., 2018). Indeed, the accuracy of substance use self-reporting practices have been questioned within the context of sports due to negative consequences associated with reporting substance use (Williams & Nowatzki, 2005). For instance, the most cited prevalence studies of substance use among collegiate athletes have been conducted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2013). The NCAA explicitly indicates there are no consequences to reporting illicit substance use in surveys administered by this organization. However, there are co-existing rules governed by this organization that consequence NCAA athletes when illicit substance use is determined to occur in contexts outside these survey administrations, making it difficult to compare rates of substances between NCAA athletes and intramural and club sport athletes. Along these lines, the context in which collegiate athletes are assessed plays a vital role in the truthfulness of responses, as reports of substance use are likely to be biased when perceived adverse consequences for reporting substance use are present (van den Berg et al., 2018).

The most widely used assessment of substance use involves quantity or frequency (Martin et al., 2021), which may be impacted by errors due to memory lapses. The Timeline Follow-back incorporates a calendar with substance-associated events to aid recall (TLFB) (Sobell et al., 1986). The TLFB has demonstrated psychometric support in various non-athlete populations (Donohue, Azrin, et al., 2004; Panza et al., 2012), and in collegiate athletes this measure has successfully measured changes in substance use outcomes (Donohue et al., 2018). However, the TLFB, consistent with other self-report frequency measures of substance use, has yet to be psychometrically examined in collegiate athletes who may be inherently less likely than non-athletes to report substance use.

The Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-5 (SCID-5) (First et al., 2016) assesses presence or absence of mental health disorders, including substance use disorders. This instrument has acceptable reliability and validity in determining the presence or absence of substance use disorders, and is arguably the most frequently used diagnostic measure of substance use in non-athlete adults. However, consistent with other diagnostic methods, this measure has yet to be examined in collegiate athletes.

The Sport Interference Checklist (SIC) (Donohue et al., 2007) was developed as a screening instrument to assess the extent to which various mental health associated factors interfere with sport performance during training (Problems in Sport Training Scale; PSTS) and competition (Problems in Sport Competition Scale; PSCS) using a *never* (1) to *always* (7) response scale. This 26-item measure has demonstrated validity and reliability in collegiate athletes (Donohue et al., 2007; Donohue et al., 2019; Donohue et al., 2020). However, the SIC does not assess the impact of illicit drug and alcohol use on sport performance. In the current study, the aforementioned SIC response scale was used to complement a set of four-item stems hypothesized to assess the impact alcohol use (2 items) and illicit drug use (2 items) have on sport performance (i.e., *How often does alcohol use interfere with your performance* in training, and separately, in competition; *How often does drug use, or use of prescribed drugs more than a medical doctor's prescription, interfere with your performance* in training, and separately, in competition). A potential benefit to using the SIC format is that athletes may be more compelled to report the negative impact of substance use on sport performance than non-sport consequences (van den Berg et al., 2018), and knowing the impact of substance use on sport performance is important to intervention planning.

Based on the adverse effects substance use has in sport training and competition (e.g., injury), and the lack of psychometric examination of assessment measures of substance use in athletes, there is a need to comprehensively evaluate the impact that substance use has on sport performance. Indeed, sport-specific substance use assessments within the college athlete population are limited, and existing survey methods of substance use are highly susceptible to false negatives. Lastly, substance use diagnostic interviews have yet to undergo psychometric examination in athlete populations. Therefore, in this study, multiple methods of assessing substance use were concurrently administered to collegiate athletes who were involved in one of three levels of collegiate athlete competition (NCAA, club, intramural) to examine psychometric properties of the aforementioned four-item measure assessing perceived impact of drug and alcohol use on sport performance, in-

cluding its test-retest reliability, concurrent validity, and relationship with an established measure of psychiatric symptomology. Unique to existing studies, a certificate of confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health was obtained to protect the participants' data from being disclosed to others when requested, even in the event of court and university mandates. It was hypothesized that participants with substance use disorders would evidence higher scores on the four-item substance use interference measure than participants who were not assessed to evidence these disorders. Lastly, relationships between the four-item substance use interference with sport scores and age, gender, ethnicity/race, year in school, and level of competition were examined.

Method

Participants

Demographic data for the overall sample (285) are presented in Table 1. Five of the participants did not provide demographic data. As can be seen, most of the participants were in the NCAA, approximately 20 years old, male, White/Caucasian, and freshmen.

Table 1

Participant Demographics for Overall Sample

Demographic		
	M	*SD*
Age in Years	19.87	1.99
	λ	%
Gender		
Male	145	51.8
Female	135	48.2
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	111	39.6
Black/African-American	43	15.4
Asian/Asian American	24	8.6
Hispanic/Latino	32	11.4
Pacific Islander	11	3.9
Other (multiple or not listed)	59	21.1
Year in school		
Freshman	102	36.4
Sophomore	83	29.6
Junior	60	21.4
Senior	35	12.5
Athlete Type		
NCAA	124	44.3
Club	33	11.8
Intramural	123	43.9

Note. n = 280. λ = frequency. Five participants did not provide demographic data and were excluded from Table 1.

Procedures

There was no patient and public involvement in the design, conduct, reporting, or dissemination plans of this research. Participants were enrolled in a Division 1 southwestern university in the United States. They were referred by various sources to determine their interest in participating in goal-oriented programming aimed at performance optimization in sports and life (Donohue et al., 2021). Three hundred and sixteen athletes were referred, and 285 agreed to complete consent and an initial assessment consisting of demographic questions, psychiatric functioning and the aforementioned four-item questionnaire assessing the impact of alcohol and drug use on sport training and competition. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two standardized interviews developed to facilitate engagement in intervention programming (Donohue et al., 2020). Seventy-four participants who reported drug and/or alcohol use and interest in receiving psychological intervention were scheduled for a second psychological assessment battery one week after the initial assessment was completed. This second battery included re-administration of the four-item measure of substance use impact on sport performance and psychiatric measures, as well as a semi-structured diagnostic measure of substance use disorders and substance use frequency.

To participate in the first assessment phase, participants had to be at least 18 years old, actively participate in an official university club, intramural, or NCAA sport, and report alcohol or non-prescribed drug use during the previous four months. To participate in

the second assessment phase, participants had to agree to invite at least one significant other to attend 12 scheduled intervention sessions across four months and be available for a follow-up assessment eight months post-randomization to one of the interventions. The University's Institutional Review Board approved this study, and participants' confidentiality specific to study data was legally protected due to a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. Deidentified data will be provided upon request. The study was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (1 R01 DA031828). Patients or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of the research.

Measures

Items assessing the impact of substance use on sport performance. To determine how drug and alcohol use negatively impact sports training and competition, the following four items were administered:

How often does drug use interfere with your performance:

1. during training?
2. during competition?

How often does alcohol use interfere with your performance:

3. during training?
4. during competition?

Participants were instructed to respond using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*). Response scores were combined to compute a total score. These item stems and response set were consistent with the structure of the Sport Interference Checklist; (Donohue et al., 2007; Donohue et al., 2019; Donohue et al., 2020) and as such were administered within the context of this measure.

The Symptom Checklist-90-R (SCL-90-R) (Derogatis et al., 1976) is a 90-item questionnaire used to determine overall severity of mental health symptomatology. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*). The SCL-90-R has acceptable validity and reliability in community samples, (Derogatis, 1994) college students (Martinez, 2005; Todd et al., 1997) and demonstrates clinical utility in college athletes (Donohue, Covassin, et al. 2004; Donohue et al., 2015).

The *Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV* (SCID-IV) (First et al., 2002) substance abuse and dependence diagnostic criteria were modified slightly to be consistent with diagnostic criteria for substance use disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders (5th edition) (American Psychiatric Association, 2002). This diagnostic approach has been effectively used to assess treatment outcomes in collegiate athletes (Donohue et al., 2018).

The *Timeline Follow-Back* (TLFB) (Sobell et al., 1986) was used to determine the number of days of alcohol and drug use reported by participants during the four months prior to the psychological assessment. A calendar is used that includes various events (e.g., parties, competitions) to assist recall of substance use days. The TLFB has evidenced validity and reliability in college students (Panza et al., 2012; Sobell et al., 1986), and clinical utility in college athletes (Donohue, Azrin, et al., 2004).

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement

Encouraging participation of a diverse sample of athletes permits social validity. Therefore, equity, diversity, and inclusion was planned in recruitment and considered in statistical analyses. Specific to recruitment, participants were randomly assigned to complete interviews that were actively focused on study engagement, such as the importance of (and difficulties experienced due to) various cultures (e.g., ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, sport, religion, gender). These interviews were developed utilizing a diverse team of student investigators (greater than 50% women and ethnic minority/international students). Participant ethnicity/race and gender were explicitly examined in statistical analyses, and relevant to inclusion all collegiate athletes (i.e., intramural, club, NCAA) were recruited and examined in all analyses.

Results

Data Screening

Data screening procedures were conducted to examine whether all variables met assumptions for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics and boxplots were visually inspected, and outliers were identified and moved closer to the distribution by adjusting the most extreme value closer to the next value in the distribution. As recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), the four-item *substance use interference with sport performance items* were transformed using the inverse formula (1/variable). These four items evidenced significant relationships with one another, with good internal consistency in the 1st study phase ($\lambda = 0.88$) and acceptable internal consistency in the 2nd study phase ($\lambda = 0.75$)[26]. These items were combined into a single-item composite score, permitting consistency with the TLFB, which combined alcohol and other drugs into one substance use frequency score.

Table 2

Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance Scores Between Participants with and without Current Substance Use Disorder

	Current SUD		No Current SUD				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(35.15)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Substance Use Interference Scores	1.73	.79	1.48	.58	-1.43	.08	.65

Note. n = 74. SUD = Substance use disorder.

Primary Analyses

Hypothesis 1

There will be a statistically significant 1-week test-retest reliability for the four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores. Intraclass correlation coefficient analysis revealed "good" agreement between scores (ICC = 0.74, 95% CI [0.57, 0.85], $p < .001$). The root mean square error (RMSE) was determined to be 0.68, suggesting that, on average, there will be a 0.68-point difference in scores when assessed across one week.

Hypothesis 2

There will be a statistically significant positive relationship between the four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores and mental health/psychiatric symptomatology. The relationship between substance use interference with sport composite scores and SCL90R was investigated using a partial Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient while controlling for the participant's age, gender, and athlete type (i.e., NCAA, Club, Intramural). There was a statistically significant, positive correlation between the two measures, $r = .217$, $n = 280$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 3

There will be a statistically significant positive relationship between substance use interference with sport performance and 30-day TLFB substance use frequency. There was a significant positive correlation between these variables, $r = .255$, $n = 74$, $p = .014$.

Hypothesis 4

Athletes diagnosed with a current SCID-V substance use disorder will demonstrate higher substance use interference with sport performance scores than athletes not diagnosed with a SCID-V current substance use disorder. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores for athletes diagnosed with a current substance use disorder and athletes not diagnosed with a current substance use disorder (see means and results in Table 2). There was no significant difference.

Secondary Analyses

Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance and Age

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between the four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores and age, $r = .185$, $n = 280$, $p = .002$.

Comparison of Gender on Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance

As summarized in Table 3, an independent-samples *t*-test revealed substance use interferes with sport performance more for male athletes than female athletes.

Comparison of Ethnicity/Race on Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance

A one-way between-groups analysis of the variance (see Table 4) showed no difference in substance use interference with sport performance composite scores among racial/ethnic groups.

Comparison of Year in School on Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance showed no statistically significant difference between freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors on substance use interference with sport performance composite scores (see Table 5).

Table 3

Comparison between Gender on Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance

Variable	Male		Female				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(264.02)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Substance Use Composite Scores	.35	.27	.27	.20	3.02	.001	.36

Note. n = 280.

Table 4

Comparison of Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance Across Ethnicity/Race

Variable	White		Black		Pacific Islander		Asian		Hispanic/ Latino		Other		*F*(5, 274)	p-value	λ^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Substance Use Composite Scores	.31	.22	.30	.26	.29	.25	.27	.20	.39	.30	.32	.26	.865	.505	.02

Note. n = 280.

Comparison of Athlete Type on Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (see Table 6) showed there was a statistically significant difference in the four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores among NCAA, Club, and Intramural athletes. A post-hoc Tukey HSD test indicated NCAA athletes reported significantly less interferences in sport performance in training and competition than Club athletes and Intramural athletes, and Club and Intramural athletes did not differ.

Discussion

Much of the information about substance use in collegiate athletes is obtained from large-scale surveys conducted by the NCAA. Indeed, this organization regularly administers substance use surveys to participating NCAA Division I, II, and III universities (NCAA, 2013) Increasingly, however, there has been an effort to additionally ascertain substance use information in club and intramural athletes (Donohue et al., 2018) because these groups represent the vast majority of college students who formally participate in university-supported sports teams worldwide. The current study results provide important information about the consequences of substance use in these athletes. Given the importance of developing methods to improve accuracy in substance use reports (Williams & Nowatzki, 2005), confidentiality of participants in the current study was assured utilizing a certificate of confidentiality from the U.S. NIH, and sport-specific consequences of substance use were explicitly determined within the context of sport training and competition.

Clinical Implications

Therefore, the current study advances substance use assessment within the context of sports, which is a great need in the field of sport psychology (van den Berg et al., 2018). The four-item substance use interference with sport performance composite scores demonstrated good test-retest reliability, and the positive correlation of this measure with a well-established measure of substance use frequency demonstrates its concurrent validity. This latter result complements the results of other studies that have found competitive athletes may experience greater negative consequences from substance use than non-athletes in life situations outside of sports (NCAA, 2022). Although there was no difference in substance use interference in sport performance scores between athletes diagnosed with a current substance use disorder and those without a diagnosis,

Table 5

Comparison of Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance Across Year in School

Variable	Freshman		Sophomore		Junior		Senior		$F(3, 276)$	p-value	λ^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Substance Use Composite Scores	.28	.23	.34	.27	.30	.23	.37	.23	1.981	.117	.02

Note. n = 280.

Table 6

Comparison of Substance Use Interference with Sport Performance Across Athlete Type

Variable	NCAA		Club		Intramural		$F(2, 277)$	p-value	λ^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Substance Use Composite Scores	.25	.18	.39	.27	.36	.28	8.111	< .001	.06

Note. n = 280.

it is important to mention this analysis approached significance (p = .08).

Substance use frequency has been shown to increase with age (NCAA, 2013; Tomon & Ting, 2010). These findings are consistent with the current study results showing a significant positive relationship between substance use interference in sport training and competition scores and age. This finding is important because administrators often terminate substance use prevention programs after the student athletes' first year of college (when collegiate athletes are generally younger) primarily to lower cost and avoid program redundancy. As an alternative strategy, these organizations may consider implementation of performance optimization programs, which uniquely address both substance use prevention and intervention (Donohue et al., 2018), effectively managing deleterious consequences of substance use in athletes throughout college and regardless of frequency or severity.

In the current study, male athletes reported greater substance use interference with sport performance than female athletes, which is consistent with previous studies that have found higher substance use frequency in male athletes than female athletes (Buckman et al., 2011; Knettel et al., 2021). Interestingly, some NCAA survey reports have indicated higher alcohol use in female athletes than male athletes (NCAA, 2013). Given that males consistently report significantly greater perceived stigma for mental health disorders than females (Wang et al., 2007), these combined results suggest male athletes may feel more stigmatized in reporting substance use problems than female athletes.

It makes sense that club and intramural athletes reported greater severity of substance use interference than NCAA athletes because NCAA athletes are generally considered more elite than club and intramural athletes and are probably more sensitive to the ill effects substance use has on sport performance (Barry et al., 2015).

There were no significant differences between substance use interference scores and ethnicity. Previous self-report assessments suggest Black individuals are more likely to underreport substance use than White individuals, perhaps because marginalized populations are more likely to perceive negative consequences for reporting substance use (Fendrich & Johnson, 2005). Participants from the current study were informed of the NIH certificate of confidentiality, which protects data from court mandates. This methodology may have assisted Black athletes in feeling more comfortable reporting substance use.

The SIC substance use interference with performance scores offer advantages over existing substance use screens. Indeed, its response set is specific to the sports environment, it is quick and easy to administer and interpret, is publicly available at no cost, is relatively non-intrusive, and it was developed in a real-world context involving student-ath-

letes who were pursuing intervention focused on mental wellness while methods were put into place to encourage accurate self-reporting of substance use. Given the conspicuous absence of sport-specific substance abuse screens in collegiate athletes (van den Berg et al., 2018), the current study results fill a substantial gap in this literature.

Limitations

It should be mentioned that the *N* was relatively low in the second phase of the study, as some of the participants were required to pursue goal-oriented psychological programming in order to be included. We consider this to be a relative strength in approximating real-world interest in the pursuit of healthcare, thus enhancing study generalizability. However, a higher *N* would have provided greater power to determine the influence of substance use interference more effectively with sport performance on diagnostic assessment. Although all collegiate athletes were encouraged to participate in the study, marginalized groups were not explicitly recruited (e.g., study notices in disability services); thus, generalizability of study results to these populations must be interpreted with caution.

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Puff, Play, Repeat: E-Cigarette Use in Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This cross-sectional analysis identified demographic and sport-specific determinants of e-cigarette and vape use among 2,489 National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics student-athletes. Binary logistic regression modeled current e-cigarette and vaping status as a function of sport affiliation, race/ethnicity, and biological sex. The final model demonstrated strong fit (Nagelkerke R^2 = .41) and correctly classified 79.7 percent of cases. Sport affiliation emerged as the strongest predictor. Race/ethnicity and biological sex further differentiated risk, with male and White athletes exhibiting elevated prevalence. Collectively, the results underscore the potency of team culture and demographic context in shaping nicotine behaviors. Findings advocate for sport-tailored, culturally responsive, and biological sex-specific prevention initiatives. These initiatives, integrated with comprehensive campus tobacco-free policies, could protect health and performance across collegiate athletics.

Keywords: student-athlete, vaping, e-cigarette, college sports

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The rapid escalation of e-cigarette and vaping product use among young adults poses an urgent public health challenge, particularly within college populations. In 2021, adults aged 18–24 exhibited the highest prevalence of current e-cigarette use (11.0%), compared to 6.5 percent among 25–44-year-olds and 2.0 percent in those 45 and older (CDC, 2023). Among U.S. college students specifically, ever-use rates have climbed to 25.8 percent, making 18–24-year-olds the largest cohort of e-cigarette experimenters (Levy et al., 2021). Recent surveillance indicated that 15.5 percent of young adults aged 21–24 reported current e-cigarette use in 2023, a notable rise from 4.5 percent in 2019, with usage disproportionately greater among men (Mohd Shoaib et al., 2025).

This surge in vaping correlates strongly with mental health distress. College students who vape regularly are 33 percent more likely to report a past-year diagnosis of anxiety or depression than their non-vaping peers (Truth Initiative, 2024). Cross-sectional analyses reveal that e-cigarette users exhibit significantly greater scores on standardized measures of anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to non-users (Smith et al., 2023). Such findings underscore a bidirectional relationship, wherein nicotine exposure may exacerbate psychological distress, while mental health challenges may drive individuals toward vaping as a coping mechanism.

A pronounced biological sex divide further complicates the landscape: systematic reviews document that male college students initiate e-cigarette use at rates up to 1.5 times greater than females, influenced by targeted marketing and differential risk perceptions (Nuurain et al., 2021). Concurrently, risk-perception studies show that non-users score 25 percent greater on harm-awareness scales and demonstrate greater self-efficacy to resist vaping compared to frequent users, highlighting knowledge deficits as a critical, modifiable factor in prevention (Khateeb et al., 2025).

This study explores a sub-set of the broader college student population – student-athletes. Understanding why student-athletes vape reveals key psychosocial drivers: convenience, sensory appeal, and perceived stress relief rank among the top motivators, with nicotine craving and relaxation motives predicting greater dependence scores on the Penn State E-Cigarette Dependence Index (Ou et al., 2024). In contrast, experimentation and social conformity motives, while linked to intermittent use, may nonetheless establish long-term habituation through reinforced peer networks (Awua et al., 2025; Hernandez et al., 2024).

Within this broader context, college student-athletes represent a critical yet understudied subgroup. Historically, student-athletes exhibited lower rates of traditional tobacco use (Primack et al., 2010); however, 2023 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) data report that 22 percent of student-athletes have vaped in the past year, with 6 percent engaging in daily use (NCAA, 2024). Such trends warrant particular attention given the unique performance pressures, team cultures, and coaching climates that shape substance use behaviors in athletic contexts.

Despite these insights, scholarship often treats college student-athletes as a homogeneous group, overlooking variations by division, sport, biological sex, and race/ethnicity. Moreover, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), which governs over 250 institutions with distinct size, resource, and cultural profiles compared to NCAA programs, remains absent from vaping research (NAIA, 2024). Consequently, interventions derived from NCAA-centric data may not translate effectively to the NAIA setting, where athlete experiences and campus environments diverge substantially. To address these critical gaps, the present study employs a cross-sectional, multi-site design to examine how race, biological sex, and sport affiliation predict e-cigarette and vaping behaviors among NAIA student-athletes. By integrating quantitative surveys with ecological context variables, this research aims to inform tailored prevention and intervention strategies that acknowledge the unique cultural and institutional dimensions of NAIA athletics.

Methods

Research Design

This exploratory study employed a cross-sectional, web-based survey design to assess e-cigarette and vaping behaviors among NAIA student-athletes, replicating key elements of the NCAA (2024) Substance Use Survey conducted by the Sport Science Institute. Cross-sectional designs allow for the efficient estimation of prevalence and associations at a single point in time, with strong external validity for population-level inferences while acknowledging limitations in causal interpretation. The survey was administered online via a secure platform configured to prevent multiple submissions and ensure data integrity, consistent with the Checklist for Reporting Results of Internet E-Surveys (CHERRIES) (Eysenbach, 2004).

Participants and Sampling

A stratified, clustered sampling approach was applied to the entire NAIA student-athlete population to ensure representativeness across sports

and biological sex. First, the population was divided into 28 clusters (14 sports × 2 biological sexes), reflecting all varsity teams recognized by the NAIA. Within each stratum, NAIA member institutions were randomly selected proportionally to their roster sizes, generated using a random number generator. This approach ensured that intra-cluster correlations, arising from shared contextual factors, were appropriately addressed in the sampling structure and subsequent analyses. Adjustments for clustering were incorporated in the statistical models to produce unbiased standard errors and valid inferences.

Athletic trainers at selected institutions facilitated recruitment by inviting all eligible student-athletes (aged ≥18 years) to participate, yielding an achieved sample of 2,489 respondents (response rate ≈ 4.9%), which exceeds typical web-survey yields and surpasses the a priori target of 1,300 for 95 percent confidence and 80 percent power (Faul et al., 2007). The demographic characteristics of the study participants are summarized in Table 1.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was an adapted version of the NCAA National Study of Substance Use Habits of College Student-Athletes (2024), a validated and reliable measure of collegiate substance use. The questionnaire comprised four domains: (1) demographics and athletic background; (2) substance use behaviors (including e-cigarettes and vaping); (3) performance enhancers and dietary supplements; and (4) drug testing beliefs.

Procedure and Data Collection

Athletic trainers received standardized training materials and an informed-consent script approved by the Institutional Review Board. In group sessions (e.g., team meetings), trainers provided the survey link and supervised completion in a classroom or training-room setting to maximize response rates and standardize administration. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with an average completion time of 15–20 minutes. Survey data were encrypted during transmission and stored on a password-protected server accessible only to the research team. Data collection occurred over a six-week period.

Data Management and Quality Control

Raw survey data were exported into IBM SPSS Statistics (v.30) for cleaning and analysis. Automated checks removed incomplete entries (defined as <90% item response) and duplicate IP addresses. Logical consistency checks (e.g., matching reported sport with reported biological sex) were performed to flag and verify potentially errant responses.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and proportions) summarized participant characteristics and e-cigarette/vape use prevalence. The primary research question—how sport played, biological sex, and race/ethnicity predict e-cigarette use—was assessed via binary

Table 1.
NAIA Student-Athlete Demographics

NAIA Student-Athlete Demographics (N = 2,489)		*N*	%
Age			
	18-21	1,668	67%
	21+	821	33%
Biological Sex			
	Male	1,269	51.2%
	Female	1,220	48.8%
Race/Ethnicity			
	White/Caucasian	1,419	57%
	Hispanic or Latino	423	16.8%
	Black or African American	398	16.2%
	Multiracial	125	5.2%
	Other	124	4.7%

logistic regression, appropriate for a dichotomous outcome and mixed predictor types. E-cigarette or vaping used was measured as "daily or frequent use" or "never used". Model fit was evaluated using the Hosmer-Lemeshow test and Nagelkerke's R^2, and multicollinearity was assessed via variance inflation factors (VIFs). Adjusted odds ratios (AORs) with 95 percent confidence intervals quantified the strength and direction of associations. All statistical tests were two-tailed with λ set at 0.05, and power analyses confirmed that the final sample provided >.80 power to detect small effect sizes (OR = 1.3) for all predictors

Results

A stepwise likelihood ratio (Forward LR) logistic regression analysis was conducted to estimate a regression model that correctly predicts the probability of NAIA college student-athletes using e-cigarettes or vapes. In all, three factors were entered into the analysis: biological sex, race/ethnicity, and sport played. All three factors were defined as categorical and recoded into dummy variables. Prior to analysis, chi-square and independent t-tests examined the bivariate relationship between e-cigarette and vape use and each factor. The results of the chi-square and independent t-tests showed significant relationships between e-cigarette and vape use and biological sex, race/ethnicity, and sport played. Furthermore, tolerance and VIF values were computed for all factors to examine the assumption of multicollinearity. Both tolerance and VIF values showed no multicollinearity problem existed among the factors. Finally, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test contingency table showed all cells had an expected value larger than 1.

The results of the stepwise likelihood ratio logistic regression revealed that three factors emerged as significant predictors of e-cigarette and vape use. These factors were sport played (Wald $_{(df = 17)}$ = 107.21, $p < 0.001$), race/ethnicity (Wald (df = 7) = 52.67, $p < 0.001$), and biological sex (Wald $_{(df = 1)}$ = 1.24, $p < 0.001$).

The results show that the overall model significantly improved the prediction of the occurrence of e-cigarette use among NAIA student-athletes (X^2 (df = 25) = 240.51, $p < 0.001$). This model had a particularly good fit (-2 log likelihood = 1966.11, Hosmer and Lemeshow, X^2 (df = 8) = 3.28, p = 0.92)

The results of the Cox and Snell R^2 and the Nagelkerke R^2 indicated that the sport played accounted for 6.7 to 10.5 percent of the variance in e-cigarette use. Race/ethnicity accounted for 9.5 to 14.7 percent of the variance in e-cigarette use. Biological sex added 9.9 to 15.5 percent to the variance in e-cigarette use. Overall, the model accounted for 26.1 to 40.7 percent of the variance in e-cigarette use. Finally, the model correctly classified 79.7 percent of the e-cigarette use cases (See Table 2).

In particular, student-athletes identifying as biological males were significantly more likely than those identifying as biological females to self-report daily or frequent vaping ($p < 0.001$). Student-athletes identifying as White were statistically more significant than any other race/ethnicity to self-report daily or frequent vaping ($p < 0.02$). Student-athletes participating in football, bowling, lacrosse, baseball, and softball were statically more likely to self-report daily or frequent vaping (all score $p < 0.05$) than the other recognized NAIA sports.

Discussion

Building upon prior inquiries into substance use in collegiate athletics (e.g., Moore & Abbe, 2021), the current analysis clarifies how demographic attributes and sport-specific contexts converge to shape vaping behavior among NAIA student-athletes. The present study demonstrated that sport, race/ethnicity, and biological sex were significant predictors of e-cigarette and vaping behaviors among NAIA student-athletes.

Sport affiliation accounted for up to 10.5 percent of the variance in e-cigarette use, highlighting how team cultures and peer networks might facilitate vaping initiation and maintenance

Table 2.

Logistic Regression Results

Factor	λ	*Wald*	*df*	*p*	R^2
Sport	-0.29	107.21	17	< 0.001	0.067 – 0.105
Race	2.40	52.67	7	< 0.001	0.095 – 0.147
Biological Sex	0.79	1.24	1	< 0.001	0.099 – 0.155
Constant	2.40	17.03	1	< 0.001	

(Primack et al., 2010; Veliz et al., 2017). Adolescent and collegiate athletes in team sports were found to vape at rates comparable to non-athletes, suggesting that social cohesion within athletic groups may inadvertently normalize e-cigarette use (Veliz et al., 2017). Recent NCAA surveillance data reveals pronounced sport-by-sport disparities in vaping: past-year use is reported by 37 percent of male and 29 percent of female lacrosse athletes, yet by only 8 percent of track-and-field competitors (NCAA, 2024). This gradient corroborates the present study's finding that sport affiliation is an independent predictor of e-cigarette use, whereas team sports marked by intense social cohesion and locker-room subcultures (i.e., football, baseball, lacrosse, softball, and bowling) may cultivate peer climates that normalize experimentation with nicotine-delivery systems (Primack et al., 2010).

National surveillance continues to document a pronounced biological sex-related disparity in e-cigarette use: in 2023, 15.5 percent of U.S. men versus 10.3 percent of women aged 21–24 years reported current vaping (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). Additional studies found male students vaped at rates 1.5 times those of females (Cornelius et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2021). In this study, being a male student-athlete accounted for 9.9 to 15.5 percent of variance. Echoing national trends, male NAIA student-athletes were more likely to vape than their female peers. Hegemonic-masculinity theory posits that culturally sanctioned risk-taking and perceived bodily invulnerability promote substance experimentation among young men (Courtenay, 2000).

Consistent with national surveillance data, e-cigarette uptake among NAIA student-athletes varied systematically by race and ethnicity, with White student-athletes exhibiting the highest prevalence of use. National Health Interview Survey data confirm a five-year increase in adult vaping prevalence from 4.5 percent to 6.5 percent, with the greatest absolute gain among White adults (5.1 to 7.5 percent), exceeding the increases for Black (3.4 to 5.7 percent) and Hispanic adults (2.8 to 4.4 percent) (Vahratian et al., 2025). In the present study, multivariable analyses within the NAIA sample demonstrated that White student-athletes retained the highest adjusted odds of current e-cigarette use, positioning race/ethnicity as the second-strongest independent predictor after sport type. This elevated likelihood aligns with broader postsecondary trends: national surveys report that White undergraduates initiate and maintain current e-cigarette use at rates approximately 1.6 times greater than Black and Hispanic peers (Seabrook et al., 2021; Vahratian et al., 2025).

Implications for Prevention and Policy

The present findings delineate clear, multilevel levers for curbing nicotine-delivery product use in collegiate sport. First, embedding sport-specific health education within routine coaching and athletic-training sessions can leverage existing team hierarchies to disseminate evidence that vaping compromises aerobic capacity. Second, culturally responsive programming should confront the mental-health antecedents of vaping, as college students who report a past-year mental-illness diagnosis have 33 percent greater odds of current e-cigarette use than their peers (Truth Initiative, 2023). Integrating stress-management training and streamlined referral pathways to counselling services is therefore crucial for at-risk subgroups. Third, biological sex-responsive strategies, such as peer-led dialogues and high-profile male athletes publicly rejecting vaping, may neutralize the hyper-masculine marketing tropes that normalize nicotine experimentation among young men.

At the organizational level, NAIA member institutions should extend NCAA on-field tobacco bans by adopting comprehensive campus smoke- and vape-free policies in line with American Heart Association guidance on tobacco-free environments (American Heart Association, 2023). Embedding enforcement provisions in athletic-department codes of conduct and integrating brief vaping-cessation modules into strength-and-conditioning curricula would create a coherent, performance-centered framework that protects respiratory health and athletic longevity.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present analysis draws on a cross-sectional, web-based survey of 2,489 NAIA student-athletes. Nonetheless, several methodological constraints temper the interpretability of these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal or prospective cohort studies are required to establish the temporal sequence linking demographic characteristics, psychosocial factors, and vaping initiation. Second, reliance on self-reported behavior introduces common-method variance and social-desirability bias, even when anonymity is assured. Third, although stratified sampling bolstered sport- and region-specific representation, the modest 4.9 percent response rate raises concerns about non-response bias and may limit the generalizability of the results.

Future investigations should therefore incorporate multi-wave or ecological momentary assessment designs and biochemical verification of nicotine

exposure to strengthen measurement fidelity. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as focus groups and ethnographic observation, could illuminate the team-culture dynamics that quantitative instruments may overlook. Finally, replicating the current analyses within NCAA divisions, junior colleges (JUCO), and club-sport contexts will evaluate the transferability of the identified risk profile and refine prevention frameworks across diverse organizational settings (Moore & Abbe, 2021).

Conclusion

The convergence of team environments, demographic characteristics, and psychosocial factors drives e-cigarette use among NAIA student-athletes. Team cultures and peer norms can normalize vaping behaviors despite straightforward evidence that even short-term use impairs pulmonary function and reduces endurance (Vardavas et al., 2012). Disproportionate prevalence among White and Black athletes and marked male–female disparities reflect broader national patterns (Cornelius et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2021).

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The Association of Athletic Identity on an Athlete's Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help

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Abstract

Mental health concerns are still a challenge for intercollegiate student-athletes and professionals (e.g., social workers and athletic trainers) working with them. One critical area is the stigma of mental health that may affect an intercollegiate student-athlete whose identity is that of an athlete. Does a student-athlete with moderate to high athletic identity self-stigmatize themselves for psychological concerns which may prevent them from seeking assistance? This study explores the association between an intercollegiate student-athlete with athletic identity and their self-stigma for seeking psychological help. This quantitative, cross-sectional study included voluntary collegiate student-athletes aged 18 years or older (N=37). Descriptive statistics were utilized to describe the characteristics of the participants. Selected questions from a combination of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale and the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale were utilized for this study. Two independent sample t-tests comparing the mean scores between genders reported that 1) there was not a statistically significant association between a male student-athlete considering himself an athlete more than a female student-athlete, and 2) there was a statistically significant association that male student-athletes having a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female student-athletes. Three Pearson correlation tests reported 1) a weak, positive correlation between a student-athlete feeling depressed if they were injured and could not compete in sport and feeling inadequate going to a therapist for psychological help; 2) a weak, positive correlation between a student-athlete who consider themselves an athlete would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems; and 3) a strong, positive correlation between a student-athlete who most of their friends are student-athletes and feeling inferior to ask a therapist for help. This study recommends performing an Athletic Identity Measurement Scale on student-athletes at their pre-participation physical examination which would assist the social worker and/or athletic trainer to identify a student-athlete with moderate to high athletic identity and approaching that student- athlete following an injury for psychological assistance because of the mental health stigma that some student-athletes may hold.

Keywords: athletic identity, self-stigma for seeking psychological help, pre-participation screening

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Recent data on the state of mental health in the United States reported that 20% of adults experienced a mental illness in 2019, 4.58% of adults have serious thoughts of suicide, and 15% of youth experienced a major depressive episode in the past year (Reinert et al., 2022) Additionally, more than half of adults with a mental health illness do not receive treatment (27 million U.S. adults), and that 60% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment (Reinert et al., 2022).

Given that athletes are part of society, it stands to reason that athletes are at risk of developing mental health disorders. The concern for mental health and wellness has been growing for athletes at the intercollegiate and secondary school levels, as well as their parents, athletic trainers, team physicians, counselors, coaches, administrators, and the media. Studies have reported that student-athletes experience the same rates of mental health concerns, one in every 4-5 adolescents and adults, as the general population (Neal et al., 2013; NCAA, 2014; Neal, 2014; Neal et al., 2015; Schinke, 2017; Reardon et al., 2019; Neal, 2021). A meta-analysis conducted with current and former elite athletes suggests the prevalence of mental health symptoms and disorders may be slightly higher than the general population (Gouttebarge et al., 2019).

There are unique stressors of being a collegiate student-athlete, with special considerations for identifying potential psychological concerns (Neal et al., 2013; Sudano & Miles, 2017). Intercollegiate student-athletes of color are at an even greater risk of poor mental health (Kroshus et al., 2023). Athletes who identify as LBGTQ+ suffer higher rates of internalized negative stress as a result of structural and institutionalized discrimination which contributes to the stress on their overall mental health and wellness (Cartwright & Neal, 2022).

Athletes do not acquire an immunity against mental health disorders because of their participation and are at risk to develop mental health challenges following injury (Neal et al. 2013; Neal, 2014; Neal et al., 2015; Neal, 2021; NCAA, 2014) including PTSD (Lynch, 2021; Brassil & Salvatore, 2018; Padaki et al., 2018; Wentzel & Zhu, 2013). Research has also reported that an athlete witnessing another athlete being injured during a practice or game may result in a negative psychological response (Appaneal et al., 2007; Day & Schubart, 2012). Additionally, the psychosocial aspects of returning to sport following a serious injury report that a need for autonomy and relatedness are beneficial to successful outcomes and enhance well-being in the athlete (Podlog & Eklund, 2007). Athletes also exhibit various skills in coping with stressful situations and injuries, with male athletes exhibiting more positive coping skills than female athletes, and that more skilled competitors demonstrate more positive coping skills than less skilled competitors (Polenske et al., 2022).

There is variability on how mental health services are provided to NCAA Division I student-athletes (Sudano & Miles, 2017). Student-athletes can be asked mental health questions during their intake health history questionnaire (Conley et al., 2014). Some universities may choose to use the PHQ-9 to screen for depression (Kroenke et al., 2001) and/or the GAD-7 for generalized anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006), along with the Mental Health-Related Survey by Carroll and McGinley (2001), to determine if a student-athlete has or is at risk for a psychological concern.

The purpose of this study was to determine the association of an athlete's athlete identity for self-stigmatizing to seeking psychological help. This study will build upon the recognition of student-athlete psychological concerns by examining the influence of athletic identity on self-stigma of an athlete for seeking psychological help. The study's results recommend utilizing the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale as part of the pre-participation physical examination health history questionnaire to identify student-athletes who report moderate to high athletic identity who are at risk for psychological concerns because of a threat to their personal identity as an athlete due to a time-loss injury or lack of playing time.

Literature Review

Athletic Identity

The issue of possessing and displaying athletic identity for a student-athlete has been an area of interest for researchers for 30 years (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Lochbaum et al., 2022). It is well established that athletes have the same rates of mental health concerns as their non-athletic peers, and that being an athlete is an identity that some student-athletes adopt (Neal et al., 2013). Another study noted the challenges an athlete faces to their identity following their career termination, including low self-esteem, loneliness, lack of self-confidence, and longer adjustment period post sports life (Erpic et al., 2004). Brewer et al. (1993 & 2001) suggested that athletic identity was stronger in males than females. However, other research has not demonstrated that males have a stronger athletic identity than females (Fraser et al., 2008). Padaki (2018) reported no significant difference in levels of athletic identity amongst females and males. Rajan and Varma (2022) reported that

males demonstrated higher athletic identity measurement scores versus females in their study. However, irrespective of gender, athletes aspiring to participate in collegiate sports and having past sports participation experience displayed higher and stronger athletic identities (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

The research on athletic identity has demonstrated that higher degrees of athletic identity relate to a higher motivation and commitment to a sport by the student-athlete (Lochbaum et al., 2022). Brewer and his colleagues (1993) introduced and popularized the term "athletic identity" with both negative (not desired) and positive (desired) factors related to a high athletic identity. The Athlete Identity Measurement Scale has been a popular instrument to measure athletic identity (Mitchell et al., 2014; Stokowski et al, 2022). Brewer and Cornelius (2001) developed the 7-item Athlete Identity Measurement Scale from the original 10-item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer et al., 1993). The 7-item instrument identifies athletic identity in three areas, social identity as an athlete, exclusivity as an athlete, and negative affectivity of being an athlete (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001).

Self-Stigma to Seeking Psychological Help

Public stigma perceptions of experiencing a psychological concern contributes to an individual to not seek assistance for their mental health disorder (Vogel et al., 2007). This leads an individual to hide their psychological challenges from others which limits their willingness to seek help with a psychological concern (Vogel et al., 2007). Dr. David Vogel's research associated with seeking psychological help has reported that self-stigma is a critical factor in an individual to not seek assistance for their psychological concerns and to not participate in therapy (Vogel & Wester, 2003; Vogel et al., 2005; Vogel & Webster et al., 2006; Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006; Vogel et al., 2007). This work has led Vogel to collaborate with Nathaniel Wade and Shawn Haake (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006) in developing the 10-item Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale.

Vogel et al. (2006) and Vogel, Wade, and Hackler (2007) reported that men reported a higher self-stigma associated to seeking psychological services compared to females. Moreland et al. (2018) also reported that male athletes are less likely to be willing to seek mental health services than female athletes.

Attitudes are the strongest indicator of actual intent to seek counseling is consistent with previous attitude on counseling (Vogel & Wester, 2003). Vogel and Wester's (2003) study suggest individuals need to be better informed about the nature of counseling (i.e., a safe environment to discuss emotional and personal issues) and what occurs in counseling and why it is potentially efficacious.

Some studies suggest that it is not general distress per se that leads to seeking psychological help, but an intense problem that the person is experiencing is the reason for seeking psychological help (Vogel et al., 2005). Athletes feel capable of hiding mental health problems from team members through a combination of mental health stigma, poor team relationships or cohesion, athlete family history and culture, and perceived coach attitudes towards mental health stigma (McCabe et al., 2023). Additionally, an athlete is more likely to engage in help-seeking behavior if they were referred by a coach rather than a teammate or peer (McCabe et al., 2023).

Methods

Research Design

This study received approval from a university's institutional review board. The researcher utilized an undifferentiated cross-sectional, in-person quantitative survey designed to gather data from NAIA collegiate student-athletes at one institution. The researcher utilized a quantitative paper-based survey to gather data. The surveys were kept in a locked cabinet until data analysis was performed and then destroyed by the researcher.

Sampling

The study utilized a non-probability cluster sampling because the researcher could not determine the probability that an individual within this sampling frame would choose to participate in the study, and that sample size was not randomized nor technically unbiased. The study sampling frame was known so any individual who met the criteria was recruited for the study. The study was practical in that student-athletes are conveniently available at one institution and were the focus of the study. The sampling frame of this research project were all student-athletes at a NAIA member institution during the fall semester. A student-athlete is identified as a college student who is presently attending courses at a university and at the same time competing on an intercollegiate athletic team. There are approximately 500 student-athletes at this institution. The study included all potential student-athletes listed above regardless of age, sex, class rank, or sport.

From this sampling frame, recruitment of potential subjects was made in two approaches: 1) through the athletic training staff at the start of the fall se-

mester to contact the researcher (email, phone number, and office address provided on the flyer) to volunteer to participate in the study and receive the consent form and perform the paper survey in person, and 2) recruitment of student-athletes at the institution to contact the researcher to voluntarily participate in the study through announcements by faculty in health and human performance courses in which student-athletes attend at the start of the fall semester. The researcher distributed the consent form and paper survey to participants who volunteered for the study and collected them in a one-time event. No personal identifiable information was on the surveys. The researcher provided the consent form statement and the paper survey to subjects who volunteered to participate during the first two months of the fall semester. There was a total of 37 completed surveys. Lochbaum et al. (2022) reported that the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale total score and positive factors for in-person data collection was greater than when the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale was not performed in-person.

Participants

Voluntary student-athletes aged 18-years-old or older and attending an NAIA member institution participated in the study (N=37). The data for all participants was used in this study. Participants were 18 to 22 years old. The mean age of participants was 19.49 with a Standard Deviation of 1.592. More males completed the survey (81.1%, 18.9% female). The disparity in 30 out of the 37 participants being male student-athletes volunteering in the study was the demographics of the pool of potential participants, as male student-athletes were more prevalent than females in health and human performance courses where recruitment took place. The largest percentage of participants were freshmen (45.9%, 13.5% sophomores, 13.5% juniors, 10.8% seniors, and 16.2% fifth year students). Participants indicated which NAIA athletic team they were affiliated with (37.8% football, 24.3% were student-athletes in the sports of baseball, male basketball, and female lacrosse respectively, 21.6% student-athletes from the sports of female ice hockey, female track, male track, and volleyball respectively, and 16.3% student-athletes in the sports of male ice hockey, female soccer, and male soccer respectively). (See Table 1).

Measures and Instruments

The measurements used in this study utilized two standardized instruments, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, and the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale. The first seven items on the survey were the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale, the independent variable for the study measuring athletic identity, survey items 1-7. The final 10 items on the survey were the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale, measuring the dependent variable of self-stigma for seeking psychological help, survey items 8-17, for a total of 17 items in the research project survey.

Independent Variable: Athletic Identity

The scale used to measure the independent variable, athletic identity, was the 7-item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). Athletic identity's operational definition is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Smith et al., 1998). The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale's level of measurement is a 7-item, 7-point instrument quantitatively measured on an interval scale of measurement. Response categories are 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4= neutral, 5= somewhat agree, 6= agree, 7= strongly agree. The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale total scores range from a low of 7 up the highest score of 49 (Ohji et al, 2021). The Athlete Identity Measurement Scale has been found to be a psychometrically sound measure of validity and reliability (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Lochbaum et al., 2022; Brewer et al., 1993; Palermo et al., 2023; Visek et al., 2007). The internal consistencies of the scale are .81 to .93 (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001).

The questions used from the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale in this study are:

1. I consider myself an athlete (survey question #1)
2. Most of my friends are athletes (survey question #3)
3. Sport is the most important part of my life (survey question #4)
4. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport (survey question #7)

Dependent Variable: Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help

The scale used to measure the dependent variable, self-stigma for seeking psychological help, was the 10-item Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006). Self-stigma for seeking psychological help's operational definition will be the reduction of an individual's self-worth by the individual self-labeling themselves as someone who is socially unacceptable, lowering an individual's self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy if they were to seek treatment, therefore making the individual feel inferior or inadequate (Vogel, Wester, et. al, 2006). The Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale's level of mea-

surement is a 10-item, 5-point instrument quantitatively measured. The level of measurement for the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale is interval. The response categories are a five-point scale with 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree on various statements related to self-stigma for seeking psychological help. The Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale has been found to be a psychometrically sound measure of validity and reliability (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006). The internal consistencies of the scale were .91 (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006).

The questions from the Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale used for this study were:

1. I would feel inadequate if I went to a therapist for psychological help (survey question #8)
2. It would make me feel inferior to ask a therapist for help (survey question #13)
3. I would feel worse about myself if I could not solve my own problems

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Age, Gender, Class Rank, Sport (N = 37)

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	37	100	18	22	19.49	1.592
18	16	43.2				
19	5	13.5				
20	5	13.5				
21	4	10.8				
22	7	18.9				
Gender						
Male	30	81.1				
Female	7	18.9				
Class Rank						
Freshman	17	45.9				
Sophomore	5	13.5				
Junior	5	13.5				
Senior	4	10.8				
5th Year	6	16.2				
Sport						
Football	14	37.8				
Baseball	3	8.1				
Male Bb.	3	8.1				
Fem. Ice Hky.	1	2.7				
Male Ice Hky.	2	5.4				
Female Lax	3	8.1				
Female Soccer	2	5.4				
Male Soccer	2	5.4				
Softball	4	10.8				
Female Track	1	2.7				
Male Track	1	2.7				
Volleyball	1	2.7				

Table 2

Results of Independent Sample T-Test: Gender and Perception of an Athlete's Identity as an Athlete

	Gender								
	Male			Female					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	p	df
Considered themselves as athletes	6.83	.46	30	6.14	1.15	7	1.23	.26	35

(survey question #17)

There were five hypotheses explored in this study:

1. Male athletes consider themselves athletes more than female athletes do; the independent variable is gender, and the dependent variable is considering themselves an athlete.
2. Males have a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female athletes; the independent variable is gender, and the dependent variable is believing that sport is the most important part of their lives.
3. Athletes who feel very depressed if injured and could not compete in sport would feel more inadequate if they went to a therapist for psychological help; the independent variable is feeling depressed following an injury and could not compete in sport, and the dependent variable is feeling of inadequacy going to a therapist for psychological help.
4. Athletes who consider themselves athletes would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their problems on their own; the independent variable is athletes who consider themselves athletes, and the dependent variable is feeling worse about themselves if they could not solve their problems on their own.
5. Athletes who most of their friends are athletes will feel inferior if they ask a therapist for help; the independent variable is athletes who most of their friends are athletes, and the dependent variable is feeling inferior if they ask a therapist for help.

Data Collection

Data was collected in an undifferentiated, cross-sectional method as there is no specific timing of the independent variable (athletic identity) intervention being administered and the survey was only administered once. Once student-athletes identified themselves as voluntary participants, they received a consent form and paper survey from the researcher. The survey is a combination of the 7-item Athletic Identity Measurement Scale and the 10-item Self-Stigma of Seeking Psychological Help Scale, resulting in a 17-item survey utilizing answers in a Likert-Scale format. Consent was assumed when the participant returned their completed survey, as the informed consent statement is on the front cover of the survey for the participant to read prior to completing their survey.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized descriptive statistics to provide details about the sample data and overall survey results. The researcher utilized inferential statistics to infer information from the sample data. For this study, the independent variable was athletic identity, and the dependent variable was self-stig-

Table 3

Results of Independent Sample T-Test: Gender and Belief that Sport is the Most Important part of One's Life

	Gender								
	Male			Female					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	t	p	df
Belief that sport was the most important part of their life	5.03	1.03	30	3.57	1.13	7	3.31	.00	35

Table 4

Results of Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test: Athletes Who Feel Very Depressed if They Were Injured and Could Not Compete in Sport Would Feeling More Inadequate if They Went to a Therapist for Psychological Help

		I would very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport	I would feel inadequate if went to a therapist for psychological help
I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport	Pearson Correlation (r)	1.00	.27**
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)		.08
	N	37	37
I would feel inadequate if I went to a therapist for psychological help	Pearson Correlation (r)	.27**	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)	.08	
	N	37	37

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

matizing for seeking psychological help. Data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0. The five hypotheses tested in this study used descriptive and inferential statistics. For the first two hypotheses, an Independent Samples T-test was used. Hypotheses 3-5 were analyzed with the use of a Pearson Correlation test.

Results

Hypothesis One: Male athletes consider themselves athletes more than female athletes

An Independent Samples T-test was run comparing gender and the subject's self-perception that they identified as an athlete. There was no significant difference between male athletes who considered themselves as an athlete (M = 6.83, SD = .46, N = 30) and female athletes (M = 6.14, SD = 1.15, N = 7) who considered themselves as an athlete; $t(35) = 1.23$, $p = .26$. This result suggests there is not a statistically significant association between a male athlete considering himself an athlete more than a female athlete does (See Table 2).

Hypothesis Two: Males have a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female athletes

An Independent Samples T-test was run comparing gender and the subject's belief that sport was the most important part of their lives. There was a significant difference between male athletes (M = 5.03, SD = 1.03, N = 30) and female athletes (M = 3.57, SD = 1.13, N = 7) who believed that sport was the most important part of their lives; $t(35) = 3.31$, $p = .00$ (See Table 3). This result suggests there is a statistically significant association between male athletes having a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female athletes (See Table 3).

Hypothesis Three: Athletes who feel depressed if injured and could not compete in sport will feel more inadequate if they went to a therapist for psychological help

Validity measurements of hypothesis three are established by the dependent variable of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) question on the survey, "I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport", and the dependent variable of Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale (Vogel , Wade, & Haake, 2006) question on the survey, "I would feel inadequate if I went to a therapist for psychological help". A Pearson Correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between an athlete feeling very depressed if they were injured and could not compete and feelings of inadequacy if they went to a therapist for psychological help (See Table 4).

Table 4 summarized the relationship between variables in hypothesis three. The correlation indicated a weak, positive correlation between an athlete being very depressed if injured and could not compete in sport and feeling inadequate going to a therapist for psychological help ($r = .27$, $p = .08$).

Hypothesis Four: Athletes who consider themselves athletes would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems

Validity measurements of hypothesis four is established by the dependent

Table 5

Results of Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test: Athlete Who Consider Themselves as an Athlete Would Feel Worse About Themselves if They Could Not Solve Their Own Problems

		I consider myself an athlete	I would feel worse about myself if I could not solve my own problems
I consider myself an athlete	Pearson Correlation (r)	1.00	.03**
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)		.86
	N	37	37
I would feel worse about myself if I could not solve my own problems	Pearson Correlation (r)	.03**	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)	.86	
	N	37	37

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

variable of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) question on the survey, "I consider myself an athlete", and the dependent variable of Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006) question on the survey, "I would feel worse about myself if I could not solve my own problems". A Pearson Correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between an athlete identifying themselves as an athlete and feeling worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems. (See Table 5)

Table 5 summarized the relationship between variables in hypothesis four. The correlation indicated there was a weak, positive correlation between an athlete identifying themselves as an athlete and being unable to solve their own problems. (r= .03, p = .86).

Hypothesis Five: Athletes who most of their friends are athletes will feel inferior to ask a therapist for help

Validity measurements of hypothesis five is established by the dependent variable of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) question on the survey, "Most of my friends are athletes", and the dependent variable of Self-Stigma for Seeking Psychological Help Scale (Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006) question on the survey, "It would make me feel inferior to ask a therapist for help". A Pearson Correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relation between an athlete who most friends are athletes and feeling inferior to ask a therapist for help. (See Table 6)

Table 6 summarized the relationship between variables in hypothesis five. The correlation indicated there is a strong, positive correlation between an athlete who most of their friends are athletes and feeling inferior to ask a therapist for help (r= .09, p = .61).

Discussion

In review of the data analysis, interesting findings emerged. Hypothesis one, male athletes consider themselves athletes more than female athletes do, the results indicated there was not a statistically significant association between a male athlete considering himself an athlete more than a female athlete. This result did not confirm the hypothesis and offers a counter-point to the stereotypical belief that males think of themselves as athletes more than female athletes do. Thus, both male and female athletes have athletic identity on various levels that the social worker and athletic trainer should measure and factor in whenever either gender gets injured which may threaten their athletic identity. This result confirms what other research has reported that males do not have a stronger athletic identity than females (Fraser et al., 2008; Padaki, 2018). What this cross-sectional study reports are that athletes, regardless of gender, aspired to participate in collegiate sports, and having past sports participation experience usually at the secondary school level, displayed higher and stronger athletic identities (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

Hypothesis two, males have a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female athletes, was confirmed through this study, as the result suggested there was a statistically significant association between male athletes having a higher belief that sport is the most important part of their lives than female athletes. This result suggests that male athletes have a

Table 6

Results of Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test: Athletes Who Most of Their Friends are Athletes Will Feel Inferior to Ask a Therapist for Help

		Most of my friends are athletes	I would make me feel inferior to ask a therapist for help
Most of my friends are athletes	Pearson Correlation (r)	1.00	.09**
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)		.61
	N	37	37
I would make me feel inferior to ask a therapist for help	Pearson Correlation (r)	.09**	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)	.61	
	N	37	37

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

higher degree of value for sport than female athletes and should be noted when working with both genders whenever an athlete becomes injured or has been demoted in their playing status. This result is consistent with Brewer et al. (1993 & 2001) and Rajan and Varma (2022) studies that report that males demonstrated higher athletic identity measurement scores versus females.

Hypothesis three, athletes who feel depressed if injured and could not compete in sport will feel more inadequate if they went to a therapist for psychological help, was confirmed as results indicated that there was a weak, positive correlation between an athlete being very depressed if injured and could not compete in sport and feeling inadequate going to a therapist for psychological help. While a study reports that while the stronger an individual identifies as an athlete the more likely they are to recover and continue their sport after an injury, an injury can emotionally impact an athlete's self-worth (Dacus et al., 2023). The results of this study suggest that while an athlete is impacted emotionally following an injury, they are reluctant to seek psychological assistance. Thus, the social worker and athletic trainer working with athletes who sustain a time-loss injury be prepared to empathically approach that athlete to start a conversation on seeking psychological help for their injury as they recover physically.

Hypothesis four, athletes who consider themselves athletes would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems, was confirmed as results indicated there was a weak, positive correlation between an athlete identifying themselves as an athlete and being unable to solve their own problems. Attitude on the intent to seek counseling is consistent with any previous attitude on counseling by the athlete (Vogel & Wester, 2003). As Vogel and Wester's study (2003) suggest, an athlete needs to be better informed about the nature of counseling and what occurs in counseling and why it is potentially effective in addressing a problem that the athlete feels they are unable to solve. The problem the athlete experiences may traverse the spectrum of general distresses of life (e.g., academics, daily schedule) or sports participation stressors (e.g., competition, conditioning, injury), to an intense problem that the person is experiencing (e.g., mental health disorder, post or recent traumatic events), which may influence the reason for an athlete to seek psychological help (Vogel et al., 2005). Reflecting on Vogel's work of public and individual stigma surrounding seeking psychological help, the social worker working with athletes may want to approach an athlete who is experiencing stressors in their lives such as physical injury, demotion on the team, academic stressors, relationship issues, and/or financial or family challenges in order to provide psychological assistance to the athlete as they navigate these various and, at times, comorbid problems as the athlete may not seek assistance on their own.

Hypothesis five, athletes who most of their friends are athletes will feel inferior if they ask a therapist for help, was confirmed as the results indicated that there was a strong, positive correlation between an athlete who most of their friends are athletes and feeling inferior if they ask a therapist for help. Vogel's work in self-stigma in seeking psychological help reports the harmful public stigma surrounding seeking assistance for a mental health issue (Vogel et al., 2007). Having more friends who are

also teammates and/or athletes from different sports than not, the individual athlete suggests that social support from those teammates is critical in reducing the stigma of seeking psychological help and encouraging those needing assistance to go for help. An educational component on mental health and wellness for all student-athletes that normalizes mental health concerns and provides information on supporting teammates needing assistance may be developed to address this finding of the study.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the small sample size of 37 participants. The study was unable to create a large sample size for data collection as participation in the survey was voluntary. Additionally, the survey results in gender heavily weighed male (81.1%). Future studies of this nature will hopefully include more female student-athlete participation. Other limitations of this study were selection of subjects and social desirability bias. Selection of subjects participating in the study that may have an on-going mental health disorder was a limitation, as some student-athletes who may be experiencing a mental health issue at the time of recruitment chose not to participate. Social desirability bias limitation is a reasonable assumption as some subjects may have answered in such a fashion to make themselves appear not to have a psychological need.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that providing a measurable tool such as the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale to the recognition of athletic identity levels in athletes would be beneficial to the social worker and/or athletic trainer working with intercollegiate student-athletes who are attempting to recognize potential mental health concerns in this population. More social workers are being involved in intercollegiate athletics and utilizing this scale as a screening tool to identify a student-athlete with moderate to high athletic identity that can be used to start discussions with the student-athlete whenever their athletic identity is threatened by sustaining a time-loss injury, demotion in playing time, personal issues, and/or whenever the student-athlete's normal behavior patterns change to encourage psychological help.

More university sports medicine departments are utilizing mental health screening tools with student-athletes such as the PHQ-9 and GAD. Adding the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale could provide insight into a student-athlete's identity as an athlete as motivation to abstain from seeking psychological help, if in need, for fear of mental health self-stigma. Establishing an Athletic Identity Measurement Scale baseline for an athlete, particularly if the total score is in the 30s or 40s (on a scale of 7-49) would alert the social worker or athletic trainer to a student- athlete with significant athletic identity and develop a protocol to approach that individual athlete for psychological assistance in the event of a time-loss injury or other life stressor they may experience.

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale is a useful tool for social workers to incorporate into their mental health and wellness measurement portfolio for student-athletes. By identifying an athlete with moderate to high athletic identity, the social worker can approach that athlete following a time-loss injury that threatens their athletic identity, or following a significant life stressor that threatens their mental health and well-being where that athlete may be reticent to seek psychological help due to public and/or self-stigma regarding mental health challenges.

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Where is Social Work? An Exploration of the Scholarship on the Impact of Name Image and Likeness in College Athletics

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Abstract

This paper examines disciplines of those engaged in research regarding the impact of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) on college athletes. The authors reviewed scholarly articles published from July 2019, which marks the beginning of the Pay to Play Act, until November 2023, examining the first author's discipline and the type of research completed. The study found that most of the research on NIL has come from the law profession (56%) and sports management (17%) and that only 14% involved actual primary data collection. No NIL research was found within social work scholarship. The authors outline a case for the inclusion of social work in NIL space, given the profession's long and rich history in social justice. The authors also argue from a social-ecological perspective that there is an urgent need for social work to actively engage in NIL research, given its potential to impact the lives of college athletes significantly

Keywords: NIL, Name Image and Likeness, college athletes, college sports, athlete rights

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Where is Social Work? An Exploration of the Scholarship on the Impact of Name Image and Likeness in College Athletics

The landscape of college athletics changed in 2021 when Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) was adopted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). This significant change was a result of the NCAA vs Alston case ruling, which was announced on July 1, 2021 (Holden et al., 2021). The ruling allowed athletes to receive compensation for endorsements and sponsorship deals, marking a departure from the NCAA's previous policies. While this change was seen as a necessary step towards equality and inclusion, it also brought a host of new challenges. Given the newness of the legislation, and ongoing decisions in the courts, the application and interpretation of NIL is constantly evolving. The lack of clarity on NIL has led to questions of social and economic justice, equality and inclusion based on race, gender, sport and division in which the athlete plays, and other factors. Who is researching NIL and are social and economic justice part of the conversation? This paper will analyze the academic disciplines engaged in research in the NIL space, the kinds of research in which they are engaged, and discuss whether the social justice lens that social work brings is being used or could be a valuable addition to the NIL discussion.

History of NIL

Name, Image, and Likeness was initially designed to provide financial compensation and marketing opportunities for college athletes. Though often seen as a new phenomenon, shaped by the recent cases O'Bannon vs NCAA and Alston vs NCAA, the origins of NIL are much older. The path to how the NCAA arrived at adopting NIL policy dates back to the formation of the NCAA. The NCAA was created in 1905 to protect student-athletes from serious injuries. In the early 1900s, several athletes were either injured or died from participating in college athletics. As a result, then-president Theodore Roosevelt commissioned the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA) in 1905 to ensure student-athletes' safety (Smith, 2021). The IAA later changed to the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association. As part of its charter, the NCAA defined *amateurism* as the desire to play college sports rather than professional sports. Also embedded in this definition was the assumption that participation in college athletics was without compensation. Operating parallel to the NCAA was the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which adopted a similar definition of amateurism. However, the IOC changed its policy of compensation for athletes in 1971. The NCAA and its member institution stood firm for several decades on their policies outlining amateurism and prohibiting athletes from being compensated. However, the popularity of collegiate sports and the incredible revenue generated from television, merchandise, and video games brought light to the NCAA's antiquated policies that forbade athletes from making money on their name, image, and likeness (Smith, 2021).

The current iteration of NIL was achieved based on the Sherman Antitrust laws, where defendants, Alston et al., successfully argued that the NCAA created a monopoly and that athletes did not have the opportunity to explore their actual market value. However, the precedent for athletes challenging sports organizations based on violating Sherman Antitrust laws can be traced back to the 1970 Flood V. Khun case. Curt Flood was a Major League Baseball (MLB) player who played for the St. Louis Cardinals and wanted to challenge the MLB's reserve clause. The reserve clause allowed MLB teams to reserve a player's rights for one year after the expiration of their contract (Weiss, 2007). The Cardinals utilized the reserve clause for trading Flood to Philadelphia, thus not allowing Flood to explore the free market after the expiry of his contract. Flood decided to sue MLB, claiming that MLB violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, which in part prevented collusion that would not allow an entity to explore the free market. Flood lost his case, but this case was a seminal moment because it laid the groundwork for modern-day free agency (Weiss, 2007).

In 1984, the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents and the University of Georgia sued the NCAA for restricting schools from negotiating their own television deals for their athletic programs (Smith, 2021). The Supreme Court ruled that the NCAA violated the Sherman Antitrust Act in this case. The above-mentioned cases are notable because the same strategy was utilized in the NCAA vs. O'Bannon and the NCAA vs. Alston cases. Ed O'Bannon was a former basketball player at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) who discovered that long after his college career, his likeness was being used in a video game without his consent or any compensation. He and several other former players filed a lawsuit against the NCAA, claiming that their rules forbidding universities from paying players for their NIL violated antitrust law. In 2014, the Ninth Circuit Court determined that the NCAA

violated the Sherman Act for its rule forbidding universities from offering full cost-of-attendance (rather than tuition only) scholarships to student-athletes (Brown et al., 2020).

In subsequent years, college football and basketball players, led by Shawne Alston, a running back for West Virginia University from 2009-2012, challenged the NCAA's limitation on "educational-related benefits" as a violation of antitrust law. In 2021, the Supreme Court determined that NCAA caps on student-athlete educational benefits violated antitrust law (Taylor, 2022). These two cases significantly weakened the power of the concepts of amateurism in college sports. In all the cases mentioned above, their suits were based on the claim that the NCAA violated the Sherman Antitrust Act.

The 1984 case and subsequent cases not only began to negate the power of the NCAA but also set the stage for conference expansion and unprecedented revenues from TV contracts for conferences. This case involved the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents and the University of Georgia (the defendants) suing the NCAA over having exclusive negotiating rights on behalf of its member institutions regarding TV contracts. The defendants argued that not allowing individual conferences the right to negotiate their separate TV contracts violated the Sherman Anti-trust Act (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). This landmark case led to the athletic conference being able to negotiate its own TV rights deal without NCAA interference (Smith, 2021). The verdict in the University of Oklahoma Board Regents vs NCAA provided the backdrop for the 2024 House vs NCAA, in which college athletes were suing the NCAA for a share of profits from television contracts. As in the previous cases, the plaintiffs state that the NCAA violated the Sherman Antitrust Act. The House case resulted in a multi-billion-dollar settlement for athletes payment.

Financial Vulnerabilities of College Athletes

NIL has created several opportunities for athletes, but the policy has also underscored the vulnerability of athletes who may now have access to large sums of money, but who have skill gaps in their financial capabilities. A crucial component of financial capability is financial literacy. College athletes are at financial risk for a number of salient reasons. First, they are at risk of potentially devastating poor financial decisions simply because they are young adults. Research (Jorgensen & Savla, 2010) indicates that financial literacy, particularly personal finance literacy, is low among young adults. [Mohd Padil et al. (2022) define *personal finance* as one's ability to manage money, savings, and investments.] Coupled with the fact that young people spend more money on housing and education, causing higher debt, the youth of college athletes puts them in a group vulnerable to financial risk. Second, college athletes are vulnerable to poor financial decisions because they are college students, who in general have low financial literacy, as has been shown in broad literature on student debt (Zhan and Sinha, 2019). In addition, student-athletes disproportionately are persons of color and come from lower socio-economic status communities. Football is 48% black, 36% white, and 16% other. Basketball 54% black, 24% white, and 22% other (NCAA 2023). 40% of student-athletes come from families that live below the poverty line (Arnold, 2016), and 86% of student-athletes who live on or off campus live below the poverty line (Bongiovanni, 2020). Thus they are particularly vulnerable to poor financial management and predatory lending scams due to disproportionate levels of lack of financial literacy among populations of color and the fact that communities of color are targeted for predatory lending practices.

The sudden windfall of money from NIL places athletes in a highly vulnerable space, and without adequate financial literacy, the possibility of poor financial decision-making can lead to lower grades, stress, and poor mental and physical health (Kim & Chattergee, 2021; LeBaron-Black et al., 2023) in addition to disastrous financial results. Research indicates that about 33% of all student-athletes report having some mental health issue. This poor financial decision-making is also seen among some professional athletes who have similar socio-economic and racial profiles. Kenny Anderson, a former NBA basketball player who was once worth over 63 million dollars but had to file bankruptcy due to poor financial mismanagement, is just one example of an athlete who, through bad financial decisions and a lack of financial literacy, lead to unfortunate financial outcomes (Quinanola, 2023).

The system providing NIL may itself exploit the financial naivete of college athletes. The recent changes in legislation allowing college athletes to be compensated have changed how athletes engage with athletic departments, their families, financial institutions, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Athletes receiving NIL, particularly financial compensation, appear at greater risk of being exploited. In 2023, Gervon Dexter, a football player for the University of Florida, signed a 436,000-dollar NIL deal with Big League Advance Fund II LLC. Dexter's contract with Big League Advance Fund stipulated that he would forfeit 15% of his earnings for the next 25 years—a fact of which he was un-

aware because of his youth and inexperience with finances and contracts. Modh Padil et al. (2021) states that young people, on average, are more susceptible to investment schemes due to unrealistic financial objectives. This is only one example of many that are taking place in the NIL era.

NIL can provide college athletes with resources in compensation for the sports performances they provide. It can also open the way for exploitation, financial loss, and resultant economic, mental health, and relational challenges and injustices, often grounded in disparities due to youth, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Addressing these disparities and injustices are foundational foci of the profession of social work, identified in the Code of Ethics. In addition, one of the Grand Challenges of Social Work is reducing economic inequality. Thus, social work is uniquely positioned to address the potentially negative impacts associated with NIL. But is the profession of social work attending to this issue?

The rapidly changing landscape of college athletics and NIL requires that scholars pay close attention to what is happening with ever-evolving NIL policy and its impacts on sports, the university, and college athletes' financial, educational, and psychosocial well-being. Because of the systems perspective and social justice lens of social work, one would expect social work scholars to be involved in this research. But, to date, no one has asked which scholars are studying NIL—who is minding the store, so to speak. As a first step in examining who is studying the world of NIL and its impacts, this study asks two questions: 1) What are the disciplines engaged in scholarship on NIL (is social work among these?); and 2) What are they exploring within this scholarship?

Social Ecological Theory and Athletes

Numerous variables make their way into college athletes' orbit and impact them on levels ranging from personal to institutional. The addition of NIL has provided a level of complexity that social workers must comprehend and analyze to understand its systemic influence on athletes' lives. Several theoretical perspectives can provide the comprehensive framework needed for social workers to effectively engage with athletes and understand the various systemic influences in the NIL era. However, the authors believe that social-ecological systems theory (SEST) (Newman et al., 2022) provides a framework that can best inform social work's approach and presence in the evolving nature of the NIL space.

SEST utilizes Bronfenbrenner's model of social-ecological systems (Crawford, 2020). This model identifies five systems within an individual's ecosystem that impact an individual's life. Those systems are as follows: 1) Microsystem, which consists of the individual and how they interact with their immediate environment; 2) The mesosystem involves interacting with other microsystems outside their immediate environment. 3) The exosystem outlines the role of formal and informal structures such as mass media and government on one's life. 4) The macrosystem explains the role of culture in one's life, and 5) The chronosystem in the social-ecological system that accounts for the impact of major events on the systems. NIL is a significant event in the athlete's ecosystem, creating new and complex interaction between the athlete and family (mesosystem), media and policy (exosystem), cultural expectations of college athletes (macrosystem), and major events such as recruitment (chronosystem). The current ever-changing nature of the NIL policy has the potential to cause stress and anxiety for athletes. Social workers can be pivotal in helping athletes understand and navigate the uncertainty of NIL by contributing significantly to the helping process. The utilization a social ecological systems perspective can help in the creation of effectual evidence-based interventions.

Newman et al. (2021) contend that utilizing a social-ecological systems approach allows social workers to provide a holistic intervention approach to athletes. Unger (2002) states that ecological theories have been part of the social work lexicon since the 1970s and can explain how social determinates impact our systems. A social-ecological approach provides an ideal backdrop for social workers to craft culturally appropriate client interventions. For social workers who work with athletes, particularly college athletes, the social-ecological theory offers a framework for examining the impact of NIL on the athlete's family, communities, and support systems. Social workers can play a crucial role in this context by providing emotional support, helping athletes understand their rights and responsibilities, and guiding them in making informed decisions about their personal brand and financial management.

Given this history and the factors discussed above, it is important to examine NIL research to see through which lenses it is being analyzed. This paper will begin to contribute to this knowledge gap by analyzing the academic disciplines engaged in research in the NIL space, the kinds of research in which they are engaged, and discuss whether the social justice lens that social work brings is being used or could be a valuable addition to the NIL discussion.

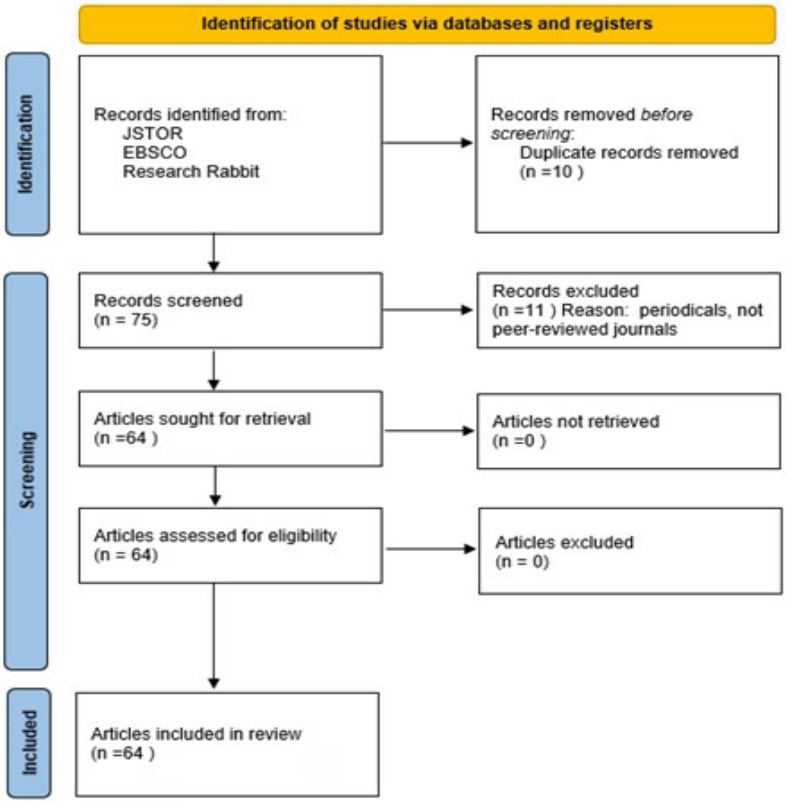
Methods

Selection Criteria and Search

To examine this question, we reviewed the scholarly literature from January 1, 2019, the year that the first Pay for Playing law was passed in California (McDonnell, 2020) through November 8, 2023, using EBSCO, JSTOR, and Research Rabbit databases. We included only peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding periodicals and magazine pieces, in order to focus on rigorous research rather than include opinion pieces and other reporting. The study search term strategy used was (NIL OR name, image, likeness) AND college AND athlete*. As shown in Figure 1, our initial search identified 85 articles. Reading publication titles revealed that 10 articles were duplicates, and screening showed that 11 were from periodicals. The remaining 64 articles were included in the study. A summary of the decision process can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for NIL literature



Data Analysis

To identify the disciplines engaged in NIL scholarship, we recorded the discipline of the home department of each article's first author. We identified the methods used in each article by having one author record an article's scholarship strategy from the Method sections or description of the process used for the study, which was then reviewed for accuracy by the second author.

For identification of the primary topic of the article, each article was read by two authors independently. One researcher identified the main purpose of each article in a descriptive narrative paragraph. Then, using a thematic analytic approach (Naeem, 2023), the purposes of the articles were collapsed into larger themes, and these themes were used to categorize each article. The second author reviewed the larger themes and independently categorized the articles; any areas of disagreement were discussed to consensus.

Similarly, one researcher identified the home academic department of the first author for each article and noted whether the article's methodology was primary data collection, was a legal analysis, or was a "think piece" review, opinion, or discussion grounded in other literature or events. A second researcher reviewed the findings to ensure accuracy.

Results

Analysis of the discipline of the first author for each of the 64 journal articles revealed the majority were in law (56%), followed by sports management/administration (17%). Thematic analysis of the topic of each article identified five major categories: 1) Legal analyses of NIL grounded in precedent and constitutional law (39%); 2) Student-athlete rights as they relate to NIL, such as contracts and payment (20%); 3) The impact of NIL on specific subpopulations such as women or international student-athletes (17%); 4) The impact of NIL on student-athletes (16%); 5) NIL challenges or issues, not focused on the impact on student-athletes, such as NIL and gambling or NIL and impact on the university (8%). A summary of the distribution of author disciplines and article topics, sorted by discipline, is found in Table 1.

Table 1.

Author discipline and content of scholarly articles found on NIL

	Legal Analysis	Student Athletes Rights	NIL and Subpopulations	NIL Impact on Student Athletes	NIL Issues not Impacting Student Athletes	Total
Law	19	11	5	1		36 (56%)
Sports Management and Administration	2	2	3	1	3	11 (17%)
Business	2		1	2	1	6 (9%)
Sports Health or Kinesiology	2		1	2	1	6 (9%)
Communication				2		2 (3%)
Political Science			1	1		2 (3%)
Tourism and Hospitality Management				1		1 (2%)
Total	25 (39%)	13 (20%)	11 (17%)	10 (16%)	5 (8%)	64

An examination of the method used in each article revealed that the vast majority were legal analyses (61%), followed by discussion "think pieces" or reviews (25%), and that only 14% of all articles involved primary data collection.

Discussion

This research reveals that while there is scholarship in the area of NIL, both the disciplines involved and the research agendas are limited. Nearly 60% of scholarship has focused on legal analyses and legal issues, with only 16% examining some non-legal aspect of NIL's impact on the student athlete. Given the complexity of laws, policy, and court cases, legal research is understandable. However, to see that only 9% of research was done by a discipline with student athlete well-being as a core part of their role (sports health & kinesiology), was surprising. Equally surprising was the paucity of primary research on this topic. Little empirical evidence of the impact of NIL on student athletes, on their families, even on universities, exists. With potentially billions of dollars at stake and thousands of young athletes' lives affected, it is crucial that we understand the impact of NIL and examine its operationalization (or lack thereof) of social and economic justice. Finally, not a single article was found written within social work scholarship.

Where is Social Work?

Surprisingly, in our review of the literature we found that social work scholarship is not present in one of the seminal moments in social policy history in higher education, a moment fraught with risk and multi-faceted considerations of social and economic justice. This lack of scholarship in social work is a missed opportunity to bring the discipline's unique perspective to inform both practice and policy. While it is understandable that the legal and regulatory complexities of NIL would result in a large body of scholarship within the law and sports management disciplines, this is not sufficient to fully interrogate the potential dangers and opportunities of NIL. A social and economic justice lens is needed, one that centers on fairness and the experience of student-athletes. The lack of primary data collection found in the works we reviewed highlights the absence of student-athlete voice in the literature. In addition, the issue of NIL is complex, with questions and implications from the individual through the macro policy levels. A discipline able to move nimbly across multiple system levels (interpersonal, intrapersonal, program, policy, etc.) is needed. Social work is uniquely

poised to engage in this work.

Work in this arena is not new for social work. The profession has a rich and extensive history with sports. Jane Adams leveraged sports, particularly basketball, as an intervention with children of immigrants at the settlement houses in Chicago (Reynolds, 2017). The profession of social work has continued its commitment to athletics with the establishment of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS), which is dedicated to promoting the connection between the principles of social work and athletics through research, practice, and advocacy. The profound history of social work in addressing social justice issues and the new Name, Image, and Likeness policy, with its potential to disproportionately affect athletes from low-income families, athletes of color, female athletes, and athletes of low revenue-generating sports, presents an excellent opportunity for the profession of social work to contribute to a path forward that prioritizes equity and justice.

What Can Social Work Bring to the NIL sphere

Social work's ability to assess and work with a range of systems, grounded in the principles of social and economic justice, brings a rich and holistic perspective to the complex challenges in NIL. Social work's facility with SEST provides the profession with a framework from with to understand the multi-level complexities experienced by young, and vulnerable, athletes entering the world of NIL. At the micro- and meso-system levels, social work has a long history of understanding the interactions of, and providing counseling and services to, individuals, families, and groups. These skills are needed to address the challenges NIL will bring. Social workers are already often serving as counselors within the athletic wellness and performance teams in colleges (Beasley et al., 2021). NIL will make relationships more complex—with families, with teammates, with other students—and social work clinical skills will be needed to help athletes navigate these relational challenges. In addition, cultural expectations of athletes will change with NIL—from disappointment in "selling out" amateur status to changes in how athletes are perceived once they have "made it big" with NIL money. Social workers, with their understanding of the impact of the cultural macrosystem on young adults, can provide athletes with invaluable guidance and support.

Working with formal and informal groups and communities that are part of an athlete's exosystem is also a level of social work practice. Social workers facilitate community groups, work with school programs in marginalized neighborhoods, and develop programs to teach healthy conflict resolution skills in organizations (Wike et al., 2014). Athletes' need to navigate financial policies require support in understanding governmental, NCAA, and other rules and structures—another part of the exosystem. A newer field within social work is financial social work (Karger, 2015), focused on social workers educating clients to understand structures and policies and build financial literacy and decision-making skills. Due to potential exploitation, financial inequities, and the fiduciary and mental health consequences of NIL, social work is needed at this exosystem level to provide comprehensive financial literacy programs to athletes and their families.

A SEST understanding of the various systems impacting athletes and their interactions is vital for those who advocate for athletes. Much work is needed at the policy level to promote NIL laws and regulations that are just and transparent, for athletes who are frequently vulnerable and from disenfranchised communities and groups. Since its inception, social work has been a champion for those whose voices have been stifled. For instance, Ida B. Wells, a social worker, bravely spoke out against the abhorrent practice of lynching in America. Whitney M. Young, President of the Urban League, dedicated his career to combating employment discrimination during the civil rights era. Another social worker, Peter Buxton, exposed the unethical research practices in the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment (Giddings, 2008; Weiss, 2014; Barrett, 2019). More recent examples include social workers working with disenfranchised groups in the area of predatory lending practices through research, education, and policy (Caplan, 2014).

Similar social work advocacy and policy skills are needed for NIL. Social work advocacy will be needed to ensure educational justice within the university for both the athletes and for other students who may be neglected in the scramble to get star athletes with NIL. By the time this paper is published, a decision will have been made in the House vs NCAA Supreme Court case. In this case, the litigants argue that college athletes are entitled to a share of the profits from the TV contracts signed by the athletic conferences and the NCAA. Due to the prospects of potential revenue-sharing agreements between universities and college athletes, there is a high probability that some low revenue-generating sports or lower paid athletes such as women may need a voice in these negotiations. Social work, skilled in helping the voiceless be heard, can play an important advocacy role here. Social workers can influence policy safeguarding athletes from scams and financially destructive contracts. Finally,

social work's history of allyship with labor rights proponents may be useful as students advocate for workers' rights in college sports.

Implications and Next Steps for Social Work

While social work has tremendous potential to promote the well-being and financial literacy of athletes, to address the complex dynamics NIL can cause in athletes' relationships, and to advocate for just policies for athletes and all impacted by NIL, there is still much work to be done if social work is to fully step into these roles. For any social work action to be effective, it will require that social work practitioners, advocates, and researchers understand NIL. Thus, a basic step for the profession will be the inclusion in the curriculum of course content on sports and mental health, relational dynamics, and policy. While some of this content is currently available in a few social work programs (Newman, et.al 2019), more is needed if the profession is to have sufficient professionals to address the needs of athletes during the "new era" of NIL—and whatever future changes athletics may face.

Social work scholarship is worryingly silent on issues of NIL. There are several potential areas in research where social work can and should provide context and understanding. One area where a social work lens could be of utility is simply in the impact of NIL on athletes' mental health; it is well documented that many athletes already struggle with mental health issues (Bauman, 2016)—how does NIL impact their potentially vulnerable mental status? A second area needing research is in the examining of the impact of NIL monies on athlete relational dynamics. For example, research is needed investigating the financial and emotional impacts of NIL on those athletes who do not receive NIL, or their NIL compensation is far below some of their teammates or colleagues in other sports. Research is also needed to understand how receiving NIL money can change the power structure and relational roles in the athlete's family. Finally, NIL policy is new. Longitudinal research is needed to discover the longer-term impacts of NIL of athletes, their families, their fellow students, and others in their communities.

Across all system levels, social work research is needed to design and evaluate the effectiveness of financial literacy programs and other programs promoting athlete well-being in the era of NIL. Social work research is needed to better understand whose voices are heard as policy changes regarding NIL occur, and to ensure that everyone impacted by NIL is at the table where NIL policies are developed. Similarly, social work scholarship is needed to evaluate the impacts of changing policies and advocate for those that promote the rights and social and economic well-being of athletes. The NIL research areas mentioned above are just a few of those in which social workers, with their systemic approach and social justice lens, are needed.

Limitations

As with all studies, this work contained a number of limitations. By limiting our work to an examination of the discipline of first authors, rather than all authors of a work, we may be underrepresenting some disciplines engaged in NIL research. In addition, the world of NIL changes rapidly, and thus our findings may not accurately reflect the extant research by the time it is published and read. Finally, we limited our exploration to peer reviewed work, which can take extensive time from acceptance to publication. By choosing not to include gray literature such as website commentary, newspaper articles, and the like, we examined publications that were rigorously reviewed, but neglected writing that may have been less scholarly, but timelier. Despite these limitations, we believe that this work provides a good picture of which disciplines are, and are not, at the table examining NIL and its impact on student athletes, their families, other students, and universities.

Conclusion

Given the paucity of research by social workers on NIL, social work researchers must demonstrate a level of alacrity in investigating the potential benefits and adverse outcomes of NIL. This paper has established that most college athletes, given their backgrounds, lack of power, and lack of financial literacy, can reasonably be considered vulnerable. The profession of social work's rich history of working with vulnerable populations to ensure positive social justice outcomes makes it an ideal fit to provide empirical evidence on the impact of NIL on today's college athletes. Just like social work did in child welfare by giving direction and evidence-based interventions, the same opportunity presents itself today with NIL and athletics. By contributing to an already scarce knowledge base, social work can set a path forward for addressing the unique multisystemic needs of college athletes in the new age of NIL.

NIL represents a new era in college athletics that has the potential to provide athletes with a portion of the huge profits in college sports—profits they have been unjustly denied for decades. However, as with any new policy or legislation, there are gaps and unintended consequences that have the potential

to harm those these policies are intended to help, and those around them. Historically, the profession of social work has been at the forefront of identifying these potentially harmful consequences and protecting the vulnerable. Today, social work is called upon again to research, advocate, and provide a clear path toward equity for all athletes in the NIL era.

As Name, Image, and Likeness becomes more integrated into college sports, there is an increasing need for research to explore a myriad of issues, particularly the effects of cyberbullying and gambling. College athletes are increasingly targeted by fans who perceive that the compensation these athletes receive through NIL makes it acceptable to attack them on social media platforms (Mishna et.al, 2019). Future research should investigate the correlation between cyberbullying and NIL, as well as the detrimental mental health consequences it may impose on college athletes. This is just one of many areas where social work researchers, armed with their unique skills and perspectives, can make a meaningful contribution. They can assist in developing a comprehensive, evidence-based research strategy that fosters lasting positive outcomes for college athletes.

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The State of Sport-Based Practicum Education for Social Work Students

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Abstract

In preparation for a career in social work, students take part in a field practicum, an opportunity to engage in experiential learning, which is considered a signature pedagogy by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). With the emergence of sport social work as an area of social work practice, there is a need for sport-specific field practicums to prepare students for a career as a social worker in sport. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the state of sport-specific field practicums in the United States. A survey was completed by 119 social work faculty and staff at CSWE-accredited institutions. Findings support the fact that social work practice in sport is growing, but there remain barriers to establishing effective and sustainable practicum placements in sport organizations. Considering these barriers, specific implications for social work staff, faculty, and students are discussed in order to support the continued growth of sport-related social work practicum opportunities.

Keywords: field education; field placements; sport social work; internships; sport organizations

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The mission of the social work profession is to empower and enhance the well-being of vulnerable populations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). To ensure all aspiring social work students are competently prepared for professional practice, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) sets accreditation standards for bachelor- and master-level social work programs throughout the United States. The goal of CSWE accreditation is to ensure quality education and prepare social workers to provide public service through upholding the professional ethics and core values of justice, dignity and worth of a person, human relations, integrity, and competence. In addition to traditional coursework via in-person and online formats, social work practicums are recognized as an essential pedagogical component of CSWE accredited social work programs.

Amongst the diversity of ways in which social workers provide competent public service is the emerging subspecialty of *sport social work* (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Moore et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2024). Sport social workers have been characterized to fulfill three distinct purposes: (1) the use of sport, recreation, and play to promote healthy youth development, often through community-based and afterschool programs (Anderson-Butcher, 2019); (2) the provision of mental and behavioral health services to athletes and teams, most commonly as an embedded clinician within collegiate athletic departments (Beasley et al., 2021); and (3) the application of social work values, knowledge, and skills (e.g., holistic biopsychosocial perspective, trauma-informed practice) by youth sport leaders, such as youth sport coaches (Tarr et al., 2023). However, as sport social work continues to evolve, scholars (e.g., Bates & Kratz, 2022) have advocated for formal learning opportunities within mainstream social work education. The current study seeks to assess the landscape of available sport social work practicum experiences offered by CSWE accredited programs. Indeed, in preparation for the current study, a cursory review of available undergraduate and graduate CSWE accredited programs found that individual sport social work courses may be a growing trend, yet past research (e.g., Beasley et al., 2021; Magier et al., 2021) has suggested that sport-based practicum experiences are rarely available or are challenging to establish.

Advancing Sport Social Work

Throughout all systems and settings of sport, a spotlight has been shone on injustices and inequities, including bullying and abuse, gender- and sex-based inequities, racial discrimination, and mental health stigmatization (e.g., Meister & Lavanchy, 2021; Reardon et al., 2019). Given the dynamic and complex needs of sport participants (e.g., athletes, coaches, referees, parents), the social work profession may be uniquely equipped to provide services, supports, and resources that meet the diversity of mental and behavioral health needs among those involved in sport. For instance, the social work profession often operates from an ecological systems theory perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that proposes an individual functions within society (i.e., person-in-environment) in which the environment interacts dynamically to shape that individual's wellbeing, health, and development.

In a similar fashion, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2011) and Dorsch et al. (2022) proposed that a sport system is comprised of three interrelated subsystems (i.e., family, team, sport environment) within the broader ecological system (i.e., micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels) of human (i.e., athlete) development. Sport social workers at the micro-level serve as licensed mental health providers, often within collegiate and professional sport organizations (Beasley et al., 2022; Bennett, 2022). In fact, college athletes may have higher levels of mental health concerns compared to general university student populations (Wolanin et al., 2016), with nearly one-in-three college athletes reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression or anxiety (Drew & Matthews, 2019). At the mezzo-level, sport social workers create and implement mental health training for coaches (Bates et al., 2024), as well as evidence-based community youth sport programs, which are shown to promote long-term life skill development (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018) and transfer (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021) among youth. From a macro-level perspective, sport social workers help address concerns of diversity, equity, and inclusion within sport systems and organizations. For example, sport social workers have been instrumental in advocacy efforts for the inclusion of trans and gender non-conforming athletes (Huslage, 2023). Ultimately, social work values, ethics, and skills uniquely position sport social workers to make positive changes throughout all levels of sport systems (Newman et al., 2022; Tarr et al., 2023).

Sport Education in Social Work

Due to the continuing evolution of sport social work as a subspecialty, Clark et al. (2022) advocated for the value of including sport social work, as with military social work and other subspecialities, as an essential element of the

social work curriculum. Yet, there is a lack of formal sport specific educational opportunities for social work students. For instance, among current sport social workers, Magier et al. (2021) reported that a critical contributor to the development of professional competence was individuals' ability to integrate sport content, themselves, into coursework assignments. Similarly, Magier et al., (2024) found that aspiring sport social workers often felt it was necessary to explore informal (e.g., webinars) and nonformal (e.g., mentorship) learning opportunities to supplement their social work education. Such findings help to explain why sport social workers may describe a lack of direction when establishing their social work careers (Beasley et al., 2021).

The lack of available formal education opportunities is not to suggest that significant advances have not been made in the advancement of sport social work. Lawson and Anderson-Butcher (2000) delivered the "The Social Work of Sport" presentation at the *World Sport for All Congress*. Moreover, the *Social Work and Sport Association* student organization at University of Michigan School of Social Work held the first sport social work conference (Newman et al., 2016), and the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) was founded and later established as a 501(c)(3) organization. Additionally, with support from the ASWIS, the *Sport Social Work Journal* was launched and is the only peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the subspecialty. The last decade has also seen the development of several sport social work professional certificate programs hosted by ASWIS, University of Michigan School of Social Work, and New York University Silver School of Social Work. The University of Kentucky, in addition to the recently established Sport Social Work Research Lab, is developing a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) with a sport social work concentration. However, the backbone of available sport social work educational opportunities comes in the form of unique, individual courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, such as those offered at The Ohio State University and University of Michigan.

Social Work Practicums

From a pedagogical perspective, CSWE (2022) holds that social work practicums are a unique method of teaching and learning. Practicum experiences provide the opportunity for hands-on, applied experiential learning that is meant to empower students to practice applying classroom content (e.g., theory, research) to real world situations and settings. Although specific requirements may vary by program, all accredited social work programs are required to provide practicums of at least 400 hours and 900 hours for undergraduate and graduate students, respectively. Social work scholarship has demonstrated that applied, hands-on learning experiences prepare students to be ethical, competent, innovative, and effective practitioners. For instance, social work practicums have been positioned as critical opportunities to reflect on ethical social dilemmas (Barsky, 2019), develop critical thinking skills (Lit & Shek, 2007), and practice applying novel social work approaches and skills (Fortune et al., 2007). Moreover, a critical component of social work practicums is structured supervision. In this way, aspiring social workers are not only supervised by a seasoned social work professional but, importantly, students are also provided the space and time to debrief, process, and critically reflect upon their firsthand experiences working with clients. This continual supervision is also intended to foster professional competence, particularly when serving individuals, groups, and communities that are often marginalized throughout historical and contemporary societies.

For many undergraduate and graduate students, social work practicums commonly occur in 'traditional' social work settings, such as at local social service agencies, community-based organizations, faith-based programs, and community schools. However, establishing a practicum opportunity in non-traditional settings is often recognized as being more challenging (Rawsthorne et al., 2018). Indeed, preliminary research has suggested that, like other nontraditional settings (e.g., law offices, museums; Elswick et al., 2015), students are often confronted with limited access to sport organizations and a lack of qualified social work supervision (Beasley, 2022). Given the essential nature of practicum experiences—and the reality that such an experience may be the only opportunity students have to work in such a setting before becoming a social worker—there is a need for sport-based learning opportunities to be prioritized and positioned in the same manner as classroom-based learning.

The Current Study

Held as the *signature pedagogy* for the social work profession (CSWE, 2022), there is an essential need for formal sport-based practicum experiences. Indeed, to develop the requisite professional competence, sport social work scholars have suggested that sport-based practicum experiences represent critical learning experiences for aspiring social work students (Bates & Kratz, 2021; Beasley, 2022; Magier et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022). The creation of

sport-based formal learning experiences may also help to educate others (e.g., coaches, sport managers, administrators) within the sport system about the social work profession (Beasley, 2022). For instance, prominent members of interprofessional care teams (e.g., athletic trainers, sport psychology professionals, mental performance coaches) are often unaware of sport social workers (Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022). Ultimately, to continue advancing the subspecialty of sport social work, research must begin by assessing the current landscape of formal sport social work practicum experiences.

Method

Upon approval from the authors' Institutional Review Boards, an online Qualtrics survey was distributed to social work program staff and faculty across the United States. The contact list was developed utilizing the CSWE online directory of accredited programs. Email information for staff and faculty across 769 total institutions were collected, including undergraduate and graduate Practicum Directors, as well as Program Directors and Deans when Practicum Director information was unavailable (See Table 1).

Online survey links were sent directly to the entire contact list in late September 2023, with two subsequent reminders sent following the initial invitation after one week and one month, with data collection concluding in early November 2023. The survey presented a consent form upon first clicking on the survey link, describing the study, risks and benefits, and how the data collected was to be utilized. Once an individual agreed to the consent form, they were able to complete the survey. Of the 769 individuals invited to take the survey, 46 emails were invalid; thus, 723 invitations were sent, of which 119 surveys were completed (16.46% completion rate). After the survey was closed, data were exported by the research team for statistical analysis and qualitative coding in Excel and SPSS.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Item	*n*	%
What position(s) do you hold at your school?		
MSW Practicum Director	55	27.64
MSW Program Director	3	1.51
BSW/BASW Practicum Director	67	33.67
Practicum Liaison	20	10.05
School Director	3	1.51
Department Chair	5	2.51
Other (please describe):	14	7.04
What type of college or university is your social work program located in?		
For-Profit	4	3.42
Public Division III	9	7.69
Public Division II	17	14.54
Public Division I	34	29.06
Private Division III	18	15.38
Private Division II	6	5.13
Private Division I	7	5.98
Public, not an NCAA member institution	12	10.26
Private, not an NCAA member institution	10	8.55

Measures

The primary goal of the survey was to assess the "state" of sport-based social work practicum placements. The survey started by asking about the respondent's position and school setting. Respondents were asked "what type of college or university is your social work program located in," prompted to describe if their school is public or private, as well as if they are a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institution and if so, what division. The survey then moved to investigating the social work practicum placements the school offers in sport settings, asking if sport-related practicum placements have been offered either currently or previously, at what degree level they are offered, how many sport-related placements are available, how many students utilize them, how many paid sport-related placements are offered, and at what level of practice (micro, mezzo, macro) placements are offered. Further, targeted questions prompted respondents to describe the tasks and duties students are responsible for.

The survey proceeded to explore the types of practicum sites, as well as what populations students work with. Subsequently, respondents were asked who in their department-initiated partnerships with practicum sites, the average length of the practicum relationship, and what

types of supervision the placements utilized. The final section of the survey asked 5-point Likert-scale questions about the ease of finding sport-based placements for students, getting in contact with agencies, meeting CSWE standards in placements, and sustaining practicum sites over time. Finally, respondents were asked about barriers to finding sport-based placements, ethical dilemmas, and whether the programs offer sport-specific content in their social work curriculum. The final question was an open text question that allowed respondents to expand upon their experience with sport-based practicum placements.

Data Analysis

As an exploratory study, descriptive statistics were observed for all variables. Descriptive statistics were generated using a mix of Qualtrics' built-in data analysis features and SPSS when statistics other than frequencies and percentages were required. Additionally, a member of the research team completed a basic content analysis of open-ended questions related type of tasks students complete in field placements. The first author coded the frequency that different social work tasks were identified by participants as micro, mezzo, and macro-practice (e.g., frequency of "therapy" being indicated as a type of micro-practice; Saldaña, 2016). The content coding was then reviewed by the lead author, and further discussed with the research team to finalize the results.

Results

Descriptive results (see Table 2) found that 35.04% of respondents (n = 41) currently or previously have had a sport-related practicum placement, and 19% of those respondents stated they currently have a student in a sport-based practicum placement. Respondents shared that an average of 3.15 students participate in sport-related practicum placements through their program (M = 3.15, SD = 3.45). Further, most placements were at the graduate, MSW-level (60.8%).

In general, the highest percentage of social work practicums focused on micro-level practice (43%), particularly within collegiate athletics (40%) and included responsibilities such as individual counseling, case management, and crisis intervention. Participants also indicated practicums with professional leagues, high school and youth sports, and community sports. At the mezzo-level, respondents shared that the most common tasks were facilitating group activities, community engagement, contributing to program development and evaluation, and providing education and

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics on Placement Type

Item	*n*	%
Does your program currently have or have previously had any sport-related practicum placements?		
No	67	57.26
Yes	41	35.04
Unsure	9	7.69
Does your program currently have any students placed in sport-specific practicum placements?		
No	30	60.00
Yes	19	38.00
Unsure	1	2.00
At which degree level are sport-related practicum placements available or have been available?		
BSW	20	39.22
MSW	31	60.78
At what level of practice are sports-related practicum placements available?		
Micro	37	43.02
Mezzo	31	36.05
Macro	18	20.93
What type of practicum site do you partner with for sport-based placements?		
Professional sport teams	2	3.45
Community sport organizations	10	17.24
K-12 sport teams	1	1.72
University sport teams	23	39.66
Youth sport organizations	7	12.07

training. At the macro-level, the most common tasks were policy and advocacy work, program development, research, and education and training. The most participants (40.4%) also reported that the supervision model of current placements was that the organization had a social worker on staff.

Participants were also asked how partnerships with sport organizations were initiated. The most common answers were that the student(s) initiated the partnership (n = 17), followed by a colleague in the social work department (n = 15), the organization reaching out to the social work department (n = 13), the respondent themself by way of a contact within the organization (n = 11), and the respondent by way of cold calling (n = 7). Participants were asked about the ease or difficulty of the practicum placement process on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = Extremely difficult to 5 = Extremely easy; see Table 3). Participants were somewhat ambivalent about the difficulty of assuring that CSWE competencies are met in sport-based practicum placements (M = 3.3), but participants indicated that it was somewhat difficult to find placements for students interested in a sports-based internships (M = 2.4), to get initial contact with sport-based practicum sites (M = 2.8), and to sustain practicum placements (M = 2.8). The difficulty of sustainability was supported by the length of partnerships, as 46.51% (n = 20) of the respondents indicated the average length of a relationship with a sport-based practicum agency was one academic year, followed by 18.6% indicating 4-5 academic years (n = 8) and 16.28% indicating 1-3 academic years (n = 7). Only two participants had a relationship with a sport-based practicum agency for 6 or more academic years. The data indicate that most relationships with sport-based practicum agencies are relatively new and may not last past one intern placement.

In a select-all-that-apply question, the largest barrier identified was that there are not enough practicum supervisors with required credentials working at agencies (26.09%), followed by not enough sport organizations willing or interested in hosting a social work intern (21.74%), and no identified barrier (18.84%).

Open-ended responses focused on the different type of tasks students complete to meet CSWE competences. Responses varied, but there were clearly identified tasks at each level of practice (i.e., micro, mezzo, and macro; see Table 4 for detailed breakdown of tasks).

Discussion

As social work practicums are the signature pedagogy of the profession (CSWE, 2022), understanding the current landscape of formal sport-based experiences is a next big step in the advancement of sport social work. Overall, findings suggest social work practice in sport is growing, as demonstrated by social work programs offering sport-specific practicum opportunities. This is promising, because the lack of this type of specialized training has been previously identified in the literature as one of the primary gaps in the education of social workers working in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021; Magier et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2024). Furthermore, the growth of sport-specific practicum education opportunities may also indicate that sport social work is further professionalizing as a subspeciality. Along with an ethical code and a theoretical foundation and applied knowledge base, specific standards of training and education are the markers of a specific profession (Broman, 1995). Therefore, sport-based practicum placement opportunities present a step towards professionalization. Findings from the current study identified micro-level practice as the most common form of sport social work practicum experience. The systems perspective of social work is what distinguishes social work services in sport from other clinical professions (e.g., counseling, psychology; McHenry et al., 2021). Therefore, to continue to grow sport social work as distinct from other behavioral health professions in sport, practicum departments should also look to expand mezzo- and macro-based sport practicums, as well as opportunities outside of college sport.

Looking more specifically at the process of establishing placements, the findings suggest that students most often bring sport-based opportunities to the social work staff and faculty at their institution. Although there are some departments that operate in the model of students seeking their own practicum placements, this may not be best practice with establishing new sport-based practicum placements due to the often closed-off nature of sport (Beasley, 2022). Social work departments should thus begin doing their own outreach to sport organizations to proactively recruit sport-based practicum sites. Luckily, despite the need to continue growing such opportunities, there are current sport-based practicums that can be a model to aid practicum departments in beginning to conceptualize what a sport-based placement may look like at all levels of practice. For example, at the micro-level students could provide college athletes individual therapy, at the mezzo level students could develop interprofessional education seminars for staff, and at the macro level student could conduct policy evaluations. The ASWIS also recently released a manual to aid social work staff, faculty, and students in creating and maintaining sport-based practicum placements, as well as suggestions

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics on Placement Specifics

Item	*n*	%
Does your program currently have or have previously had any sport-related practicum placements?		
No	67	57.26
Yes	41	35.04
Unsure	9	7.69
Does your program currently have any students placed in sport-specific practicum placements?		
No	30	60.00
Yes	19	38.00
Unsure	1	2.00
At which degree level are sport-related practicum placements available or have been available?		
BSW	20	39.22
MSW	31	60.78
At what level of practice are sports-related practicum placements available?		
Micro	37	43.02
Mezzo	31	36.05
Macro	18	20.93
What type of practicum site do you partner with for sport-based placements?		
Professional sport teams	2	3.45
Community sport organizations	10	17.24
K-12 sport teams	1	1.72
University sport teams	23	39.66
Youth sport organizations	7	12.07
Other (please describe):	15	25.86
What supervision model do current sport-specific practicum placements use?		
The organization(s) has a social worker on staff who provides supervision	23	40.35
The organization(s) does not have a social worker on staff, so we contract an outside supervisor	14	24.56
The organization(s) does not have a social worker on staff, so a social work faculty or staff member provides off-site supervision	18	31.58
Unsure	2	3.51

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics on Placement Challenges

Item	*n*	%
What supervision model do current sport-specific practicum placements use?		
The organization(s) has a social worker on staff who provides supervision	23	40.35
The organization(s) does not have a social worker on staff, so we contract an outside supervisor	14	24.56
The organization(s) does not have a social worker on staff, so a social work faculty or staff member provides off-site supervision	18	31.58
Unsure	2	3.51
For both past and current sport-specific practicum placements, who initiated the partnership?		
Myself, I "cold-called" the organization(s)	7	10.45
Myself, I had a contact at the organization(s)	11	16.42
A colleague in the practicum department	15	22.39
The organization(s) reached out to the practicum department	13	19.40
The student(s)	17	25.37
Other	4	5.97
How easy or difficult has it been for your program to find practicum placements for students interested in a sport-based internship?		
Extremely difficult	8	18.60
Somewhat difficult	14	32.56
Neither easy nor difficult	17	39.53
Somewhat easy	3	6.98
Extremely easy	1	2.33
Approximately, what has been the average length of a relationship with a sport-based practicum agency?		
One semester	6	13.95
One academic year	20	46.51
1-3 academic years	7	16.28
4-5 academic years	8	18.60
6+ academic years	2	4.65
What barriers to finding practicum placements for students interested in a sport-based practicum placements has your school encountered, if any?		
Not enough spots for students at agencies	6	8.70
Not enough sport organizations willing to take students	15	21.74
Not enough practicum supervisors at agencies with required credentials	18	26.09
It is too expensive or complex for agencies to host a student (due to a lack of space, stipends, no willing task supervisor, etc.)	2	2.90
Agencies' policies or practices are not consistent with social work values	6	8.70
Student(s) has/have had negative experiences with an agency or agencies in the past	2	2.90
Agencies are concerned with client confidentiality	1	1.45
No barriers	13	18.84
Other barriers	6	8.70

Table 5

Ease and Difficulty of Practicum Placement Planning Process

Item	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Count
Approximately how many students participate or have participated in sports-related practicum placements through your program?	0	15	3.15	3.45	46
How easy or difficult has it been for your program to assure student interns are meeting CSWE competencies with their work at a sport-based practicum placement?	2	4	3.30	.76	40
How easy or difficult has it been for your program to find practicum placements for students interested in a sport-based internship?	1	4	2.40	.93	40
How easy or difficult has it been for your program to get in initial contact with a sport-based practicum placement?	1	4	2.83	1.04	40
How easy or difficult has it been to sustain practicum sites over multiple semesters?	1	4	2.80	1.04	40

around supervision models when the organization does not have a supervisor on site (Beasley et al., n.d.), which was a challenge identified in the current study. This can be a great resource for anyone interested in establishing a practicum partnership with sport organizations.

Interestingly, not many challenges were identified once the process of establishing the practicum site was initiated, outside of securing appropriate social work supervision, which is a recognized challenge in other nontraditional social work practicum placement settings (Jasper et al., 2013). This suggests that establishing practicum placements in sport settings, in practice, may not be as difficult as perhaps perceived. However, despite participants indicating that sustainability was not extremely difficult, the majority of the placement opportunities only lasted one year. Thus, sustainability of these placements may be a challenge, as has been identified in qualitative work on the experiences of practicum staff establishing sport-specific filed placements (Beasley, 2022).

Research indicates that to sustain any type of higher educational program's partnership with outside organizations, systemic buy-in throughout both institutions is needed (Sandmann et al., 2009). When there is only buy-in from one individual from each organization, if one or both of those individuals leave, then the relationship has a high likelihood of dissolving. Similar challenges to sustainability have been identified in sport-based practicum partnerships (Beasley, 2022). Beasley (2022) suggests that systemic organizational buy-in only can happen if social work programs understand the need for social workers to provide services to people in sport, and if sport organizations understand what services social workers can bring to their organization. Therefore, social work faculty and staff need to educate and advocate for the subspecialty of sport social work both with their social work colleagues as well as with the sport organizations they are contacting. This can include education and advocacy through interdisciplinary efforts such as webinars, attending sport and social work conferences to discuss practicum opportunities in sport, and hosting and attending continuing education-unit opportunities. These efforts should intentionally include educational campaigns for athletic administrators prior to any conversations about social work internships to decrease misconceptions and eliminate some of the educational work on the front-end of initiating a practicum partnership. This type of advocacy can both grow the practicum and ensure longer lasting sustainability of established partnerships.

Overall, practicum placements can grow the subspeciality of sport social work, as they not only train more social workers to work with sport populations or use sport as interventions in their social work practice, but they also introduce sport organizations to the social work profession, which can lead to more social work roles being created in sport (Beasley et al., 2021; Beasley, 2022). In line with this call for growth, the findings of this study provide a base un-

Table 6

Practicum Placement Task Examples

Practice Level	Practicum Tasks
Micro	• Individual counseling/therapy: Providing direct 1:1 counseling or therapy athletes • Case management: Managing individual cases, assessing needs, making referrals • Supporting student success: Addressing barriers to academic success, providing tutoring/academic support • Wellness promotion: Educating on mental health, providing social-emotional support • Crisis intervention: In the moment crisis intervention with athletes • Mentorship: Serving as mentors/peer supports to athletes • Group work: Facilitating group counseling or psychoeducation • Professional skills development: Learning case management, applying CSWE competencies in practice • Referrals/linkages: Connecting athletes to additional services and resources as needed • Assessment: Initial assessment of athlete needs
Mezzo	• Group work: Facilitating support groups, psychoeducation groups, team trainings • Community engagement: Community outreach, establishing partnerships • Program development/evaluation: Contributing to program design, policies, administration, needs assessments • Education/training: Developing materials, leading seminars/workshops, teaching skills • Interdisciplinary collaboration: Attending multi-disciplinary meetings, collaborating across organizations • Wellness promotion: Organizing activities, workshops related to health/wellbeing • Family work: Working with athletes' families • Professional skills development: Applying CSWE competencies in program evaluation, grant writing • Peer support: Coordinating peer mentoring opportunities • Assessment: Assessing community needs
Macro	• Policy/Advocacy: Policy analysis, revision, implementation; Advocacy efforts • Program Development: Program development; Grants, fundraising, marketing, recruitment • Research: Assessing wellness programs, Community needs • Education/Training: Developing resources and trainings; Providing continuing education • Community Engagement: Community outreach, facilitation, collaboration • Awareness Building: Educating others on the role of social work with athletes • Journal Development: Working on editorial boards, production • Leadership/Management: Working with executive teams, committees

derstanding of what current practicums may look like, the process of establishing such practicums, and can provide insights on the future growth of these specialized practicum opportunities.

Although the current study offers one of the first explorations of the state of sport-based practicum education, it is not without its limitations. First and foremost, there was low response rate to the survey. Future surveys, perhaps one that is backed by CSWE, should target an increased sample size. Secondly, there were more public institutions represented than private institutions. With these two limitations taken together, the results may not be generalizable. Finally, the data are descriptive in nature, which offers many opportunities for future research. For example, research on student experiences in these types of placements can provide a needed prospective, and case studies on different types of internships can provide more nuanced insights, such as the differences of practicum placements in a sport organization versus practicum placements in clinical settings where sport is used as an intervention.

Conclusion

Practicum education is the signature pedagogy of social work education (CSWE, 2022) and can help professionalize the subspeciality of sport social work (Beasley, 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand the current state of sport-based practicum practicums at CSWE-accredited institutions. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that there are opportunities for growth of these types of practicum placements, including more case management, community, and macro-based placements. Continued advocacy for sport-based practicums can ensure that programs are graduating social workers prepared to work at the intersection of social work and sport.

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Establishing Social Work Practicum Placements in Sport Settings: A Constraints Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Social work in sport is a growing subspeciality of social work practice, and there is a need for social work programs to graduate social work students competent to work with athlete populations. Practicum opportunities in sport settings are an important part of such educational efforts. However, there are challenges to establishing these placements because sport is a nontraditional social work setting. This narrative inquiry explored the constraints of social work practicum staff in establishing practicum placement opportunities in sport organizations. Overall, participants had to make certain planning decisions based on the culture of the organization, which was different for elite versus youth and community-based sport organizations. These different types of organizational contexts also led to different challenges, although the strategy of remaining open and transparent about the expectations was used to overcome both the challenge of the elite sport system and the need to assure meaningful educational tasks for students in youth and community-based sport settings. Finally, participants needed to negotiate their positionalities to prove their understanding of sport culture to gain trust and credibility with the gatekeepers throughout the planning process. Participants experienced interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints, and had to implement various strategies to overcome those challenges.

Keywords: social work education; field education; internships; sport social work

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Social work in sport is a growing subspecialty of the social work profession (Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2000; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Even so, there are limited sport-specific educational opportunities for social work students looking to work in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022a; Magier et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2018). This may not only be a barrier for future social work students to get into sport practice but may also have consequences for competent care of athletes. Thus, social work practicum placements in sport settings can be a foundational step in further professionalizing sport social work practice.

However, practicum placements in sport settings are an example of a nontraditional social work setting, which provides unique challenges to creating and sustaining practicum partnerships. Both social work literature (e.g., Dhemba, 2012; Rhodes et al., 1999; Spector 2020, 2019), and sport management literature (e.g., Hardin et al., 2021; Odio et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021) have identified constraints to establishing meaningful internship opportunities for students. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand what constraints social work practicum staff must negotiate when establishing a social work placement in a sport setting. The findings of this study build on calls by social work scholars (e.g., Beasley et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2022; Magier et al., 2023) to create more specialized learning opportunities for sport social work by providing insights on how to create practicum partnerships with sport organizations.

Literature Review

Athletes across sport settings, from youth to elite, are at risk for diminished mental health (Beasley et al, 2024; Saxe & Hardin 2022; Strohle, 2017). Therefore, scholars have suggested interdisciplinary care teams are a needed model of care to meet the varying needs of athletes (e.g., Bader & Martin, 2019; McHenry et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2016). Social workers have long been considered a key professional in interdisciplinary care teams due to their training in case management and generalist practice (Craig et al., 2016; Harkey, 2017). Consequently, many social work practitioners and scholars have advocated for the inclusion of social workers in sport settings (McHenry et al., 2021; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2019). This growth has meant there is a need to incorporate sport social work into the general social work curricula (Clark et al., 2022). Specifically, scholars posit that as practicum experience is the key pedagogy of social work education (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015a), there needs to be concerted efforts to increase the availability of sport-specific practicum placement opportunities for social work students (Beasley et al., 2021, 2022; Magier et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2019). However, as social work in sport is still an emerging subspeciality of social work practice, these practicum placements are still nontraditional social work settings, which creates unique barriers.

Nontraditional Practicum Placements

Scholars define nontraditional practicum placements in social work as any setting where the social work student is not surrounded by other social work professionals (Jasper et al., 2013; Hughes, 2009) and where the organization has a core business not related to social work or welfare services (McLaughlin et al., 2015). In recent years, as the number of social work students globally has increased, social work programs are struggling to find suitable organizations to place students (Cleak & Smith, 2012; CSWE, 2015b). Consequently, there has been an increase in nontraditional practicum placements to meet the demand (Hek, 2012). These include libraries, museums, tax-preparation, and theater, where interns provide case management and work on community development initiatives (Aykanian et al., 2020; Elswick et al., 2015).

Even as nontraditional practicum placements are becoming more common, to the extent of this literature review, there are very few empirical studies looking at nontraditional practicum placements generally. There is some literature that has identified benefits to these nontraditional settings for social work students. For example, students can improve their social work skills (Scholar et al., 2012) and students get the opportunity to learn to operate in an interprofessional team (Hughes, 2009). Furthermore, due to having to educate other professionals on the social work profession, students may exit the placement with a better understanding of social work values and ethics (Jasper et al., 2013; Scholar et al., 2012) and the breadth of the social work profession (Rawsthorne et al., 2018).

There are also challenges, such as the hesitancy of students to be placed in nontraditional settings, and the use of a task supervisor, who is not a social worker (Elswick et al., 2015). Many social work students considering placements in nontraditional settings express their fear of not getting to practice social work skills (Rawsthorne et al., 2018). Therefore, practicum staff may have difficulty finding students willing to be placed in such settings. Then, practicum staff need to negotiate the challenges of having a professional who is not a social worker act as task supervisor for the social work student. Jasper and colleagues

(2013) found that some task supervisors lacked knowledge of the social work profession, which may impact student learning. Additionally, there are logistical challenges with this arrangement (Cleak & Zuchowksi, 2018; Zuchowski, 2016), such as student start dates, identifying the social work student's role in the organization, and additional pressure on task supervisors (McLaughlin et al., 2015), Even so, there appears to be a growing recognition that these nontraditional placements can provide valuable practicum experiences for social work students, and should be considered by all practicum staff (Scholar et al., 2012; Aykanian et al., 2020). As sport organizations do not currently extensively hire social workers (Menaker et al., 2023) and their core business is not social welfare services, sport organizations are a nontraditional practicum placement setting. Thus, there can be predicted challenges to implementing sport-based practicum placements, which may be compounded by the culture of sport.

Internships in Sport Settings

There are many documented benefits to internships in sport organizations for students looking to work in any aspect of the sport industry (Brown, 2018), including competitive advantage in the job market (Southall et al., 2003), bridging the gap between theory and practice (Young & Barker, 2004), professional networking (Koo et al., 2016), professional and career development (Sauder et al., 2016), and deciding if a career in sport is a good fit (Cunningham et al., 2005). Scholars have also found many benefits for sport organizations to host interns, as internships are vital to achieve their organizational mission and goals (Bradbury et al., 2021; Yoh & Choi, 2011). Internship opportunities provide seasonal employees for sport organizations as well as fill entry-level employment positions (Barefoot & Martinez, 2023; Cunningham et al., 2005). Internships are also an opportunity for organizations to develop future employees and to identify candidates for future employment opportunities, serving as an extended interview process for organizations and creating a potential applicant pool (Walker et al., 2021).

Brandon-Lai and colleagues (2016) found that students gain political skills, domain specific self-efficacy, sport industry identification, and future intentions of employment opportunities from internships. However, they added that these outcomes are moderated by the quality of the internship experience. For example, if students are not challenged in their internships, and instead assigned more menial tasks, they are less likely to have a positive experience (Stratta, 2004; Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, the quality of on-site supervision has also been linked to student outcomes (Hardin et al., 2021). Therefore, research has been done on establishing these opportunities effectively, especially as there are many challenges to implementing successful internships.

Williams (2004) identified four primary challenges to implementation of a successful internship in sport. First, there are several barriers to the recruitment of interns, as internships in sport organizations are very competitive (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2024). Many sport organizations have overly detailed recruitment criteria, as they expect the most high-quality interns. However, these qualifications may eliminate a large pool of students who may otherwise be successful. Additionally, sport organizations are most likely to accept interns through recommendations from individuals and departments in which they already have a relationship. Finally, time requirements often differ from that of academic schedules, and therefore student availability is a concern for many host organizations (Williams, 2004). Second, the professionalism and preparedness of a student is considered key for the host organization (Williams, 2004). Third, the structure of the internship can cause challenges. Many internships are unpaid, but many students need or would certainly like compensation of some sort for their time (Walker et al., 2021). Finally, the level of responsibility of the intern supervisor is many times a barrier. There needs to be clear expectations between the academic program and the supervisor on the expectations of the role before they hire an intern (Williams, 2004).

Williams (2004) concludes that one of the most important factors to a successful internship for both the student and the sport organization is a quality relationship between the internship site and the academic department, which ensures the student is getting a quality experience and that the sport organization is getting quality work from the student. This further emphasizes the importance of all partners in an effective internship experience (Brown et al., 2018) and underscores the importance of research on the experiences of these stakeholders in establishing internship opportunities.

Similar challenges, aside from challenges with working in nontraditional social work environments, have been documented in establishing social work practicum placement opportunities. Research has pointed to the need for more practicum instructor training (Spector & Infante, 2020), the lack of quality organizations and lack of qualified internship supervisors (Dhemba, 2012), the importance of the student-supervisor relationship (Bogo et al., 2022), and the limited sites that can offer opportu-

nities for a generalist practice experience (Teigiser, 2009). To meet these challenges, Wertheimer and Sodhi (2014) present a model that places practicum coordinators as the primary liaison between the social work department and the community and host organizations. Similarly, Boitel and Fromm (2014) contend that the integrated practicum contract, developed by the university's practicum placement office that outlines learning expectations is the foundation to a successful practicum experience for the organization and the student intern, as it explicitly states what is expected of the internship or task supervisor. This positions practicum offices and staff as one of the key organizational players that are influential in creating new and innovative practicum partnerships (Sowa, 2009). Social work practicum coordinators have a prominent role in establishing effective internships in both social work and sport settings. Therefore, the focus of this research was examining, through the lens of constraints theory, the challenges and constraints they faced in working with sport organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Constraints Theory

Constraints are circumstances or factors that limit, prohibit, or prevent someone from participating in or pursuing an opportunity. Constraint theory has its conceptual foundation in leisure studies dating to the early 1960s in examining why people did not participate in outdoor sports and recreation activities (Ferris, 1962; Jackson et al., 1993, 2000; Mueller et al., 1962). Crawford and Godbey (1987) continued to develop the conceptual model of constraints and developed three categories of constraints: (a) intrapersonal – factors that limit participation related to individual attributes, (b) interpersonal – factors that limit participation as the result of relationships with others, and (c) structural – factors that limit participation due to the situational and environment aspects.

Research in sport has broadly examined several constraint dimensions that may negatively influence participation in a plethora of different types of sporting events as well as the influence of motivations and emotional attachment may have on constraints (e.g., Anaza et al., 2013; Funk et al., 2009; Kim & Trail, 2010; Ridinger & Funk, 2007; Trail & Kim, 2011). This research highlights the notion that sport organizations and administrators would have some control on alleviating or diminishing these barriers. This same concept can be applied to the current study in the examination of social work students who want to pursue internships in sport organizations. As social work internships in sport settings are a relatively new concept, social work programs may face intra-, inter-, and structural constraints in trying to place students in sport settings, and field practicum staff may have some control in diminishing such barriers. Therefore, constraints theory was used to understand the experiences of social work practicum staff establishing practicum placements in sport organizations.

Method

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand what constraints social work practicum staff have to negotiate during the planning process when establishing a social work internship in a sport setting. Narrative inquiry is the investigation of human experience through individuals' stories (Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2020). Therefore, data collection and analysis centered on participants' planning stories of establishing practicum placements with sport organizations. The study was approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants

Participants were recruited via the Alliance for Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) listserv, the CSWE listserv, from professional contacts, and from publicly available university email addresses of practicum placement staff. Recruitment was based on purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2015), where specific characteristics need to be met prior to participation in the study. The criterion for this study were social work practicum staff employed, in a faculty or administrative role, at CSWE-accredited social work departments that has either currently placed or has placed in the past a bachelors-level (BSW) or masters-level (MSW) social work student at a sport organization. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Data Collection

Participants completed the informed consent form prior to the first interview. Participants participated in two narrative interviews: the narration phase, where the researcher can ask participants to tell their story of the experience of interest (Clandinin & Johnson, 2017), in this case establishing an internship in a sport organization, and the conversation phase, when the interview becomes more semi-structured, and the researcher can ask clarifying questions and further elicit stories from their participants. Overall, the narrative interviews focused on collecting stories about the planning process of practicum placements with sport organizations. After completion of the second interview, the first author transcribed and de-identified all interviews. The average recorded length of all interviews was 57 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data was then transferred to Google Sheets for narrative analysis. The first phase of analysis focused on separating the data into story stanzas (Labov, 1972; Riessman, 2008). Then, a narrative thematic analysis was completed to analyze the actual content of the story, identifying themes in each individual story and then themes across stories that create a larger narrative (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) notes that there are four main differences between other types of thematic analyses and narrative thematic analysis. First, prior theory guides the analytical process in narrative thematic analysis. Specifically, this study was guided by constraints theory (e.g., Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Second, sequence is preserved, and third, analysis still attended to time and place, which are essential elements of narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); thus, this narrative thematic analysis was completed in story stanzas. Fourth, narrative thematic analysis remains case-centered (Riessman, 2008), and in this case, social work practicum placements in sport settings. This preserves the narrative way of knowing, which organizes knowledge through sequences rather than through categorizing (Riessman, 1993).

Fidelity of the Narrative Data

Kim (2016) argues that the fidelity of narrative research lies in the researchers' honoring of the participants words. Specifically, this was accomplished in this study through member-checking, as well as the aforementioned process of analyzing data in story stanzas, and then presenting findings as contextual stories, rather than solely as decontextualized quotes. In this project, member-checking took place at two points in the research process (Brit et al., 2016; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Each participant was sent a copy of the initial transcription after each of their interviews, and they were asked to check the transcript for accuracy and make any needed changes. The participants were then sent a copy of the consolidated results after all analysis was complete to review. They were asked to assess the accuracy of their narratives and the interpreted results, and to make any suggestions for changes or edits to items that may have

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Licensed	Highest Degree	Position
Dante	Male	White	53	Yes	PhD	Associate Director of Practicum (Former)/Faculty
Ella	Female	Caucasian	46	Yes	MSW	Assistant Practicum Coordinator
Leo	Male	White	67	Yes	MSW	Practicum Instructor/Practicum Coordinator
Merritt	Female	White	39	Yes	MSW	Practicum Coordinator
Ryan	Male	Caucasian	70	Yes	MSW	Practicum Instructor/Practicum Coordinator
Sarah	Female	White	42	Yes	MSW	Director of Practicum Education
Toni	Female	Caucasian	54	Yes	MSW	Assistant Practicum Director
Ty	Female	German American	53	Formerly	MSW	Assistant Dean of Practicum Education

Note. All information was self-identified by participants.

been misinterpreted. One participant responded that they did not have edits, two participants responded with further edits to clarify their stories, and five participants did not respond.

Positionality Statement

Due to the constructivist nature of this narrative inquiry (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007), it is important for the authors to acknowledge their positionality, which influenced each part of the research process. The lead researcher is a licensed social worker, as well as holds a PhD in sport management. This interdisciplinary training allowed for interpretation of the planning process from both a social work and sport management understanding. The second author is a tenured faculty member in a sport management program at a large university in the Southeast. He has extensive experience in administering internships in sport settings for students pursuing degrees in sport management. He has also assisted in cultivating and developing internship opportunities for students. He also has experience working in the collegiate environment, so he has an understanding of the sport culture.

Findings

Three themes were constructed from participants' planning stories: (a) insider/outsider status, (b), differences between elite and community sport, and (c) gatekeeping.

Insider/Outsider Status

Throughout the planning stories of the participants, it became clear that participants were coming into the partnership as outsiders. However, every participant negotiated their outsider positionality by positioning themselves as an insider to sport culture. Each participant discussed their own realization that social work belongs in sport contexts, by discussing their own sporting experiences. Ella, for example, shared how her own experience as a college athlete opened her eyes to need for athletes to have access to behavioral health services:

> I started out at (a university) and played for a year and then redshirted my sophomore year, and then I transferred to (another university), and then played three years there. So, in looking at the transition of transfers and seeing the support that they could have been given…there was a lot of academic support, and what I saw with my teammates, there was a lot of academic support, but not social-emotional support.

Sarah similarly connected the work of a colleague focused on fan etiquette to her own experience, reflecting, "As a parent, even personally, I'm just kind of fascinated with that whole thing. Going to my kiddos' sports and seeing the wide variety of spectator behavior and how that influences athletes." Other participants spoke about moments during their sport fandom that opened their eyes to the human issues that athletes face. Dante, for instance, remembered the story of a star basketball player for his undergraduate institution: "...he was hot property. And two years later, he was homeless and penniless. And you know, I remember feeling like something's wrong with this scenario where someone can be celebrated so much, and then the next thing, you know, they're out in the street." Every participant shared their own, insider story of social work in sport, which was influential in their own advocacy for sport social work.

Interestingly, participants used such insider experiences to gain initial buy-in for sport-based practicum placements. This was done in three ways. First, for participants who had a background as an athlete, they used their athlete experiences to gain buy-in. Second, some participants strategically adapted part of the sport culture in their negotiations. And third, for participants with limited or no background in sport, they found an insider to help them in the planning process. For participants who had a background in sport, their identity as an athlete was key to initially gaining acceptance from the sport organizations' gatekeepers. Ella, who was a collegiate athlete, explained how her athletic background helped her gain acceptance,

> I used a lot of my own experiences as a student-athlete in college and kind of sharing what my experience was, what I saw, and so I had to rely a lot on my own athletic experience, and there was a lot of banter about everyone's own athletic experience. So, that was a common shared experience that made it all relatable, and not just some random person coming in (to the athletic department) saying, "Hey, I want to have interns here."

Merritt similarly recalled that her experience as a former student-athlete helped her in the initial conversations that she had with the athletic department at her campus, stating, "There are just those pieces that I think for what we're doing, we're working with (athletics), that you know about in a different way than just maybe hearing about it, just having that experience. So, I think maybe it legitimizes a little bit." Ryan explained that when he first began working with sport organizations, he "wasn't as versed" in sport culture, but could rely on "my own experience in coaching" to contextualize his conversations with the athletic department at his institution.

Another strategy some participants used to position oneself as an insider was to match the business-like nature of sport organizations, which was different than approaching a traditional social work organization. Dante, for example, discussed how in working with more business-oriented organizations, such as elite sport organizations, he and his colleague approached discussions about practicum placements from a "closer mentality." Merritt shared a similar sentiment, recalling a story of her first meeting with a community-based sport organization, whose program director had a background in elite college sport. She explained,

> In the beginning, (they were) kind of standoffish, just like, "Social work?" You can just tell. You get the vibe (they are) not really sure. So, I'm selling and working it, then we get to the end, they were like, "We don't have a social worker here," or something, and I said, "You don't have one yet!" And they looked at me, and had bought in.

Merritt reflected that she believed this approach worked because it was "strong and direct."

Finally, for individuals without a background in sport, they relied on relationships with insiders to help them establish practicum placements in a sport organization. Both Sarah and Toni relied on relationships with social work faculty members who worked with sport organizations already. For example, Ty used the insider perspective of a colleague who was "50% with our program and 50% there (in the athletic department)" to assure the success of the practicum placement. As she explained, this colleague told her, "'In order for this (the practicum placement) to happen, we need to do all these things.' So, I said, 'Okay. We will do all those things.'" Thus, although participants approached negotiating their outsider positionality in different ways, positioning oneself as an insider was an essential step in the planning process.

Differences Between Elite and Community Sport

Throughout each participant's planning stories, there were clear differences between the process of planning a practicum placement with an elite sport organization, primarily collegiate athletic departments and professional sport organizations, and the process of planning a practicum placement with community-based sport organizations, such as youth sports and high school sports. Many of these differences were related to the cultural differences of organizations.

Several of the participants consistently discussed the culture of elite athletics as a closed system. Ryan described the difficulty in gaining access to the athletic department, for both him and for students who may be interested in an internship, as "I don't know if it's like this all over, but the athletic department here is sort of a cloistered unit. They don't like to talk about what happens or what they do inside the athletic department." Indeed, a few participants, when speaking about the culture of elite collegiate athletics, likened it to the military. Laughing somewhat, Ty explained,

> Athletics is…kind of an entity unto itself, a fortress. I think last time I made the parallel to a military culture, like they have their way of doing things, and I don't mean to place blame at all. I think that the reality is, they are dealing with a lot of different tensions and pressures. They've got the NCAA, rightfully, monitoring them, and making sure that they're held accountable, so that means that they have a lot of rules and structure in place, so it's a big bureaucracy. And it is insular by design. It's designed to kind of protect the players, to protect the program to protect the coaches. In terms of a closed system versus an open system. It's a much more closed system.

Ty's description of the athletic department as a closed, military-like system opened her story about how, it "just felt different" than work with other agencies, even though the process of establishing the practicum placement with the athletic department was similar (i.e., same timeline, same official forms). Ty concluded that her work with the athletic department on campus was more about gaining appropriate approval. She stated, "In many ways, it was a more, certainly more confidential space, so it was like I was applying for higher levels of clearance with the FBI."

Tellingly, some participants also discussed that the closed off nature of elite athletics limited the ability to establish a partnership. For example, Dante, in describing his experience of trying to establish a practicum placement in his former institution's athletic department, told the story of why the placement never happened, even though they were able to get an initial meeting. He began the story describing the athletic department as a "closed system" and one that does not want "prying eyes." He continued, recounting a meeting he had with the athletic department's academic advising staff,

> I remember doing a presentation to them, and just kind of talking with their leadership, and it just got squashed, and we were really hopeful that it could happen, and we kind of pushed back to where like, "…the (academic)

> advis(ing), some of that could be a good internship, but we also would like to do some counseling with the students. We would like to be involved with them in other ways." And they were like, "That's a little too much for us." So, they were going to prescribe the terms of how they wanted the services to be delivered. I think they were concerned about what might happen if others got involved. So, it ultimately didn't transpire.

To overcome the challenges of working with a closed off and protective system, many participants pointed to the importance of being explicit and transparent in the planning process. For example, Ty stated she had to be prepared, which starts with "sharing lots of documents." She continued explaining, "Which you know of course we always do, but I got the impression that they read them." In reflecting on the formality of this process. Ella, who has worked on placements both in her institution's athletic department and at a local community college athletic department, stated that her main strategy was to validate the athletic departments' concerns about bringing in a social work intern: "I did a lot of validating and reassuring about respecting the culture and understanding and demonstrating that I had enough awareness to know, so really, that was really the kind of main thing I tried to convey."

Many of the participants also placed students in community and youth sport organizations, where sport was used as one of the primary forms of intervention. Interestingly, whereas the stories surrounding elite sport focused on the closed off nature of the organization, the stories surrounding community sport did not indicate challenges establishing a partnership with the organizations, but challenges ensuring interns were getting the opportunities to engage in meaningful learning activities. For example, Leo told a story of a student he was working with who was placed in a youth sport organization that used squash as an activity with the participants. The student intern was initially not getting much specific social work-related learning activities,

> The first student that was there said, "I really like it there, and I love working with the kids, but I'm basically just playing with them, and they're teaching me how to play squash, and the kids love that. They'd say, "Oh, yeah, come on, (student name), we're going to show you how to do it." And that was the way of them to sort of test her out and build a relationship with her, and they always want her to play squash. So, she was willing to do that, but then I had to work with the practicum instructor and have a meeting and say, "Now let's see what we could do to move this to the next level."

Like with the elite sport organizations, overcoming the challenges of working with community sport organizations also involved clear communication and expectations so that the participants were certain the interns were having meaningful work experiences, such as Leo's follow-up conversation with the administrator at the youth sport organization. Sarah also explained that her worries that a student may not participate in meaningful social work activities were quickly quelled by how organized the on-site task supervisor was: "One of the things that (the practicum instructor) did that I liked is he actually typed up a weekly to-do list for her. So, in addition to her learning contract, and not very many instructors or agency supervisors do that, so that was kind of unusual, and very much appreciated for her." Thus, clear communication and expectations were similarly important in work with community sport organizations.

Overall, the cultural context of the sport organizations, whether a community sport organization or an elite sport organization, was clearly important to participants' telling of their planning stories. Tellingly, many of the orientations of their stories focused on describing the culture of the organization or of sport generally to contextualize their reasons for certain actions in their planning process.

Gatekeeping

The theme of gatekeeping appeared solely in the planning stories related to elite sport organizations. Gatekeeping happened in two ways across the stories of the participants who worked with elite sport organizations. First, the participants experienced gatekeeping themselves in that it was difficult to get initial meetings with a sport administrator, so they stressed finding the "right" person. Second, many of the participants discussed how there was gatekeeping related to student access to internships in elite sport organizations, as organizations would only take certain types of students.

In describing the general process of establishing practicum placements, Sarah captured the importance of finding the person who is the gatekeeper in the organization, or the person who can make the decision if the organization can take an intern. She suggests that a successful practicum partnership begins by "getting to the right person." Leo agreed. In recounting his initial efforts to establish a relationship with the athletic department at his institution. He recalled being strategic in choosing to reach out to one of the assistant ath-

letic directors, who had a background in social work and was foundational in setting up the department's student counseling services. Due also to this administrator's close relationship to the head football coach, Leo knew that "he was a person that I wanted to cultivate a relationship with."

Dante's experience setting up a placement with the local Major League Baseball (MLB) team also exemplified the importance of meeting with the right people, which he described as the decision makers. He recalled the meeting he had with the sport administrators about calculating the payment for an outside social work practicum instructor, because the organization did not have a social worker on staff, as well as for a stipend for the social work intern. He described this conversation as,

> I remember distinctly with the (local MLB team), we were sitting in the conference room, which is just unbelievable, having this conversation with their management around the program, and you know, they had me ask the closing question, "Can you pay for a instructor? Can you pay the stipend?" They said yes to the stipend, no to the instructor…They could say on the spot whether they were going to do it or not.

He concluded that this was a benefit of working with an elite sport organization, as, in those initial meetings, he was already meeting with the organization's senior staff. Ella shared a similar experience that highlighted the importance of getting the buy-in from the right person. In her work the athletic department at her university, she had spoken to many different individuals in athletics in the hopes to set up the internship, but it was not until she got a meeting with an assistant athletic director, who held one of the highest positions in the athletic department, that the internship opportunity was established. As she described, "Everyone kept saying, "Yeah, yeah," like, 'We've tried, we're trying,' (but) then I met with the assistant athletic director, and she was full on board." As Ella's story suggests, it was essential for the participants working with elite sport organizations to find the decision-maker, or the gatekeeper, whose approval was needed for the practicum placement to be established.

Ella's work with the assistant athletic director also exemplified the gatekeeping that happened with students. In her initial conversations with the assistant athletic director about the possibility of a social work internship in the athletic department, Ella stated specifically, "And (the assistant athletic director) said, 'I don't think this could work with anyone who's not a former student-athlete or an athlete themselves.'" Both Ryan and Leo mentioned similar attitudes from the athletic department at their institution. Ryan described the view of the athletic department as, "They like to pick their students, they always (have a background) with sports." Leo believed this was an ethical dilemma, as he explained his experience with the athletic department,

> I wanted the opportunities to do a placement to be open to everybody, but they wanted more, at the athletic department, more of an elite athlete. Now our other placements…they were open to taking anybody, which I really liked. But in, at (the university), we did have a problem with them wanting just the elite athletes, and many times they wanted somebody that they knew already, which I thought was really sort of an exclusive club attitude, you know, like, "Well, you're in the club," you know, "We'll take you. The other people we don't want."

Ryan agreed this was an ethical dilemma, stating "In my mind, that's a little bit of a dilemma, because I don't think it really conforms to (diversity, equity, and inclusion) principles." In recounting a story of placing a recent student, who was a former soccer player, in the athletic department, Ryan reflected on his own role in the process,

> I referred a student there last year, who, well did play soccer, but I told her to contact our connection (in the athletic department), so I said, "You want to meet her." So, they want people with that kind of background. So, I'm kind of facilitating that process, but it's a dilemma for me, how do students get referred. They don't like it to be completely open, because then, like some of our placements that become very popular, they don't want to have to sift through 25 applications for one spot, (or) interview 25 students for one spot.

Another diversity, equity, and inclusion ethical issue was raised by Ty. Ty described the athletic department at her university as, "Almost all of the employees within (university's) athletics are White, and the majority, of the employees that are within (university's) athletics are White. The majority of athletes, student-athletes, are BIPOC." Therefore, she discussed how it was important to place BIPOC student interns in the athletic department to work with the student-athletes. However, due to the culture of the athletic department, this has proven difficult. Ty described one specific instance of trying to place a student in a placement at the athletic department,

> We had a candidate for that placement, who was a young Black male and he applied for the placement. He and I met and

> talked about it individually, and I was encouraging this and that and my understanding from him was that he didn't really want that placement…he went a different direction, and it seemed a really good fit for him. That was my take on it. But then, (a colleague) reached back after the fact, and said, "What happened? How come this guy didn't get it?" You know, "Why did they pick another White female?" And so, we had a frank conversation about that, and we continue to advocate and try to direct BIPOC candidates to them, because that would better match the predominant population.

Interestingly, both Ty and Ella spoke about how they had to be selective in the students they spoke to about the opportunities for a practicum placement in a sport organization due to the limited number of partnerships. Ella shared her approach to recruiting students for sport-specific practicum placements: "I have to kind of be careful, because I don't want to talk about (it) too much, because then if I get, you know, five or six students and they really want to, and right now we have barely one or two (partnerships with sport organizations)."

Taken together, the protective nature of the elite sport culture led to an increased need for the social work practicum staff to identify and get acceptance from the right gatekeeper, as well as the sport organization's preference for a specific type of intern, which ultimately hindered equitable access to these internships. This inequitable access may then be further exacerbated by the limited number of internships available, leading some practicum staff to not advertise the internships to all students.

Discussion

The findings suggest participants in this study faced intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints when working to establish a non-traditional social work internship with a sport organization. It is also important to consider that the constraints must be negotiated in a hierarchical manner (Koo et al., 2017). Intrapersonal constraints must first be overcome in that there is an awareness that sport organizations are viable organizations for social work practicums, which ultimately stemmed from the participants negotiating their own positionality. Relationships and trust must then be established with sport organizations' staff members and athletes to negotiate interpersonal constraints. These relationships are critical to gain access for the opportunity for an internship. Finally, structural constraints must be overcome as the organizational structure influences the planning experiences. Therefore, practicum placement coordinators need to have an awareness of the dynamics of the various athletic structures.

Intrapersonal Constraints

Intrapersonal constraints reference the challenges that one must overcome individually in the planning process (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The first such challenge or constraint suggested in the literature is the lack of awareness that sport is a viable option for a social work practicum placement site. Sport is an emerging area of social work practice so many practicum placement staff members may not be aware of the opportunities in the sport industry (Magier et al., 2023). The simple notion that sport (or recreation) organizations present an opportunity for practicum placement sites may not be known to social work BSW or MSW staff members. Further, students typically do not enter the social work profession with aspirations of working in sports organizations, and they are unaware of this career path in social work (Beasley et al., 2021). Traditional practicum placements may be associated with schools, nursing homes, state agencies, emergency shelters, rehabilitation centers, and other community serving organizations. This lack of recognition by both educators and students is perpetuated by the absence of the topic in the social work higher education setting (Beasley et al., 2021; Magier et al., 2023). There are classes devoted toward social work opportunities in other settings, such as school social work (Bosma et al., 2010), but there are limited classes or class modules focused on the sport setting. Thus, there is an overall lack of recognition of the sport setting itself as an opportunity by practicum placement coordinators, students, and faculty.

In participants' planning stories, they each identified as an insider to sport in some way (e.g., fan, coach, etc.), which opened their eyes to the role of social work in sport. This insider status was then used to gain initial buy-in for the practicum placements, especially as they were seen as an outsider in many of the elite sport organizations. Such an identity negotiation between insider and outside status in sport was the primary way participants overcome the intrapersonal constraint of outsider status, which could otherwise have limited personal acceptance of the emerging field of social work in sport or have created barriers to initial buy-in from sport organizations. True to the hierarchical nature of constraints (Koo et al, 2017), once the practicum staff members recognized the role of social work in sport and positioned themselves as an insider, they then had to navigate the intrapersonal constraint of the lack

of trust of gatekeepers, which required developing a relationship with the gatekeepers at those organizations.

Interpersonal Constraints

Many participants began building relationships with potential placement sites through cold-calling, meeting individuals at professional events (i.e., conferences, alumni events), and tapping into the networks of their friends and colleagues. Trust in the relationships were established through being open, transparent, in consistent contact, and setting clear expectations of the internship partnership. This takes continual relationship building, frequent interactions, and open communication between all parties involved. Sport management literature has also suggested that building trust and rapport through the setting of clear expectations is the foundation to any successful interorganizational partnership (Babiak & Willem, 2016).

Throughout the participants' planning stories, the network of individuals they built through these relationships was an important resource in establishing practicum placements, whether their connections became practicum instructors themselves or helped them get an "in" with a sport organization. Developing and leveraging one's social capital, defined in management (Lin, 2001) and sport management (Wicker et al., 2016) literature as someone's relationships and social network, seems the first step in building social work internships in sport organizations. Overall, at the intrapersonal level, participants in this study invested time and resources to educate themselves to build stronger relationships and a larger network that supports the social work in sport movement, which ultimately created more buy-in and opportunities for social work internships.

Structural Constraints

The third aspect of gaining access is the willingness of both the organization itself to want the services provided by social workers and allow for the practicum placement of an intern, and for the social work department to accept such a structure of an internship. Although there has been a shift in the sport industry towards prioritizing the well-being of athletes and coaches in sport (Waller et al., 2016), overall organizational commitment is still lacking (Beasley et al., 2021), perhaps due to the mental health stigma prominent in sport culture (Breslin et al., 2019; Kern et al., 2017). Similarly, there has been more and more acceptance of athletes as a population of need by the social work profession (Dean & Rowan, 2014), but there is still some resistance, as discussed by participants in this study. Limited organizational buy-in, in both the social work and sport professions, could result in loss of internship placements.

Overall, from the organization's side, there are multiple layers of organizational structures that must be negotiated prior to a sport organization becoming a viable placement site. Part of this negotiation at the structural level involves getting approval throughout the organization for a practicum placement. So, the practicum placement coordinator must not only gain the trust and confidence of the initial contact within department but also other administrators, such as coaches. It seemed the most successful strategy used by participants was presenting themselves as an insider to sport, by sharing their own sporting experiences. However, such an insider status also led to ethical issues around student selection. This included the practicum staff having to navigate the organization wanting the "right" student, which was compounded by diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges reproduced in both sport (e.g., Singer et al., 2022) and social work (e.g., Black-Deer & Ocampo, 2022), suggesting structural constraints, such as racial bias, needed to be negotiated by participants.

The cultural contexts of the organization also created unique structural constraints. Specifically, the different organizational contexts of community-based sport organizations versus elite sport organizations created different challenges in the planning process. Elite sport organizations were significantly more closed off than youth and community sport organizations, related to the protective nature of the organizations. Several of the participants in their story orientations described elite sport organizations as "military-like." The intersection of elite sport culture and military culture is not uncommon in sport management and sport studies literature, with scholars examining the militarization of American sport (i.e., Ternes, 2016; Vasquez III, 2020).

At a practical level, the participants in this study were noticing and experiencing the military-like culture of elite sport. On the other hand, youth and community sport organizations were not closed off and were easier for participants to establish initial relationships. Even so, challenges centered on ensuring that social work interns still had opportunities to practice the CSWE (2015a) competencies. Consequently, in work with youth and community sport organizations, the participants were more intentional in assessing the student learning activities through formal and informal formative evaluations, whereas more work was needed to be done on the frontend with elite sport organizations.

Implications

For social work practicum staff looking to continue working with sport organizations or for social work practicum staff interested in beginning to place social work students interns in sport organizations, the findings speak to the complexity of the planning process, especially with the gatekeeping apparent in elite sport organizations. Finding ways to position oneself as an insider to sport culture could be an effective strategy in building initial relationships. However, building organizational buy-in and commitment may be the most difficult. It is recommended to build relationships with sport management and kinesiology faculty and educating them on the social work profession and social work in sport. Then, bring these sport management and kinesiology faculty into the internship planning process to leverage their insider knowledge and understanding of sport as well as their already established relationships with sport organizations.

To overcome all levels of constraints, the participants planning stories also highlight the importance of deconstructing stigma around social work in sport, both in the sport setting and in the social work field. Therefore, social work practicum staff must include education and advocacy efforts in their planning processes through interdisciplinary efforts such as webinars, conferences, courses, and continuing education-unit opportunities (Antle et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022b). These efforts should intentionally include educational campaigns for athletic administrators prior to any conversations about social work internships to decrease misconceptions and eliminate some of the educational work at the beginning of building of the relationships.

Furthermore, due to the competitive nature of internships in sport organizations and the fact that sport organizations tend to base future hiring of interns on experiences with past interns (Williams, 2004), it may be that sport organizations are not accepting social work (or other behavioral health professions) interns due to previous negative experiences. To combat this, there is an onus on social work education to effectively prepare students to work with sport populations. This can include educating students in coursework on psychometrically validated assessment tools (e.g., The International Olympic Committee [IOC] Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 [SMHAT-1] and Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 [SMHRT-1]; Gouttebarge et al., 2021) and their use and limitations with specific athlete populations (e.g., Cohen-Young, 2024; Gavrilova et al., 2024), as well as evidence-based interventions with sport populations (see for example the special issue published in the *Sport Social Work Journal*; Beasley & Newman, 2024). These efforts can be woven into the traditional social work curricula or can be in the form of full classes dedicated to sport social work (Clark, 2022). Indeed, faculty and administrators should continually evaluate curriculum to ensure the needs of students are met, and emerging topics are being included in the curriculum (Pate et al., 2023). Such education could set the foundation for a social work intern to have a successful practicum experience and subsequently the sport organization may be more willing to host future social work interns.

Conversely, athletic administrators, with support from the social work practicum staff, should consider including this information in athlete orientations and training, so that athletes have the knowledge of who is providing services (Beasley et al., 2022a; Beasley et al., 2021). These orientation sessions can include education on the full scope of practice and services that social workers can provide. This will help decrease stigma and assist in establishing relationships. Ultimately, as the social work profession continues to expand into nontraditional settings, such as sport, social work practicum departments will also need to continue to innovate.

Limitations and Future Research

Social work in sport is an ever-growing field, and there has been an increase in the number of social work departments offering sport-specific learning opportunities in sport settings since the time of data collection. Exemplifying this growth, the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) released a guide related to creating practicum partnerships with sport organizations and in the sport settings (Beasley et al., n.d.). Therefore, data collected in this study does not capture such growth, and several participants could only speak to experiences working with one or two organizations. Future studies could thus provide more insight on the growth of these internships—including perhaps more discussions of the success of sustainability efforts. Furthermore, due to the infancy of opportunities at the time of data collection, recruitment efforts focused on practicum staff who worked with any type of sport organization. Future research could then benefit from using case study methodology to focus on the nuances of practicum placements in different settings, such as youth sport organizations, college sport organizations, elite sport organizations, as well as placements where sport is used as an intervention in social work practice.

Conclusion

As sport social work continues to grow, there is an increased need for sport-based social work practicum placements, both to the meet the educational needs of social work students and to meet the need of sport organizations. The insights offered by participants in this study can provide current and future social work practicum staff working with sport organizations insight on navigating the complexities of the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints in such planning processes.

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

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Abstract

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

Stakeholder	Recommendations
Social Work Practicum Students	• Immerse in Athletic Culture Early: Understand the athletic department's structure, language, and values before placement. • Foster Resilience and Reflective Practice: Cultivate self-awareness to navigate role ambiguity and interdisciplinary tensions. • Embrace Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Build relationships with coaches, trainers, and psychologists for holistic student-athlete support.

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Stakeholder	Recommendations
Student-Athletes	• Normalize Mental Health Conversations: Engage in open discussions and initiatives around mental health and systemic inequities. • Utilize Available Support: Access services such as counseling, academic support, and financial literacy guidance; recognize social work students as "resource navigators." • Give Feedback to Inform Services and Programming: Offer honest input to shape responsive and student-centered services.
Athletic Department	• Institutionalize Mental Health and Social Justice Services: Embed social workers to foster well-being and reduce stigma. • Facilitate Orientation and Access: Provide protocols to help social work students integrate into the department. • Support Interprofessional Collaboration: Clarify roles, foster communication, and align services across departments. • Champion Student-Athlete Well-Being Through Partnerships: Invest in permanent roles focused on transitions and biopsychosocial needs.
Social Work Practicum Education Program	• Build Formal Partnerships: Establish reciprocal agreements with athletic departments with clear goals and supervision structures. • Develop Site-Specific Practicum Tools: Offer tailored resources and training for students in athletic settings. • Prepare Students for Policy Shifts: Promote adaptability and resilience by embedding reflective and emotional intelligence practices into the curriculum.
Preceptor (Onsite Non-Social Work Supervisor)	• Maintain Consistent Presence and Guidance: Provide daily support and communicate with off-site practicum instructors. • Foster a Welcoming Environment: Assist students with integration by sharing departmental culture and dynamics. • Clarify Expectations and Scope: Collaborate with practicum education programs to define roles and align activities with social work competencies.
Practicum Instructor (Degreed Social Worker)	• Foster Reflective and Ethical Practice: Provide regular supervision emphasizing ethical decision-making and theory-to-practice integration. • Adapt Goals to Site Realities: Revise learning plans based on changing conditions to ensure meaningful outcomes. • Facilitate Cultural Competency: Support students in understanding athletic culture while maintaining social work ethics. • Support and Encourage Advocacy and Empowerment: Promote advocacy and intervene as needed to protect student learning and well-being.

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

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

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

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

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

Athletic Department Culture

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

However, the intricate nature of the athletic department's organizational culture can make it difficult to implement change effectively. For instance, there has been a long-standing debate about whether college sports are a character-building educational activity for the student-athlete or a funding opportunity for the university system (Thelin, 2011). This highlights the complex and controversial role of a social worker within the complicated establishment. The complexity of the work intensifies when there is a lack of thorough research regarding the diverse values, norms, and perspectives of each team within the department (Schroeder, 2010; Singer & Cunningham, 2012; Beyer & Hannah, 2000). For a social worker, grasping their role within the athletic department's hierarchy—and appreciating the cultural significance of its values and beliefs—is essential. This deep understanding is not just important; it is crucial for effectively facilitating even the smallest changes within the department (Singer & Cunningham, 2012).

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

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

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

Social Work Students in the Athletic Department

Social workers considering a position within an athletic department can experience numerous inquiries regarding their profession, responsibilities, and intended contributions to the department. Integrating social work within such an organization poses significant challenges, particularly in cases where the department has not previously employed a social worker and lacks an established social services infrastructure (Bates & Kratz, 2022). Research indicates that social workers from diverse backgrounds often encounter difficulties related to organizational structure, professional identity, and hierarchical systems (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Many social workers have described feeling perplexed while working within this system as they advocate for the needs of athletes and their professional interests (Newman et al., 2022). Furthermore, at times, social workers are viewed apprehensively and may not be given a place on the hierarchal pyramid that allows their voices to be heard (Newman et al., 2022). Collaboration can be challenging, as their client-focused approach may sometimes conflict with the institutional framework of the athletic department yet remains essential (Aron, 2022). Developing trusting relationships is critical, as it fosters empowerment and advances client-centered methodologies despite institutional barriers (Bates & Kratz, 2022). By emphasizing relational dynamics, social workers can better address their student-athlete's immediate needs while contributing to developing more responsive and humane institutional frameworks. This emphasis on interpersonal connections ultimately facilitates transformative outcomes for individuals, underscoring the profound impact of nurturing relationships within social work practice.

Social workers are vital members of an interdisciplinary team in an athletic department. They advocate for decisions that affect all members and can contribute to clients' well-being (NASW, 2021). Within the context of athletics, social workers can identify and respond to critical issues such as psychological distress (Moreland et al., 2018), incidents of sexual violence (McCray, 2015), crises and suicide prevention (Rao et al., 2015), career-related and educational opportunity stress (Wendling et al., 2018), as well as social conflicts (Ludvigson, 1997). Through their collaboration with athletic department personnel and coaching staff, social workers provide invaluable resources and support mechanisms that empower student-athletes to tackle challenges while cultivating effective coping strategies. Furthermore, they are pivotal in advocating for policies and programs that create a healthy and inclusive environment for all participants. Thus, social workers enhance a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting the athletic department and its student-athletes, addressing their diverse needs both on and off the field.

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

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

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

Practicum Instructor and Practicum Student Supervisory Relationship

Practicum education is a crucial component of social work students' learning experience, allowing them to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical situations (CSWE, 2015). At times, the term "supervisor" may be used in lieu of "practicum instructor." The practicum instructor is pivotal in guiding and supporting the student throughout their practicum placement, as a mentor, advisor, and supervisor. The practicum instructor's responsibilities include providing practice teaching and feedback on the student's practice skills, monitoring their progress to ensure all competency-based learning requirements, and supporting their professional development. Collaboratively, practicum instructors and students establish goals and objectives for social work practicum performance evaluation. Students who encounter challenges during the placement can rely on their practicum instructors for support, resources, and expertise. When needed, the practicum instructor can be an advocate for the student's educational experience in the practicum environment to ensure that the learning activities include both the student's learning interests, social work education competency-based expectations, and harmony with the practicum site's goals. The practicum instructor is expected to model the professions and university's best ethical and professional behavior, providing the student with a solid foundation upon which to build their career and guidance as the student develops their social work skills and practice abilities (University of Oklahoma, Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences, Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work [OU Zarrow SSW], 2024).

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

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

Educational Framework

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

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

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

One MSW Concentration Year Practicum Experience

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

Timeline

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

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

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

Supervisor and Preceptor

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

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

Over-All Assignment

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

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

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

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

Educational Contract

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

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

The student also encountered interrelational and logistical challenges during the practicum. Limited access to student-athletes and staff, combined with the department's intense athletic schedule, made timely introductions and consistent engagement difficult. As a result, orientation to the department and physical navigation of the practicum space was delayed. Furthermore, because social work was a new addition to the department, opportunities to educate others on the profession and its potential contributions were limited, which restricted the range of possible interventions and learning experiences. Despite these barriers, the student successfully scheduled regular meetings with one team, met once with another team's coaching staff, and was invited, along with another graduate assistant, to attend weekly meetings with a third team. These interactions, though fewer than anticipated, created valuable openings for visibility, trust-building, and role clarification.

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

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

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

Space, Structure, and Supervision

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

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

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

Work Plan 2

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

At the beginning of Work Plan 2, the student had only been able to interact with two spring sport teams due to ongoing competition schedules, delayed introductions, and limited access to coaching staff. Shortly after the development of the second plan, a coach from the university's largest athletics team contacted the Student-Athlete Experience office to express concern over elevated stress and time demands affecting their student-athletes. While this inquiry ultimately opened a door for deeper engagement, the process of navigating this access point was complex and, at times, fraught with tension. As the social work role within the department was still new and not widely understood, the student encountered subtle resistance and ambiguity regarding their place in the athletic setting. This situation reflects a broader challenge often faced by social workers entering unfamiliar or traditionally insular environments. Although the circumstances surrounding the outreach were difficult, they offered a pivotal opportunity for the student to build credibility, clarify their purpose, and initiate more sustained relationships with student-athletes and staff. This turning point marked a shift in the practicum experience, allowing for growth in collaboration, communication, and professional presence within a dynamic and, at times, uncertain context.

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

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

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

Overarching Practice-Informed Observations

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

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

Practicum Supervision and Ethical Guidance

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

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

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

confidence.

Building Resiliency for the Practicum Student

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

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

Addonizio (2011) conducted a mixed-methods doctoral dissertation, which revealed that American social work students employing effective coping strategies exhibited significantly lower levels of stress and psychological distress in comparison to their peers. The results of this study illustrate the significant impact of practical and organizational coping skills—such as the development of realistic goals, proficient planning, effective time management, and the pursuit of social support—on enabling students to manage the inherent demands of their academic curriculum (Benson et al., 2009; Mosimege, 2006; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). This approach emphasizes the importance of fostering resilience among social work students to enhance their well-being and promote academic success.

Navigating NIL and Social Work Practice in a Shifting Policy Landscape

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

As NIL continues to evolve, social work is inherently aligned with promoting social justice, ethical standards, and inclusive practices in collaboration with institutions such as the NCAA (Wright, 2024; NASW, 2015). The NASW has established ethical principles that emphasize the importance of sensitivity toward cultural and social factors while advocating for competence and humility in working with individuals from varied backgrounds (NASW, 2015). Social workers are expected to engage in political and social action that advances fairness and human rights while advocating for policies and programs that protect the dignity of all individuals (NASW, 2015). Similarly, the CSWE has outlined competencies that guide social work students to demonstrate knowledge and skills aligned with ethical and person-centered practices (CSWE, 2015; CSWE, 2022). Within athletic departments, social workers provide mental health services, identify systemic barriers to opportunity, develop education programs, and facilitate support groups that empower student-athletes to share their experiences and access resources. These efforts promote a healthy and respectful environment for all athletes.

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

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

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

As of the publication date, some states have enacted legislation that removed specific institutional initiatives and federal guidance related to Title IX and related programs (Bushard, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). These changes impacted the practicum education experience of one social work student whose original work plan included serving on a campus athletics committee focusing on inclusive initiatives. Midway through Work Plan 1, this role was removed due to changes in state policy. In response, the student engaged in alternate learning experiences aligned with the goals of student support. To comply with updated state policies, the student revised their second work plan to meet educational competency standards while focusing on permitted activities. This included forming relationships with the campus Gender & Equality Center, Student Life Center, and external organizations to provide services that promote the overall well-being of student-athletes. During this period of transition, state universities were also required to remove specific terminology from hiring materials. The student participated in research with Athletic Department Human Resources staff to develop updated media content aimed at supporting recruitment and retention under the new guidelines.

Recommendations for Social Work Practicum Models

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

1. Social Work Practicum Students

During this practicum, the social work student encountered significant ambiguity in role clarity, access to student-athletes, and departmental expectations, particularly in the early weeks. These recommendations for future practicum students reflect learning gained through navigating those uncertainties and building trust over time.

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

2. Student-Athletes

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

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

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

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

3. Athletic Department

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

- **Institutionalize Mental Health and Social Justice Services:** Integrate social workers into athletic departments to support student-athlete wellness and inclusion. Actively work to reduce stigma around help-seeking by fostering a culture where all staff and students feel safe discussing mental health and personal challenges.
- **Facilitate Orientation and Access:** Provide structured departmental protocols, including introductions to staff and the physical space to better integrate social work students into the department culture.
- **Support Interprofessional Collaboration**: Create a clear plan for how social work roles, specifically practicum students where a social work supervisor is not on-site, will integrate within existing department structures, including outlining responsibilities and lines of communication. Encourage collaboration between social workers, coaches, medical staff, and academic advisors to foster a transcendent culture and improve holistic care models.
- **Champion Student-Athlete Well-Being Through Partnerships**: Invest in the integration of permanent social work roles that focus on post-athletic transitions and biopsychosocial needs, especially where clinical services may not be applicable.

4. Social Work Practicum Education Program

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

- **Build Formal Partnerships**: Develop formalized, reciprocal relationships with athletic departments that include clearly defined roles and mutual goals for practicum experiences. Strive for placements that include on-site social work supervisors to maximize learning outcomes and student satisfaction.
- **Develop Site-Specific Practicum Tools**: Ensure students and practicum instructors are equipped to navigate less conventional practicum environments, such as athletic departments, through specialized training and guidance by providing tailored templates or guidance for creating competency-based work plans in emerging fields like sport social work. Offer specialized training for students entering athletic settings to prepare them for the competitive and hierarchical nature of sports culture.
- **Prepare Students for Policy Shifts:** Prepare students for policy shifts, by encouraging adaptability and proactive engagement with alternative learning opportunities. Support resilience-building as a core competency by embedding reflective practice, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies into curriculum.

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

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

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

6. Practicum Instructor (Social Worker Providing Supervision)

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

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

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

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

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Abstract

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

NCAA Division III Student-Athlete Experience

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

Student-Athlete Development

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

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

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

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

Sport Social Work

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

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

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

Methods

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

Results

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

Table 1

Number of Social Workers in NCAA Division III Athletics Departments

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

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

Discussion

Career Pathways for Sport Social Workers

These findings highlight several key career fields for sport social works. Half of social workers found working in NCAA Division III institutions were, not surprisingly, in clinical services. Approximately 60% of social workers registered through the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) in 2023 held a clinical licensure (as cited in Lombardi, et al., 2024). Moreover, a report created for The Council of Social Work Education and National Association of Social Workers determined that 82% of recent social work graduates in the United States provide clinical or direct services to clients (Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity, 2020). The growth of clinical social workers reflects the increasing demand of mental health professionals. Since 2013, the NCAA recognized the need to prioritize mental health of student-athletes with the creation of the Mental Health Task Force and later blossomed into robust resources, research, and organized dialogue through the NCAA Sport Science Institute. In fact, the NCAA's Mental Health Best Practices: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Health (2024) recommends that athletic departments collaborate with licensed mental health providers to address the mental health and wellness of student-athletes. Sport social workers with a clinical focus can offer their services through mental health counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, performance enhancement, wellness programming, and much more.

Outside of clinical services, there was one person with an undergraduate degree in social work who worked in athletics administration. Traditionally social workers tend to work their way up from a clinical position to a managerial position as a natural progression in their career. Yet few start out with the goal to be an administrator. Social work management combines the valuable knowledge and skills of both social work and administration in order to effectively lead human service organizations (Arnold, 2023). That said, having a social work background helps lay the foundation for administrators seeking a role within a people-serving profession. Athletics administration is a fit for social workers with experience in sport management or business and interested in managing daily operations of an athletics department. Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, facilities oversight, game-day operations, fundraising and marketing, budgeting and financing, strategic planning, policy development and enforcement, and personnel management.

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

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

Student-Athlete Development Model with a Social Work Lens

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

1. *Academic Support.* GAMER (Graduation, Athletic Matriculation, Enrollment, and Retention) seeks to increase retention and graduation rates in the department. Each team is assigned an Athletics Academic Liaison for academic support. Athletics Academic Liaisons primarily meet with student-athletes who have a 2.5 GPA or lower throughout the semester to check-in on their academic performance and refer out to learning support services, registrar, counseling, etc. Under GAMER, The Starting Line was originally designed to help first-year student-athletes transition into college with a weekly study hall and/or tutoring requirement. In Fall 2023, The Starting Line expanded to non-freshman with a GPA between 2.0-2.9 to ensure they receive the necessary academic support.
2. *Leadership Development.* CLAWs (Cougar Leadership Academy Workshops) equips student-athletes with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and life after sport through a series of workshops and activities. Building on Navarro and Malvaso's (2015) student-athlete development model, applicants accepted into CLAWs participate in workshops based on their class year with a specific focus. The first-year workshops focus on transition to college (i.e., study skills), second-year workshops hone in on social responsibility (i.e., bystander intervention), third-year workshops prepare student-athletes for life after sport (i.e., financial literacy), and fourth/fifth-year workshops concentrate on career development (i.e., interviewing skills). Workshops are facilitated by athletics staff as well as campus partners from Career Services, Center for Leadership and Service, Cougar Connections Center for Social Work, Gourmet Dining, Kean Wellness Center, and more. Student-athletes can also serve as leaders on the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) and take advantage of opportunities to attend national conferences or participate in community service events.
3. *Career Preparation.* As an extension of CLAWs, Kean University's Department of Athletics and Recreation offers numerous opportunities to jumpstart their careers. The Jacqueline Towns' Women's Empowerment Series is funded by Karl-Anthony Towns in honor of his mother, Jacqueline Towns. To support women's pursuit of success on and off the court, the Jacqueline Towns Women's Empowerment Series invites influential women in the sport industry to speak about their experiences rising to the top in a male-dominated profession. The Department also collaborates with the Office of Alumni Engagement and Career Services to organize their annual Student-Athlete/Alumni Speed Networking Event. During this event, current student-athletes connect with student-athlete alumni through timed interactions and guided questions. Moreover, Kean University has partnerships with several professional sports organizations for internships and networking including the National Football League, New York Jets, Red Bulls, and New Jersey Devils.
4. *Mental Health and Wellness.* In addition to comprehensive support offered by the University to address mental health and wellness, (Counseling Center, Kean University Behavioral Intervention Team, Cougar Connections Center for Social Work, and UWill), Kean's Athletic Trainers are trained in Mental Health First Aid and well-versed in responding to student-athlete concerns and crises. Further, the Department collaborates with Kean's Community Wellness and Counseling Center (CWCC) to

Figure 1

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

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

5. *Community Engagement.* Student-athletes are encouraged to learn about philanthropy and give back to the Kean community by participating in local community outreach programs. Kean University Building Stronger Urban Communities (KUBS) was created to build a pipeline to higher education for neighboring communities. Student-athletes are invited to participate in clinics and sporting events organized by KUBS to mentor youth. The Department of Athletics and Recreation joins forces with non-profit organizations as well where student-athletes can volunteer with after-school literacy programs for middle school students through Write on Sports or lead team activities and games for children with serious illnesses and/or disabilities matched by Team Impact.

Implications

There are several key takeaways from this informal research project. As a growing field, sport social work needs to recognize student-athlete development as a potential career path. In general, sport social work lacks a clear career path and training in intercollegiate athletics (Beasley et al., 2021a; Beasley et al., 2021b). Literature recommends that current sport social workers complete formal education, engage in informal learning opportunities, and draw on experience from personal athletic participation (Magier et al., 2023). Social work education at both the bachelor's and master's levels should incorporate sport social work into course curricula to educate students on the needs of student-athletes. Furthermore, social work education should organize special events such as bringing in guest speakers, organizing tabling events, or collaborating with professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports to bring awareness of sport social work to college campuses. Identifying field placements within athletic departments is also imperative to give students first-hand experience working with student-athletes. Understandably, the lack of social workers in athletics departments is a barrier to field placement opportunities due to supervision requirements. One alternative is partnering with a social worker in another department on campus with related responsibilities as a field supervisor, and assigning a staff member in the athletics department as a task supervisor.

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

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

Limitations

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

Conclusion

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

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By Choice or Circumstance: Supporting College Athletes Transitioning Out of Sport

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Abstract

Preparing college athletes for life beyond sports is crucial for their long-term success and well-being. Many college athletes dedicate a significant portion of their time and energy to their sport, often at the expense of exploring other career and personal development opportunities (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020; Manthey & Smith, 2023). When their athletic careers end, whether due to graduation, injury, or other factors, they may face identity crises, financial instability, and difficulty transitioning into the workforce (Hansen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to equip collegiate athletes with the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to prepare them for life after sports. This preparation can foster resilience, adaptability, and a sense of purpose beyond their athletic identity (Kidd, 2022). This commentary will explore the complex implications of sport retirement on overall social-emotional well-being of collegiate student athletes and suggest strategies to increase positive outcomes, utilizing the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a framework to explore the student athlete mindset about transitioning out of competitive sports.

Keywords: athletes, college student athletes, sport retirement, transition preparedness

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Introduction

The end of the 2023-2024 collegiate sports season was marked by close to 1000 student-athletes drafted into professional sports. It also marked the end of athletic careers for hundreds of thousands of student athletes who will shed their uniforms for the last time and face the daunting reality of stepping into the world as non-athletes (NCAA, 2024). They left behind their identity as an athlete, which has defined them for years. This critical shift, often overlooked, can have profound impact on mental health, identity, and career prospects for student athletes (Hansen et al., 2019). This commentary uses the story of former collegiate student athlete Rose as a central case example to illustrate the key themes in the transition from sports for college athletes through the lens of self-determination theory.

Understanding Sport Retirement

According to the data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2024), the overall chance of a collegiate student athlete transitioning to professional sports is less than 3%. There are varying odds depending on the sport played, the number of athletes competing in a sport, and the number of professional opportunities in the sport. Given the smaller number of professional women's sports leagues, the odds are even less favorable for female athletes compared to male athletes. Despite these statistics, many athletes like Rose, a Division 1 rowing athlete, begin their college careers with high aspirations.

While the chances of going professional are very small, sports remain a fundamental part of growth and development for over half a million college athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2020). In the NCAA's (2023) health and wellness study, 40-45% of female athletes cited planning for the future, financial, and academic worries as significant stressors in their college lives, compared to 25%-30% of male athletes. In Rose's case, these worries came even sooner: In her sophomore year, she began to doubt her performance due to chronic pain and her mental health; as a walk-on, non-scholarship athlete, she feared being cut from the team. Rather than wait for that possibility, she confided in her parents and close friends, who supported her painful decision to step away from the sport on her own terms. Afterwards, Rose found herself navigating college life without the support system she had come to rely on as a student athlete, including nutritional support, athletic trainers, training facilities, and medical care. With two years of college remaining, Rose had to independently seek out academic advising, career development, and mental health counseling. Despite these challenges, Rose demonstrated remarkable resilience and ultimately graduated a semester early. Her experience illustrates how student athletes who exit sport must navigate a complex identity shift while adjusting to new social realities (Smith & Hardin, 2020).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Ryan & Deci (2017), provides a psychological framework that examines human motivation, well-being, and personal growth. This framework serves as a lens for understanding how student athletes like Rose can be supported during and after their athletic transitions. SDT posits that individuals are driven to grow and achieve their fullest potential when three basic psychological needs are met, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The theory also examines how biological, social, and cultural considerations either enhance or undermine the inherent capacity for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Focusing on three key needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—this commentary will examine the support and resources that college athletes would benefit from to prepare for and cope with their transition away from sports being a primary part of their daily life.

Autonomy

Autonomy, as described by SDT, is the feeling of being in control of one's own goals with a sense of self-determination rather than being pressured by external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While Rose's decision to leave her rowing team was technically voluntary, it was driven by feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being cut. Her desire to take control of the situation reflected her need for autonomy in the face of growing pressure. Once off the team, Rose found herself isolated from the support systems that had previously shaped her daily life. Without access to the resources once provided, she had to navigate her college journey independently. Her story underscores the importance of colleges providing transition programs that affirm agency and offer ongoing support, even for those athletes who leave teams before graduation (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Retirement from college athletics exists on a spectrum: some athletes transition on their own terms, while others face retirement as a necessity rather than a choice, such as in the case of an injury. Previous research has found that collegiate athletes, while living independently from their families, often experience limited autonomy over their daily life decisions as they are heavily influenced by their

commitment to their sport and team (Manthey & Smith, 2023). To support autonomy as defined by SDT, collaboration between institutional academic resources, career planning services, and athletic departments should focus providing individualized counseling or programs that allow athletes to explore their personal interests and goals as they approach the transition experience (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023).

Competence

For college athletes, the transition from sport is a compounded life event. They may also be experiencing a combination of other life transitions, such as the completion of their academic experience, preparing for further education, seeking to enter the job market, or moving to a new community or back to their home of origin (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2019; Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). In SDT, competence is defined as feeling capable, skilled, and believing that one's efforts can lead them to experiences of growth, accomplishment, and success through their own actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Leaving the rowing team was an emotionally taxing decision that left Rose feeling like a failure and disappointment. Once she made the difficult choice to step away, she abruptly lost her access to resources including nutritional support, physical trainers, training facilities, and priority medical care. She no longer had athletic performance as a measure of success and had to rebuild her sense of self-worth. By independently networking with academic advisors, professors, campus social organizations, and a mental health professional, Rose gradually began to recognize her strengths beyond sport. She developed a new confidence in her academic abilities and ultimately graduated a semester early.

While the NCAA does have general requirements for member institutions to provide personal and professional development programs for athletes, there is not a standard curriculum for these programs, and institutional funding levels vary (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Rose's experience highlights need for increased intentional programming and mentorship to empower student athletes to define success beyond their sport (Hansen et al., 2019; Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023). Recent studies have found that programs focusing on identifying mental health concerns, creating a supportive environment that eliminates stigma, and incorporating career planning and development prove to be most beneficial to prepare student athletes for their transition (Hansen et al., 2019).

Relatedness

The third psychological need as outlined by SDT—relatedness—is described as the need of individuals to have a sense of belonging within social communities and feeling cared for by others while also caring for them (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Many individuals influence collegiate student athletes, including coaches, administrators, athletic trainers, faculty, family, friends, and teammates (Saxe et al., 2017). In the context of SDT, relatedness may include strong peer relationships, mentorship from coaches for both their athletic and personal development, and loving connections to family members. Feeling connected and valued by others during the major life change of transitioning from sport is essential for psychological well-being and motivation (Raabe et al., 2020). Moreover, athletes classifying their retirement transition as positive had at least one form of social support (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020). Without intentional programming or structured guidance, Rose struggled to navigate campus life as a non-athlete. The sudden loss of structure and connections led to increased anxiety and stress. Fortunately, she received strong emotional support from her parents and, with constant encouragement, was able to make new connections that she found to be pivotal in her adjustment to being a non-athlete college student.

Post-Sport Adjustment

For student athletes like Rose, the adjustment to a post sport lifestyle can be a transformative, yet disorienting, period. The loss of structure, identity, and embedded support systems forces athletes to reevaluate their goals and develop new routines (Klueh, 2019). In Rose's case, her sense of autonomy was tested as she had to make decisions about her academic and personal future without the guidance she once received from her coaches and trainers. She also had to develop new strategies to navigate campus resources, build connections, and plan for a life beyond athletics. Despite her initial setbacks, Rose reclaimed a sense of purpose and motivation when her basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—were actively supported (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research supports the idea that athletes who receive intentional support from coaches and academic staff in the form of mentorship, career development, and open spaces to express the need for mental health support experience positive transitions (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023; Smith & Hardin, 2020). Moreover, institutions that create environments where athletic and academic growth are equally emphasized and the development of transferable skills such as time management, leadership, and organization are supported, athletes are better prepared for the transition (Barzca-Renner et al., 2020). Rose's story brings to light the importance of designing holistic

transition programs that prepare student athletes for a successful transition out of sports and equip them with the necessary tools to thrive beyond the game.

Conclusion

The transition out of collegiate sports represents a complex and deeply personal journey that challenges a student-athlete's sense of identity, belonging, autonomy, and competence. Through the lens of SDT, this commentary explored existing literature and the case of Rose to highlight ways in which athlete autonomy, competence, and connection can be supported throughout the transition experience. The data highlighted from the NCAA (2023) demonstrates the high levels of anxiety and stress faced by athletes, as they navigate the transition from sports to other career paths. Research findings underscore the necessity of providing holistic support systems that prioritize mental health, career planning, and the development of transferable skills.

There is a pressing need to enhance awareness, comfort, and trust in resources offered and available to collegiate student athletes as they prepare to transition away from sport. Social workers can play a central role in this process, acting as advocates, educators, and therapeutic supports and validating the athlete's identity beyond sport. The supplanting of social workers into roles within athletic departments and teams would foster environments to help collegiate athletes transition smoothly into life beyond sports, ensuring their overall well-being and success.

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