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# Stigmas and Stereotypes: Counseling Services for Student-Athletes

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Current trends indicate that a rising number of students seek counseling services because of severe psychological problems (Gallagher, 2011). Unfortunately, it is argued that stereotypes and stigmas continue to play an important role deterring students from seeking professional help. In this study, we focus on student-athletes as a population of interest, and examine their attitudes towards counseling services through the use of quantitative survey methodology. Subscale scores on Fischer and Turner's instrument, Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS), were measured with a sample of 258 college students enrolled at a midsized southeastern university. The purpose of this article is to enhance readers' understanding of student-athletes attitudes towards counseling services and the student-athlete experience as a whole. Potential explanations for the findings and implications for college counselors on how to enhance services for student athletes are provided.

KEYWORDS Student-Athletes, Stigmas, Mental-Health, College Counseling

## Stigmas and Stereotypes: Counseling Services for Student-Athletes

For many students, college is a time to develop an identity, acquire valuable knowledge, and gain an increased sense of autonomy. Throughout this journey, students are confronted with the task of adjusting to "college life" which involves making decisions and choices that can impact their well-being. This transition, while not always smooth, comes with greater degrees of responsibility, and often

finds students struggling to manage their time to fulfill their personal, academic, and professional demands. In this midst of decisions and choices, psychological distress has emerged as an issue of great concern within colleges and universities. Today, an increasing number of students self-report that they are anxious, concerned, worried, distraught, and disorganized. According to the 2011 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, 91% of directors' report that today, an increasing number of college students seek counseling services because of severe psychological problems (Gallagher, 2011). This research points out that this is an increasing trend, with larger numbers of students suffering from eating and anxiety disorders, depression, alcohol abuse, and suicidal ideation (Hayes, Soo Jeong, Castonguay, Locke, McAleavey, & Nordberg, 2011).

While trends indicate that a rising number of students seek counseling services, it is argued that stereotypes and stigmas continue to play an important role deterring students from seeking professional help. Reasons associated with this unwillingness to seek counseling services include fear, apprehension, and a pervasive "stigma" associated with having a psychological disorder (Ægisdóttir O'Heron, Hartong, Haynes, & Linville, 2011). When scrutinizing student sub-groups, it is noted that when compared to their peers, student-athletes are very reluctant to seek professional help and less likely to utilize counseling services, (Brewer, Van Raalte, Petipas, Bachman, & Weinhold, 1998). In this study, we examine student-athletes as a population of interest, and examine their attitudes towards counseling services. Our objective is to (1) understand how to foster the mental health and well-being of student-athletes, and (2) examine current programs and policies that universities and campuses are implementing to increase utilization of counseling services.

## The Student-Athlete Role

It is well known that athletic participation adds additional pressure on the life of student-athletes (Watson, 2006). In essence, this pressure manifests itself through increasing demands to fulfill athletic commitments (e.g. practice, workouts, games, media appearances), and the responsibility to obtain good grades to maintain athletic eligibility. While some student-athletes fare quite well in integrating these two roles (i.e., student and athlete), others find these roles incongruent, and struggle to manage the demands associated with college life (Killeya-Jones, 2005; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). The literature suggests that prevalent stigmas and stereotypes associated with student-athletes only complicate this journey, and position them as a population that must be carefully examined when discussing the impact of psychological distress.

Labels such as lazy, privileged, out-of-control, pampered, lacking intellectual ability (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Watson, 2006), and perceptions of low engagement and competence (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005) are often cited in the literature when describing the student-athlete. The pejorative nature of these labels and stereotypes can exacerbate mental health issues affecting this population, not only negatively influencing how peers, faculty, and administrators view and interact with student-athletes (Kissinger, Newman,

Miller, & Nadler, 2011), but also creating increased levels of anxiety for the student-athletes themselves (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). As a result, it is not surprising that student-athletes are less likely to seek supportive or professional mental health services when dealing with emotional stress (Watson, 2006), or when experiencing personal problems (Brewer, Van Raalte, Petipas, Bachman, & Weinhold, 1998). In this study, we seek to elucidate why student-athletes are more reluctant to seek counseling services, and how their role as student-athletes may shape this decision.

## Seeking Counseling Services: Internal and External Barriers

When examining mental health issues on college campuses, it is necessary to understand why students avoid professional help when dealing with psychological disorders. Literature concerned with the mental well-being of student-athletes has identified internal and external barriers that deter student-athletes from seeking counseling services (Watson, 2003). In this section, we summarize key points defining these barriers to further understand these dynamics and utilize these barriers to guide our examination of student-athletes in higher education.

### *Internal Barriers*

Internal barriers are associated with the “team” mentality of student-athletes in which, quick recovery and self-sufficiency are values heavily perpetuated over one's own personal difficulties (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1991). Two categories within internal barriers have been identified: a) social stigma, and b) the win-at-all-costs philosophy (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1994; Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1991; Watson, 2003)

The social stigma associated with utilizing counseling services emerges as a prevalent reason for student-athletes to avoid seeking professional help. On campuses, counseling services typically follow strict confidentiality regulations, and when individuals seek help, this is often an anonymous process for most college students. However, for student-athletes, it is argued that this may not be the case because they are highly visible on campus. When discussing social stigma, Etzel *et al.* (1991) found that student-athletes tend to enjoy a sense of “campus-hero” and/or “celebrity status,” (p. 15) and therefore believe that their image can be ruined if they express a need for counseling services. This type of mentality suggests that student-athletes are more likely to associate counseling services with negative and undesirable risks (e.g. jeopardized image) and perceive little benefit from these counseling interactions (Watson, 2003, 2006).

The Win-At-All Costs philosophy states that since the beginning of their intercollegiate careers, student-athletes have been socialized to prioritize winning and the overall good of the team, over their personal problems (Watson, 2003). As a result, when student-athletes seek professional help, this could damage the coaches' confidence in the player to perform, and can be interpreted as a selfish act among teammates, who view the overall good of the team as a priority over personal needs. For student-athletes, seeking counseling is perceived as a risky

decision, with consequences such as less playing time, losing starting positions, and the questioning of their athletic performance (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1994).

### **External Barriers**

External barriers are considered forces beyond the control of student-athletes, and can emerge from the nature of athletic departments, the institution itself, and the demands of college sports (Watson, 2003).

First, the athletic department is often times viewed as a separate and closed system within the university (Ferrante *et al.*, 1996). The literature suggests that many athletic departments have little or no connection with other campus units, which student-athletes can interpret as a disassociation with the rest of the university. As a result, student-athletes may view counseling services as a resource detached from what is offered to student-athletes, and will be more likely to seek support from coaches and teammates when dealing with mental health issues (Watson, 2003).

Second, it is noted that how the institution serves student-athletes can also impact the delivery of counseling services to this population. Across colleges and universities, student-athletes are often seen as a privileged group who has access to a multitude of additional resources that other students do not (Watson, 2005). With increasing rules and regulations about the support that can be provided to student-athletes (e.g., NCAA regulations), institutions may be more likely to hesitate to offer any other additional resource, fearing a potential rule violation or sanctions (Watson, 2003).

Lastly, team commitments refer to the demands associated with being an intercollegiate student-athlete. One of the major problems student-athletes face regarding team commitments is time management. Student-athletes often have demanding schedules that include not only academic requirements, but also a plethora of responsibilities including practice, weight training, rehab, and traveling. This hectic schedule often reduces and makes personal time to cope with issues a scarce commodity, placing seeking help as an additional activity that is weighted against pressing priorities associated with team demands (Etzel *et al.* 1991; Watson, 2003).

### **Rationale for the Study**

Three reasons support the importance of this study. First, this study is significant because it examines the impact of stereotypes and stigmas towards seeking professional help when dealing with mental health issues. This is a major issue because stigmas and stereotypes continue to be reported as the number one reason as to why college students underutilize counseling services (Ludwikowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009). Second, and more aligned with the population selected for this examination, this study is significant because it offers empirical evidence that examines the attitudes of student-athletes, a group that faces similar academic and personal challenges when compared to other students, but also deals with a particular environment that places them as a population in need of unique and personalized services. Third, this study stands as a valuable resource not only to understand student-athletes' views towards counseling services, but also as

window of opportunity to implement programs and policies that can effectively serve student-athletes and other groups in need of counseling services.

## Method and Data

This study utilized quantitative survey methodology to investigate the role of stigma in student-athletes' use of counseling. Subscale scores on Fischer and Turner's instrument, the ATPPHS, served as the dependent variable and intercollegiate athletic participation as the independent variable.

### Participants

College students, both athletes and non-athletes, from a division 1 mid-sized southeastern university were recruited from freshman level classes as well as the university's student athlete academic enhancement center to participate in the current study. Participants represent a convenience sample and completed the survey instruments in either a large classroom setting or in the student athlete academic enhancement center. A total of 258 college students—140 (54.3%) men, 118 (45.7%) women—participated in this study. Of the students, there were 73 (28.3%) freshmen, 70 (27.1%) sophomores, 69 (26.7%) juniors, 34 (13.2%) seniors, and 12 (4.7%) who reported a different student status. Through self-identification, there were 9 (3.5%) Hispanics, 167 (65%) White not Hispanics, 75 (29.2%) Black not Hispanics, 3 (1.2%) biracial students, 3 (1.2%) who reported other, and 1 individual who did not identify his/her ethnicity. Respondents ranged in ages from 18–59 with the mean age of 20.9 years. Ninety (34.9%) students identified themselves as currently being involved in a collegiate sport and therefore were coded as student-athletes.

### Measures

*Demographic questionnaire.* A demographic questionnaire was developed containing three sections. The first section consisted of 7 items: age, gender, race, marital status, class rank, collegiate athletic status, and college educational track. In order to measure past experience with counseling, the second section asked participants to identify what counseling services they have received in the past as well as what, if any, services they are currently receiving. The third section included four qualitative items that allowed participants an opportunity to express their opinions about professional psychological services.

*Attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help scale.* Respondents' attitudes toward seeking professional help were measured using Fischer and Turner's 1970 Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS). The 29-item measure contains items such as, "If I were experiencing a serious emotional crisis at this point in my life, I would be confident that I could find relief in psychotherapy." Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, from 0 strongly disagree to 3 strongly agree, to identify the level of agreement with statements concerning attitudes toward professional help. Accordingly, participants' scores could range between 0 and 87 with a higher score signifying a more

positive attitude toward professional psychological help and or mental health services in general.

In the original study Fischer and Turner (1970) reported an internal consistency of .83 and a two-month test-retest correlation of .84 in samples involving college students. This instrument continues to be used and similarly, recent studies reported an internal consistency of .79 when utilizing the ATPPHS, (Pederson & Vogel, 2007). Eighteen of the 29 items were reversed scored and total scores (sum of all scores) as well as four subscale scores were calculated: recognizing the need for help, stigma tolerance, interpersonal openness, and confidence in mental health practitioners.

These four subscales were originally identified through factor analyses. Three random samples were used for the analyses resulting in four factors of attitudes (Fischer & Turner, 1970). Factor I, detects participants' acknowledgment of their own individual need for professional mental health services. Individuals who score low on this subscale do not recognize the direct benefit of seeking out services for their own emotional difficulties. Those who score high on the recognition of help subscale believe there are benefits from seeking professional help when suffering from emotional problems, and thus, are more likely to utilize services in the future (Fischer & Turner, 1970).

Factor II examines participants' attitudes toward the stigma associated with receiving professional mental health services. Those who score low in this subscale reveal concern about what individuals would think if they were to seek services, whereas those who score high demonstrate a lack of uneasiness toward the opinions of others. Factor III recognizes the ability of individuals to feel comfortable expressing their personal and emotional problems to a mental health professional. Thus, those who score high on the openness subscale are more likely to reveal personal matters to a professional compared to individuals who score low on this subscale. The final factor, Factor IV examines participants' confidence in professional mental health services and its providers. Items in this particular subscale include items reflecting such attitudes as beliefs in methods of psychotherapy treatment and the belief that someone who is suffering from emotional stress would benefit from mental health services (Fischer & Turner, 1970).

### **Procedure**

Following approval of the university institutional review board, participants were recruited through announcements made in freshmen level classes as well as the university's student athletic academic enhancement center. The informed consent document explained to participants that they would be completing questionnaires about their attitudes and opinions of professional help. After reviewing an informed consent document, participants received a folder containing each of the measures explained above.

Overall and subscale means for the ATSPPHS were compared by whether or not participants identified as currently being involved in a collegiate sport using MANOVA. Further, specific items of interest were selected and analyzed by demographic category with chi-square analyses.

## Results

The purpose of the present study was to understand student-athletes' attitudes towards mental health services. The researchers hypothesized that when compared to their non-athlete peers, student athletes would have more negative attitudes toward the utilization of professional counseling services. To analyze this hypothesis, 258 non-athletes and student-athletes were asked to complete the 29-item ATPPHS and their responses were compared using MANOVA. Results showed statically significant differences between student athletes and non-athletes for overall scores. Additionally, student-athletes scored lower on both the openness and confidence subscales revealing a more negative attitude toward professional psychological help.

Coefficient alpha for the full scale ATSPPH was adequate at .824. The overall mean score for student athletes was 74.611 (s.d. 8.33) and for non-athletes was 78.861 (s.d. 9.75), a difference that was statistically significant. Results of the MANOVA, using the four subscales as related dependent variables revealed significant differences for the overall model as well as for the Openness and Confidence subscales. Athletes had significantly less positive responses than did non-athletes regarding their interpersonal openness ( $F(1, 220)=21.685, p<.001$ ) and their confidence in mental health practitioners ( $F(1, 220)=5.387, p=.021$ ). Although not significantly different, athletes had lower scores on the Need and Stigma subscales as well ( $F(1, 220)=3.78, p=.053$  and  $F(1, 220)=3.401, p=.067$ , respectively).

There were four specific individual items of interest to the researchers within the ATSPPHS because they relate directly to student-athletes' likelihood of seeking counseling services. A series of Pearson Chi-square statistics were calculated. The following provides a discussion of those items.

*Item 6: Time and Expense.* Chi-square analysis shows significant results concerning reasons why respondents do not seek counseling services ( $X^2(3, N=252)=9.610, p=.022$ ). Results indicate that 51.7% of student athletes compared to less than 40% of the non-athletes agreed that the reasons they do not seek counseling services is because of issues related to time and cost. This finding coincides with research from Watson (2006) who also reported that time management appears to be one of the main reasons student-athletes do not seek counseling.

*Item 10: Problems Should Be Kept Within The Family.* Chi-square analysis shows a significant relationship between student-athlete status and Item 10, ( $X^2(3, N=252)=22.746, p<.001$ ). On this item relating to openness towards counseling, 36.9% of student-athletes strongly agree that certain issues should be kept within ones family and not made public, compared to only 11.9% of non-athletes. This result indicates that student-athletes in our sample are more likely to keep matters private, consistent with the literature that suggests that the team and family mentality prevalent within the student-athlete community acts as a deterrent for student-athletes when dealing with mental health issues (Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

*Item 13: Keeping one's mind on a job is a good way to avoid personal issues and problems.* Chi-square analysis shows a significant relationship between athlete

status and the responses to Item 13 that measure openness towards counseling ( $X^2(3, N=253)=13.98, p=.003$ ). On this item 76.7% of student athletes compared to 53.9% of non-athletes reported that they agree or strongly agree that keeping one's mind on a job is a good way to avoid personal issues and problems. These results confirm that for student-athletes, loyalty to their team, coaches, and teammates comes above all other priorities. These results clearly evoke the "win-at-all-costs" philosophy, suggesting that athletes are socialized in an environment where the team comes first, and focusing on performance to benefit the team comes before any personal problem or issue (Etzel, Pinkey, & Hinkle, 1994; Watson, 2006; Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

*Item 19: Talking with a professional is a poor way to deal with emotional conflicts.* Chi-square analysis shows a significant relationship between student athlete status and Item 19, which measures confidence in counseling ( $X^2(3, N=243)=10.442, p=.015$ ). On this item, 42% of student athletes report that they agree or strongly agree with the statement compared to 22.9% of the non-athletes. For athletes, talking to a professional is not only viewed as a costly and time consuming task, but also as a decision that can jeopardize their status as student-athletes. As stated by Watson (2006), as long as negative stereotypes held by coaches, the university, alumni, fans, and others persist, seeking counseling services will continue to be interpreted as a poor way to deal with emotional conflicts.

## Discussion

### *Time and Expense of Counseling Services*

In this study, the instrument items combined time and expense, and our results indicated that 51.7% of student-athletes (compared to less than 40% of the non-athletes) view these two factors as prominent deterrents to seek counseling services. When discussing time constraints, it is clear that demanding schedules that include practice, weight training, traveling, and academics, constrain student-athletes' ability to seek help and deal with personal issues. This hectic schedule often reduces and makes personal time to cope with issues a scarce commodity, placing seeking help as an additional activity that is weighted against pressing priorities associated with team demands (Etzel *et al.* 1991; Watson, 2006). Responding to this concern, counseling services have increased consultation hours (Gallagher, 2011), have partnered with athletic departments to create physical spaces for a counselor in or near the athletic facilities, and have scheduled sessions on week-nights and weekends for student-athletes. The overall goal is that the visibility of the counseling staff and its increased availability can transform how athletes perceive counseling services, and will allow them to utilize these services in a timely manner without adding additional pressures to their already demanding life.

With regard to cost, student-athletes appear to believe that the cost associated with counseling services is also a deterrent. Therefore, institutions must find avenues that allow students to access this type of help without the additional economic burden. Gallagher (2011) highlighted that 74% of respondents of the

Survey of Counseling Center Directors report that they have increased the amount of time in training for faculty and others to respond to students, and 61% have increased training for staff in working with difficult cases. These interventions help ensure that institutions identify issues early which could become cost-saving strategies considering that students can access help at early stages.

Another approach is to develop partnerships between athletic departments and counseling services to fund positions that will serve student-athletes. Gallagher (2011) reported that counseling services across the nation have hired full-time and part-time clinical staff, have created behavioral health consultants positions, have expanded crisis services, and are more engaged in providing campus suicide prevention training (Gallagher, 2011). These initiatives depend highly on economic resources, but institutions ought to examine their available on-campus resources, and recognize that it is in their best to provide reasonable and appropriate mental health support (McBain, 2008). In particular, this emerges as a necessity in a time where mental issues on campus have increasingly been connected to campus crisis, violence, and expensive litigations.

### **Problems should be kept within the family**

Our results indicated that 36.9% of student-athletes (compared to only 11.9 of non-athletes) believe that problems and issues should be kept within the family and not made public. When discussing social stigma, the literature reports that student-athletes enjoy a certain celebrity status on campus. As a result, their presence in the counseling center is viewed as a risky decision that might damage their reputation as campus heroes. This correlates with previous findings that highlight that individuals consider anticipated risks as a factor when seeking counseling services, and must account for the potential negative outcomes of disclosing problems and issues with another person (Vogel & Wester, 2003). Our findings are concerning because they suggest that while student-athletes face issues just as any other student group, they are more prone to discuss and seek help for these problems within the boundaries of their team. Overall, students-athletes not only believe that seeking counseling services can portray them as vulnerable and weak (Watson, 2006), but also live within a community that reinforces that keeping matters within the family is an effective way to deal with personal issues.

It is apparent that student-athletes place a high value on their relationship with teammates, coaches, and staff. More important, intercollegiate athletics have been described as a closed system within colleges and universities, which might encourage athletes to believe that seeking help beyond the athletic department is not the norm (Ferrante *et al.*, 1996). For that reason, counseling centers must think about how to serve student-athletes considering their close relationships within athletics. One alternative is to appoint a key liaison or staff member/s from the counseling center to work with student-athletes. Even in counseling centers with few staff members, designating a point person could positively influence athletes' perceptions towards the use of these services, introducing this person not only as a counselor, but also as part of the athletic department family. Counseling services must actively seek forming relationships with the students they serve, and these

relationships can enhance the capacity of counselors to guide student-athletes, understanding the issues and problems that define this group, and battling stereotypes that currently negatively impact student-athletes.

***Keeping one's mind on a job is a good way to avoid personal issues and problems***

In our study, 76.7% of student athletes (compared to 53.9% of non-athletes) reported that they agree or strongly agree that keeping one's mind on a job is a good way to avoid personal issues and problems. From this perspective, it is easy to draw a connection to the Win-At-All Costs philosophy, where winning and focusing on the "job" is a priority above all other needs. This type of mentality encourages student-athletes to use their sport as an avenue to avoid all other concerns. Unfortunately, this ignores the importance of the relationship between mental and physical health, where a healthy mind can help to diminish stress and allow athletes to focus on performance (Vandervoort & Skorikov, 2002).

Exclusively focusing on winning can also have an effect at the institutional level. This type of mentality creates an environment where athletic personnel believe that if the team is successful, dealing with the issues and problems of student-athletes can wait. The rationale behind this perception is that bringing attention to problems faced by student-athletes could generate negative publicity for the athletic department and the university, can negatively impact the performance of the team, and can create a backlash from other students, alumni, and fans (Watson, 2006). However, not prioritizing these issues can jeopardize the well-being of student-athletes. For that reason, a change in mentality is needed, and will require that colleges and universities recognize that dealing with mental health issues affecting student-athletes in a timely manner is not only an institutional responsibility, but also a priority considering that healthy minds and bodies are essential to attain many of the benefits associated with participation in college athletics (e.g., development of character, hard-work habits, commitment, leadership).

***Talking with a professional is a poor way to deal with emotional conflicts***

Data in our study revealed that 42% of student-athletes (compared to 22.9% of the non-athletes) believed that talking with a professional is a poor way to deal with emotional conflicts. Considering that individuals often underestimate the effectiveness of counseling services and overestimate the risks, Vogel and Wester (2003) argue that discussing the benefits associated with counseling services needs to be a priority within athletic departments. Examining our findings, it appears evident that for student-athletes, the risk of seeking help (i.e., jeopardize image, lose starting positions, less play time) outweighs a greater number of perceived benefits. Therefore, when student-athletes confront mental health issues, they are more likely to seek help from their teammates or staff in the athletic department, or keep all issues to themselves.

This is an emerging concern because teammates and athletic personnel are not prepared to provide counseling or psychological training (Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Today, while many athletic departments have

expanded their academic facilities, and have developed positions such as life skills coaches, eligibility coordinators, and academic advisors to serve student athletes (Covell & Barr, 2010), it is worrisome that those who work with student athletes may not be appropriately trained to help them deal with mental health issues. The literature suggests that many of the individuals who work with athletes are former college student-athletes who come from backgrounds such as physical education, sports medicine, or business, and whose sole responsibilities often focus on maintaining academic eligibility and enhancing sport performance (Brooks, Etzel, & Ostrow, 1987; Etzel *et al.*, 1994). In reality, they do not have the counseling background needed to help student-athletes deal with mental health issues. On the other hand, when one considers the experiences of professional counselors working with athletes, one could also argue that it will be important for them to understand the world of student-athletes and how this impacts their personal, academic, and professional development.

We recommend that counselors and athletic student personnel seek opportunities for collaboration, and continue to pursue professional development opportunities that will prepare them to better serve athletes. From our perspective, a much needed step is to bring together individuals who serve student-athletes in different capacities to discuss how to help them develop personally, academically, and professionally. Within institutions, we encourage collaboration among counselors, physicians, coaches, and athletic personnel, with the central goal of improving the services offered to student-athletes. Key to this type of collaboration is not only discussing how to reach this population, but also making a distinct effort to approach student mental health issues more holistically, bringing attention to internal and external barriers that deter student-athletes from seeking counseling services.

## Recommendations for Future Research

It is evident that current research examining student-athletes as a population of study has increasingly gained attention in the field of higher education. This study corroborates findings in the existing literature concerned with the examination of attitudes towards counseling services and reveals several areas warranting further examination.

First, Vogel, Wade, and Ascherman (2009) argued that while stigmas can define the views and willingness of individuals to seek counseling services in society at large, it is also important to understand the impact of stigmas within one's social network. When dealing with student-athletes, it has been noted that the influence and perceptions of those they interact with on a daily basis (i.e., teammates, coaches) can have a powerful tow on their decision to seek counseling. As such, this particular characteristic opens the door to examine how positive behaviors can be modeled in the student-athlete community, utilizing this close connection to build a culture where seeking counseling services is supported by the entire student-athlete community.

Second, as researchers we cannot ignore the size and diversity of the student-athlete population attending colleges and universities in the U.S. In this study, we

approached this investigation comparing student-athletes as whole to their non-athlete peers in one institution. However, it is evident that a comparison is also warranted within the student-athlete community taking into consideration identity characteristics (i.e., race gender, socio-economic status, etc), accounting for the wide variety of institutional contexts, and comparing student-athletes across particular fields such as their academic majors, their sport, scholarship-status, and others. Quantitative and qualitative inquiries can offer a much-needed context to help student-athletes, revealing information that will help institutions reduce or eliminate stigmas associated with utilizing counseling services.

Lastly, bringing attention to these differences, researchers have noted that while a growing number of quantitative studies have set the foundation to examine the student-athlete experience, as a field, researchers and practitioners continue to struggle to enhance educational outcomes for this population. To advance research concerned with student-athletes, it is argued that qualitative research can provide a much needed context to understand what truly occurs within this student community. Qualitative research emerges as a desirable methodology complementing quantitative work because it provides a much needed depth, informing policy and practice, and helping researchers truly uncover how to foster the success of student-athletes. Unfortunately, to conduct qualitative research, access to the student-athlete communities is imperative, and at the present time, there is a perceived sense of mistrust in which institutions, coaches, and athletic personnel continue to be reluctant to partner with researchers to carry out in-depth qualitative examinations (Browning, Flowers, Fluker, Harmon, Miranda, & Roxbury, 2010). Consequently, developing collaborative research agendas where coaches and athletic personnel take an active role facilitating this interaction holds great promise, with qualitative inquiries unraveling the experiences of student-athletes, and making contributions to enhance the well-being of this population.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations of the present study that need to be noted. First and foremost, the findings of the present study should not be generalized to all student-athletes. All participants were students registered in either one of two freshman level classes at the same public southeastern university, or were required to complete hours in the university's student academic enhancement center. Participants in the sample were also students in their first two years of college. Therefore, it is possible that as students mature, they will be more willing to seek help, and could be more likely to recognize the value of counseling services. In addition, a majority of participants in our study were White-non-Hispanic. A more diverse sample could provide valuable information that speaks to the current demographics of student athletes at large. With respect to other variables that can impact student-athletes' views towards counseling, none of the participants were asked about their sexual orientation, their household income, or their cultural upbringing, all of which could possibly contribute to one's stigma toward counseling.

Second, there are also concerns about the actual measurements that were used. Whereas the scale was developed several decades ago, it continues to be used and has been shown to be valid and reliable. However, attitudes are complex and in the

Attitude Toward Professional Psychological Help Scale, it is difficult to identify with specificity, what component of attitude may contribute to stigma. For example, there is a problem of double-barreled items. Item 6, for example, assesses both time and expense as reasons why student athletes do not seek professional mental health services. Thus, it is hard to identify which one (time or cost) weighs more into ones decisions as to why they do not seek services.

Regardless of the limitations of the present study, results have confirmed previous research and provide evidence that stigmas, stereotypes, and the nature of institutions and college athletics, continue to influence how student-athletes perceive counseling services. The findings open the door to further examine this population and truly understand how to confront a growing number of students across the nation dealing with mental health issues.

## Conclusion

In summary, scholarly research and practice must approach the student-athlete experience as a whole, disentangling the particular elements that in turn help us bring clarity to our understanding of student-athletes. Today, it is clear that to fulfill the needs of student-athletes and other student sub-groups, we must understand all the elements that shape their identity. Furthermore, we must truly recognize how each of these elements come together as whole, in an environment where personal, academic, and professional responsibilities add further challenges to become a successful student. This study points out the need for institutions to continue to reach students and create avenues for them to utilize counseling services. In particular, this study re-affirms that stigmas and stereotypes are eminent problems when helping students deal with mental health issues, and what is more concerning, that certain characteristics defining student-athletes as a group can strengthen these stigmas and stereotypes. Commitment to the well-being of student-athletes is at the forefront of this examination, adding to a body of research that can guide institutions to develop an environment that minimizes the pervasive nature of these stigmas and stereotypes associated with seeking counseling services, builds a campus environment where student-athletes thrive, develop, learn, and above all nurture their roles as students and athletes.

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