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It's time to turn up the volume on college athletes' "silent struggle"

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Whether characterized as the “silent struggle” or “quiet crisis,” it’s getting harder to ignore the mental health impacts that college students—and student-athletes in particular—face.

In two months of 2022 alone, five student-athletes died by suicide. The rates of reported mental health concerns noted in the 2022 NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study were 1.5 to 2 times higher than have been historically reported prior to 2020. Concerningly, the same NCAA research found that only half of student-athletes believe mental health is a priority to

their athletics department.

The threats to student-athlete wellness are, undeniably, intensifying. From the stress of balancing academics and athletics, to pressures around sports betting, to grappling with toxic team cultures, the obstacles these young adults contend with are more diverse and acute than ever before.

It’s time for university leadership to make complete, not simply incremental, changes so that coaches, staff, and athletes have the resources they need to feel supported, in and out of the game.

A turning point for addressing mental health on campus

Whether they're athletes or not, student well-being is a growing concern across campuses. The trend lines speak for themselves.

From 2016 to 2021, the percentage of students with significant symptoms of depression rose from 25% to 41%. Similarly, the percentage of students reporting significant symptoms of anxiety rose from 21% to 34%. Among student-athletes, mental health was the leading factor for those who said they'd likely transfer during the 2021-2022 school year. The demanding nature of college athletics only magnifies these issues—and makes them more critical to solve.

“The responsibilities of student-athletes today don't start with practice and end once the game clock runs out.”

DR. CHAD ASPLUND

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

“The traditional ‘offseason’ gets shorter every year. Social media creates an always-on, but not always positive, feedback loop. All of this leaves athletes with even less time to decompress and focus on self-care,” says Dr. Asplund.

With so many aspects of the student-athlete experience at risk, many are turning to policy as the solution. This July, Ohio became the first state to require all high school coaches to undergo mental health training. The NCAA has also doubled down on refreshing guidelines to mitigate future crises and standardize a certain level of support across schools.

One working group is expected to release final guidance for updated Mental Health Best Practices—originally published in 2016 and last revised in 2020—at the January 2024 NCAA Convention. This past April, the NCAA D1 Board of Directors unanimously agreed to adopt a “holistic student-athlete benefits model.” Starting in August 2024, these schools will be required to offer a range of benefits including mental health services and life skills development.

Two trends affecting student-athletes' mental health

LEGALIZED SPORTS BETTING

The nationwide boom in sports betting has quickly introduced a new layer of stress for student-athletes. The concurrent rise in athlete and athletics staff gambling violations is altering fans' relationship with sports, positioning injured lists as potential insider information.

In today's social media age, any athlete can become the target of disgruntled bettors whose money is on the line—creating immense pressure on players that can quickly lead to safety and mental health crises. In only a few years, it has made them larger targets for online harassment and threats from disgruntled gamblers.

INCREASED HAZING

Even within campuses and locker rooms, systemic cultural challenges persist and put athlete wellness at risk. As of August 2023, lawsuits have been filed (and some settled) against various athletics teams from at least three different schools over alleged hazing, abuse and discriminatory behavior.

One study of Division III institutions found that around 40% of student-athletes had experienced hazing, compared to 25% of non-athletes—underscoring how these experiences are far from unique to Greek life environments.

Mandates like these are long overdue. But will they be enough?

Focusing on the right resources to effect real change

Fortunately, many institutions are not simply waiting for governing bodies to issue new rules in order to act. Colleges and universities across the U.S. are starting to get creative to help mitigate mental health issues, specifically for student-athletes.

Earlier this year, Wayne University named its first-ever assistant athletic director for mental health and wellness. The University of California, Irvine, manages a curriculum-based program and bystander intervention program aimed at destigmatizing open discussions about mental health. Widener University recently established the HUB (short for health, unity and belonging), a physical place for student-athletes to refuel, take a mental health break and connect with peers.

These are important steps in the right direction, however, adoption of these resources is the real challenge. Fewer than half of student-athletes feel they would be comfortable personally seeking support from a mental health provider on campus, according to the NCAA's Student-Athlete Well-Being Study.

“ Truly serving our student-athletes cannot stop on the court or on the field

JENNIFER HEPPEL
PATRIOT LEAGUE COMMISSIONER

“Protecting their mental well-being is a responsibility we have to our campuses, and our broader communities. But to get it right, athletes must be part of (not just the subject of) the conversation,” says Heppel.

Traditional, on-campus support services and even a greater investment in training for athletics coaches

and staff may not be enough to prompt struggling students to seek help. Having the courage to seek out help from a medical professional—let alone share openly with peers—is not a guarantee.



How institutions can create a safe space for student-athletes

These are the three steps to create the best environment for student-athletes to voice any concerns or feelings they may have:

PRIORITIZE PREVENTION

A growing number of organizations are emerging to equip students with the social and emotional skills needed to identify when they (or peers) are at risk and how to communicate concerns proactively. For example, [RADical Hope](#) partners with institutions including NYU and the Arizona State University to implement their skills-based wellness program that teaches students tools to pursue effective self-care, stress management, empathy, and healthy relationship-building.

GO BEYOND THE LOCKER ROOM

Mental health struggles follow student-athletes on and off the field—any efforts to address this crisis should not be isolated to athletics departments or individual teams. Some institutions are taking a public health approach to promoting student wellness, embedding resources across departments, physical locations and their broader communities. [The Ohio State University](#), for instance, has dedicated clinicians for each of the institution's individual colleges and student life centers. [Pace University](#) (among other schools) has a newly created Chief Wellness Officer role, charged with improving mental health outcomes across students, faculty, and staff.

REMOVE BARRIERS TO SPEAKING UP

We believe anonymous, two-way communication channels are a less intimidating first step toward getting help (for themselves and for others), particularly for students already wary of asking for it. An always-on, digital option that student-athletes can text or email when they need it most removes the barriers that often prevent this vulnerable community from speaking up. Tools like these also offer a faster, more flexible way of capturing student feedback that can clue athletics directors and leaders campus-wide into issues with team culture, or player/coach dynamics before they have a detrimental impact.

Amplifying student-athlete voices starts with passing the mic

The mental health crisis that afflicts college students is often characterized as a “silent” or “quiet” challenge because it’s simply not discussed out loud enough. Not by the students it impacts, by institutional leadership or by staff.

As colleges and universities look to invest in new resources to address this trend, every decision should be viewed through the lens of, “Are we checking a box? Or will this make a material impact on the student experience?”

The challenge today is not simply changing the conversation about mental health but giving everyone the ability to have the conversation loudly, clearly, and continuously.



TR REALRESPONSE®

RealResponse is invested in elevating student, staff and faculty voices in the athletics experience conversation. By offering a safe, anonymous platform for two-way communication, we ensure everyone has a chance to be heard.