

NCAA Graduate Student Research Grant Program Summaries of Findings

[M. Bird, Attitudes Toward Seeking Online and Face-to-Face Counseling](#)

[M. Byrd, Impulsivity in Concussed Collegiate Athletes](#)

[L. Larsen, Narrative Inquiry of Eight Black Female Assistant Coaches in NCAA Division I WBB](#)

[C. Schaeperkoetter, Athletics department success for small colleges](#)

[L. van Raalte, Student-Athletes' Stress Coping Experiences](#)

Student-Athlete and Student Non-Athletes' Attitudes Toward Seeking Online and Face-to-Face Counseling

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Student-athletes face a number of stressors when entering college such as moving away from home, balancing their academic commitments with athletics, dealing with high pressure situations and performance results, injury, and the eventual end of their athletic career. Due to the additional stressors faced by student-athletes, it should come as no surprise that this population experiences mental health disorders at similar rates compared to their non-athlete counterparts. Furthermore, student-athletes experience a number of unique barriers that may deter this group from seeking the psychological help which they need. These barriers included a perceived lack of time, a negative view toward seeking help, and the stigma associated with receiving mental health treatment. Online counseling is a form of mental health help that possesses a number of benefits such as anonymity and convenience which could help reduce the barriers that student-athletes face, however, little is known about the attitudes that student-athletes hold toward this method of counseling.

The purpose of this study was to investigate student-athletes' and non-athletes' attitudes toward online and face-to-face counseling. More specifically, the authors wanted to investigate the difference in attitudes that student-athletes hold toward online and face-to-face counseling, the difference in student-athletes and non-athletes' attitudes toward online and face-to-face counseling, and the influence of athletic status (student-athlete or non-athlete), athletic identity, self-stigma, and perceived stigmatization from others, on attitudes toward online and face-to-face counseling.

Participants in this study included 101 NCAA Division I student-athletes and 101 non-athletes from a large southeastern university. Non-athletes were matched to student-athletes on gender and ethnicity as these variables have been found to influence attitudes toward counseling in previous research. Attitudes toward counseling held by participants were assessed by scales that provide measures of participant's value, and discomfort, toward each form of counseling. Additionally, self-stigma, perceived stigmatization from others, and athletic identity were measured using existing measurement scales.

Results of this study would show that student-athletes favor face-to-face counseling over online counseling. That is, student-athletes report more value in face-to-face counseling, and less

discomfort in face-to-face counseling compared to online counseling. Moreover, student-athletes hold less favorable views toward both forms of counseling compared to non-athletes. In this study, student-athletes reported less value in both forms of counseling compared to non-athletes, but the groups did not differ on the levels of discomfort placed in each form. Results from this study would suggest that neither athletic status nor athletic identity influence the amount of self-stigma, or perceived stigmatization from others experienced by participants. As self-stigma increases however, all participants report less value and more discomfort in online counseling, and student-athletes report more discomfort in online counseling. In contrast, when perceived stigmatization from others increases in the sample, participants report more value in online counseling.

The less favorable attitudes held toward online counseling by student-athletes may be explained by a lack of knowledge that student-athletes have in regard to this method of counseling. Although online counseling was presented as counseling using videoconferencing, participants in this study may have been unaware as to what online counseling involves, and what the relationship between a client and a professional entail. Therefore, they may not fully understand the benefits that this modality of service delivery offers. Due to the matching used in this study, the lower value placed in counseling by student-athletes may not be due to differences in gender or ethnicity between the groups. Furthermore, as athletic status did not influence the levels of stigma reported by participants, the lower values placed in both forms of counseling by student-athletes may not be explained by a difference in levels of stigma between the two groups. Despite face-to-face counseling being the favored method in this study, online counseling may be particularly beneficial for those presenting higher levels of stigma as it was seen that those with higher levels of perceived public stigma reported more value in the online method.

Findings from this study have implications for campus counseling centers and athletic departments. Future research in this area should focus on educating student-athletes as to the outcomes that can be achieved by engaging in mental health treatment. If more is known about how counseling can help, then student-athletes may place higher value in these services. Future studies should also focus on teaching student-athletes about what online counseling involves and the benefits provided by this form of counseling. If student-athletes better understand the process of online counseling, attitudes toward this form of therapy may increase, and more individuals would be willing to seek this kind of treatment.

Experiences of Impulsivity, Anxiety, and Anger in Concussed Collegiate Athletes: A Mixed Methods Study

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The effects of sport-related concussions are a public health concern (Kelly, 1999) that have garnered attention with researchers and practitioners alike. The somatic and cognitive effects, which are often used for concussion diagnosis, have been studied more extensively than the emotional effects commonly reported by athletes. The emotional effects, specifically impulsivity, anger, and anxiety, have been studied more rigorously in a clinical population following head trauma, but these findings have not been extended in an athlete population. Athletes, specifically collegiate athletes, have emotional responses to injury as evidenced in research pertaining to musculoskeletal and orthopedic injuries (Tracey, 2003), but there is a lack of research specifically targeting concussed athletes.

To add to the existing research in this area, this study used a dual approach to examine impulsivity, anxiety, and anger in collegiate athletes following sport-related concussion. A repeated-measure design, followed by semi-structured interviews was utilized to determine if athletes are experiencing these emotions, and if so, when during the recovery process. The interviews provided athletes with the opportunity to talk about these emotions and describe how they make sense of and cope with these experiences.

Athletes were recruited from multiple universities in the East and Midwest regions of the United States. Surveys were administered within 10 days of the athlete's diagnosed concussion and again 10 days later. Impulsivity was measured using the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale –II (BIS-II; Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995), anger was measured using the state scale of the State-Trait Anger Inventory (STAXI-2; Spielberger, 1999), and anxiety was assessed on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item screening measure (GAD-7; Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006). Interviews were completed after the athlete had been medically cleared to return to play.

Currently, 12 athletes have completed the surveys and of those, five consented to the follow-up interviews. The athletes had an average of four concussions in their collegiate career and the most experienced in their current season was two. The athletes endorsed the strongest feelings of all three variables during the first survey time point, with anxiety and anger consistently scoring the highest. Two of the athletes scored above a ten on the GAD-7, which is indicative of severe anxiety. Both athletes were referred to the counseling services at their university by the principal investigator. The athletes scores were monitored for their second survey and both of their scores dropped below ten. Both were participated in an interview where their anxiety scores were addressed and counseling was again recommended.

Several themes were identified from the interviews with athletes. The major themes were school, loss of control, isolation, and frustration. Athletes discussed how they were unable to keep up with school work due to their symptoms. Loss of control referred to their recovery and feeling as if they could not do anything to return to play sooner as well as not feeling in control of their own emotions. One athlete said, "I felt angry all the time and I didn't know why." Similarly one said, "I had all these feelings.. were they normal? Do other people feel like this too?" Another athlete discussed how feeling isolated led to her frustration, "Because I didn't look injured, people didn't think I was injured. That was hard because you're hurting but you can't talk about it because people don't understand." Athletes believed that people wanted to understand, but their symptoms were difficult to explain.

Based on the data collected from surveys and interviews in this study, there are recommendations for medical professionals and staff. The first is the inclusion of an anxiety measure in return to play concussion protocols. All athletes spoke about their anxiety in regards to different aspects of their recovery, including their unknown playing status and how long their symptoms would last. Most importantly, of the two athletes who endorsed severe anxiety symptoms, only one had previously been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. A second suggestion is to offer athlete education groups on campuses specifically for concussed athletes led by a sport psychology practitioner or someone who is educated in the emotional symptoms of concussions. This would provide athletes a place to discuss their symptoms and help normalize their experience so that they can better understand why they feel the way they do.

By incorporating anxiety measures into the return to play concussion protocol and offering education groups on campuses, athlete mental health can be addressed in a proactive way. Too often athletes suffer in silence and it leads to tragedies in the college sport world that can be prevented.

“I Haven’t Worked to be a Token:” A Narrative Inquiry of the Experiences of Eight Black Female Assistant Coaches in NCAA Division I Women’s Basketball

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The Scout

In the 2014-2015 academic year, 4,984 women played NCAA Division I women’s basketball (NCAA, 2016). Of these women, 2,543 identified as Black women, while only 50 of the 345 head coaches and only 314 of the 1044 assistant coaches of these athletes identified as Black women (NCAA, 2016). To state this more simply, 51% of the athletes in NCAA Division I women’s basketball are Black females; in contrast, only 26% of the coaches are Black females. While initiatives encouraging Black women to pursue careers in coaching are being implemented by the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) and the NCAA (e.g., *So You Wanna Be A Coach*), little research has been conducted to probe the underlying issues related to the underrepresentation of Black female coaches. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of Black female assistant coaches in NCAA Division I women’s basketball by examining three important components: (a) the roles they are asked to fill; (b) the ways being a Black female has impacted the participants’ experiences as an assistant coach; and (c) the ways that Black women cope with the multiple oppressions they face in NCAA Division I sports.

Film Session

During face-to-face interviews, participants described their path into coaching, the roles they are asked to fill, and the ways they cope with the multiple oppressions they experience as Black women in coaching. Four themes arose throughout a thematic analysis of these narratives, and each will be discussed below.

Pregame: Learning to coach

All of the participants in the current study were former high-level basketball players, and the majority of them were influenced to go into coaching because of the positive impact of the Black females who coached them. Additionally, the participants discussed gaining coaching knowledge from informal (e.g. daily experiences) and informal learning situations (e.g. conferences).

First half: Experiences from the first 10 years

The participants in this study who had been in coaching for less than 10 years stated that being a Black female often put them in a better position to obtain jobs. Rhea said, “Everybody wants a Black female on staff.” Though they felt confident in being hired as assistant coaches, the participants recognized that they would likely be the only Black female on the staff and that their role would be recruiting and mediating. These coaches accepted this because they believed that if they worked hard, good things (e.g. career advancement) would eventually happen for them.

Second half: Experiences from the last five years

A noticeable shift occurred in the narratives of the participants with more than 10 years of coaching experience. These participants spoke of being prepared to be a head coach; however, they were not sure that they would be allowed that opportunity. They also discussed that as Black females they were stuck in a “box” and “pigeonholed” as recruiters even though they wanted more on-court coaching responsibilities. Lastly, the participants expressed frustration in their need to constantly prove themselves to be taken seriously as coaches.

Overtime: Thinking about the future.

The participants indicated a desire to become a head coach despite realizing the added pressures and lack of leeway that many Black female head coaches experience when compared to their White male and female counterparts. They also brainstormed several ways to get more Black females into coaching including more workshops geared toward Black females, administrators being more open to hiring Black females, and more Black female coaches being intentional about mentoring future generations of coaches.

These results speak to the importance of giving Black female coaches a variety of roles to expand their coaching knowledge. Limiting the roles that Black female assistant coaches are assigned could hinder their opportunities for growth as a coach and as a result, reduce their likelihood of becoming a head coach in the future. These results also bring to light the unjust hiring practices at the institutional level and the possible negative effects gendered racism has on the psychological health of Black female assistant coaches.

Game Plan

It is hoped that these findings will lead to the development of interventions that can empower NCAA Division I Black female coaches as well as challenge current structural ideologies that disadvantage Black female coaches in this context. Further, creating a more inclusive environment at NCAA Division I institutions could enhance the experiences and coaching career aspirations of Black female student-athletes by allowing them to see empowered Black female role models in coaching.

“Alternative Success Theory”: An examination of what athletics department success means for small colleges

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What?

The small college athletics environment is a distinctive faction of the university that has arguably represented a shift in approaches and strategies for enrollment attainment goals. The stakes for many of these small schools are perhaps higher than simply competing for on-field success. For a school where student-athletes make up a small percentage of the student body and where athletics departments measure success on wins and losses, if the athletics program loses or ceases to exist, the school will still survive. If a small school “loses” with their definition of success and the athletics department does not attract student-athletes (and their tuition dollars), the school may not survive. Further, by gaining a holistic understanding of the small college athletics environment, we can better understand how such an “Alternative Success Theory” contextualizes sport as its own entity but also as an important faction of macro-level campus-wide processes.

Purpose and Method

The primary purpose of this study was to explore alternative definitions of success and the overall role of athletics in the survival of small colleges where student-athletes make up 20% or more of the student body population. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with NCAA Division III athletics directors, administrators (e.g., president, provost, Vice President for Enrollment Management), and faculty athletics representatives to better understand how university and athletics administrators define athletics program success at small colleges and how such definitions

impact financial and organizational priorities and decision-making. In all, 33 in-person interviews were conducted at 11 different Division III institutions across seven different states. At each of the 11 schools, the athletics director, one high-level administrator, and one faculty athletics representative were interviewed for a total of 33 interviews.

Main Takeaways

- In general, expectations about winning/losing were not discussed as part of the hiring process when athletics directors were hired.
- Faculty Athletics Representatives (FARs) were asked if they ever had to navigate any tensions between groups in their roles as the FAR. Each of the interviewees indicated that tension was almost exclusively about student-athletes missing class time for competitions. As a result, while conference competition scheduling tended to be mostly out of the control of the athletics department, factions of faculty blamed the athletics department for class-competition conflicts. Many FARs did indicate they felt it was part of their FAR role to dispel this misconception amongst faculty members.
- When asked what goes into judging whether the athletics program was successful or not, many interviewees indicated the importance of the student-athlete experience, enrollment, retention, gaining more resources, and competitiveness. Importantly, competitiveness was not usually at the top of the list regarding what was valued most. Rather, valuing the student-athlete experience was considered to be mutually beneficial for enrollment and retention.
- Interviewees were asked what role tuition discounting for the general student body played in the overall institution's financial stability. Respondents indicated that the high tuition-high discount model was extremely important and represented a change in the financial landscape of small colleges. Further, there was an emphasis on the importance of coaches' recruiting in order to make up gaps in financial aid packages between their institutions and the financial aid packages of competitors.
- Interviewees were asked to think about what would happen to the institution if the athletics department ceased to exist. Respondents used words such as "devastating," "catastrophic," "big trouble," "cripple us almost completely," and "we would close down," further demonstrating the critical role of small college athletics to the overall institution.
- Interviewees were asked about athletics department strategies to add stability to the athletics department and the institution. Many spoke of the role of having specific roster size targets and of the notion of adding sports to increase enrollment, all as a shared discussion between coaches, athletics directors, and campus administrators.
- The willingness to adapt was emphasized as well. Athletics directors, campus administrators, and faculty spoke of the trend of adding more full time head and assistant coaches. Doing so dually helps with recruiting/enrollment and also with student-athlete experiences because more full-time coaches provide stronger on-campus mentors.
- Athletics directors, campus administrators, and faculty were asked about the specific missions of the athletics department and the university. Many relied on the Division III philosophy with

programmatic development. Interviewees indicated using the Division III philosophy as a guide was extremely helpful because it contains a large a set of measurable, actionable items.

- When asked how level of a playing field Division III athletics is, nearly all respondents indicated that it was clearly not a level playing field because of varying levels of resources, academic offerings and prestige, differing endowments and enrollment numbers, and whether the institution is public or private.

Evaluating Student-Athletes' Stress Coping Experiences in their Academic and Athletic Lives: A Test of the Stress-Buffering Model

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A formidable research literature indicates that stress can significantly harm ones physiological and psychological well-being, and there is extensive agreement that social support can help assuage those negative effects. Theorists of the stress-buffering model predict that social support will moderate the stress coping response. For collegiate student-athletes, the stress that accumulates across their dual roles as a student and an athlete is arguably unavoidable. Stress sources may include pressures from meeting scholarship criteria, athletic culture-shock, brawn-no-brain stereotypes, and managing their dual roles as a student and athlete. Fortunately, student-athletes are also afforded a myriad of support networks that can help mitigate the harmful effects of stress. For example, athletic departments have ensured student-athletes have access to free academic advising, tutoring, student study centers, athletic training, and doctors among other interpersonal support groups. Student-athletes may also receive support from family, friends, teammates, and the community. The purpose of this study was to test the stress-buffering model and to examine how five different types of social support influence the stress-coping process for student-athletes.

This study included $N = 459$ Division I collegiate student-athletes. The sample included student-athletes from 18 different sports and 18 different colleges, were predominantly Caucasian, and included those on partial scholarship ($n = 189$), full scholarship ($n = 119$), and those not on scholarship ($n = 99$). The sample included both men ($n = 140$) and women ($n = 267$) and the average age of participants was $M = 20.18$, $SD = 1.45$. Student-athletes were sent an online survey where they were asked to think about their role as a student and as an athlete and completed the following measures: stress, social support, self-efficacy, and performance. It was predicted that (H1) stress would negatively predict self-efficacy, (H2) social support would moderate the relationship between stress and self-efficacy, and (H3) self-efficacy would positively predict performance (in both an academic and athletic setting). A research question was also posed that asked how student-athletes' dual roles influenced performance in each setting. To test these predictions, a series of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted. Results were mixed and provided partial support for predictions as well as interesting exploratory results.

For the first hypothesis, in both an academic and athletic setting, stress negatively predicted performance such that the more self-reported stress reported, the worse performance student-athletes felt in their academic and athletic lives.

For the second hypothesis, social support did not moderate the relationship between stress and self-efficacy, however, social support was a positive predictor of self-efficacy such that the more social support a student-athlete perceived was available, the higher their feelings of capability in their academic and athletic lives. Exploring this finding further, esteem support and information support

were the only significant support types of self-efficacy (emotional, network, and tangible support were not significant predictors of either academic or athletic self-efficacy).

The third hypothesis was supported; self-efficacy positively predicted performance in both an academic and athletic setting such that the more capable a student-athlete reported feeling, the better they reported their performance. Additionally, and only in an *academic* setting, social support moderated the relationship between stress and performance such that when stress is low, it did not matter if social support was high or low, your performance was about the same, but when stress is high, social support makes a significant impact on performance such that the more support you for during high stress times, the better your performance. High levels of stress and low levels of social support resulted in the lowest performance scores.

The research question was also explored with hierarchical linear regressions. *Academic* stress was a negative predictor, and *academic* self-efficacy was a positive predictor, of *athletic* performance. *Athletic* stress was a negative predictor, and *athletic* social support, self-efficacy, and performance were positive predictors of *academic* performance. Overall, partial support for the stress-buffering model is provided.

Several important implications can be gleamed from these results. First, as esteem support and information support were the only significant predictors of self-efficacy in both an academic and athletic setting, social support structures designed to help student-athletes in their endeavors should reinforce in these two social support types. For example, athletic departments might include training for coaches or teams, or slogans that boost self-confidence (esteem support), and workshops and materials that provide facts and advice for student-athletes in their academic and athletic lives (informational support). Especially as student-athletes dual-roles are influencing performance in each setting, it would be helpful for student-athletes to learn how to manage their time and understand how their roles are not separate constructs, but intermixed in their self-identity.