PROF ACADEMY: A MODEL TO ENHANCE OVERALL WELL-BEING, MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG DIVISION III STUDENT ATHLETES AS THEY TRANSITION FROM PROF TO PROFESSIONAL

PROPOSAL NARRATIVE
a. Problem Statement

This project will create an impactful program, entitled the PROF Academy, that will assist college student-athletes as they transition into the professional environment by providing education on mental health and overall well-being concepts, such as mindfulness, stress management, anxiety reduction techniques and understanding depression. PROF Academy will consist of workshops and online modules addressing the above topics, as well as providing career development skills, including resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills and networking. This innovative Program seeks to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration among the Rowan University campus to holistically bolster the psychosocial well-being and mental health of student-athletes.

As a member of the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC), there is a great need for PROF Academy at Rowan, as a review of each of the NJAC’s member institutions depicts no such program has been implemented at any of the NJAC institutions. PROF Academy, named after Rowan University’s mascot “The Prof,” will serve as a model for these institutions to enhance awareness of student-athlete needs and their overall well-being as they transition from a student-athlete to a professional.

Stroll (1995) posits that Division III student-athletes are not afforded the scholarships and media attention that Division I student-athletes often enjoy, and, thus the former experience a different college experience with perhaps a greater focus on academics. As academic performance and demands are stressors to student-athletes transitioning from high school to college, it is imperative that this is addressed proactively to provide a safe environment in the college setting (Hoover, 2010; Kroshus, 2015). While adjusting to a new environment, college students-athletes may experience changes in their relationships, financial management, and sleep habits (Davoren & Hwang, 2014; Kroshus, 2015). Along with these changes, many student-athletes experience anxiety and depression on higher levels than usual, which could be related to several factors, including academic problems (Davoren & Hwang, 2014). Davoren & Hwang (2014) report that over the period of one year, 30 percent of 195,000 college students reported feeling depressed, and 50 percent reported feeling anxious. Transitioning to college may also increase the risk of potential alcohol abuse, injuries and negative behaviors (Chew & Thompson, 2014).

The number of student-athletes experiencing mental health issues is rising each year (NCAA GOALS, 2016). In addition, there has been an increase since last year in the number of student-athletes feeling overwhelmed (NCAA GOALS, 2016). Some student-athletes may actively utilize mental health services on campus, while others may not use them or know they are present on campus. As reported in the NCAA 2016 GOALS data, a little less than half of the student-athlete population that utilized mental health services were satisfied with the care received (2016).

Many Division III student-athletes have the aspiration to graduate from college and either enter the workforce or attend graduate school (NCAA GOALS, 2016). Hoover (2012) indicated Division III student-athletes transition in their late junior year/early senior year, shifting focus from athletics to their potential careers. While student-athletes believe that their student-athlete experience will help them develop skills that will be helpful in future careers, they indicate having difficulties finding experiential learning opportunities due to the time constraints of being a student-athlete.
In addition, it is important to understand the needs of student-athletes to guide their successful trajectories from college to their careers. Per the student-athlete responses from the NCAA 2016 GOALS Study, the most-requested responses regarding what they wanted to receive from administrators and/or coaches were “academic success especially preparing to get a job after college” and learning how to balance both athletics and academics positively (2016).

\textit{b. Description of campus-level pilot program}

The PROF Academy model is a workshop and online series including components of student-athlete well-being, enhancement of mental health and professional development delivered to student-athletes at Rowan University. It is anticipated that approximately fifty (50) academic junior year student-athletes will serve as the pilot population since they are starting their transitions from student-athletes to professionals. After the cohort of student-athletes is selected, they will be provided a series of modules, both face-to-face and in an online Blackboard Learning Management System course shell. These modules will address components beneficial to student-athletes in preparing to enter the professional environment. It is the intent that after this pilot program is complete, PROF Academy will be provided to student-athletes throughout their four years at Rowan University.

The modules will include:

- Mindfulness: Enhancing Self-Awareness
- Credentialing for the Future: Resume writing, cover letter writing, and navigating the job search
- Improving Interviewing Skills through Mock Interviews
- Stress Management Techniques
- Understanding Anxiety and Depression
- Addressing Student-Athlete Needs
- Increasing Awareness of Mental Health Services on Campus
- Networking

PROF Academy will initially be implemented during the spring and fall 2017 semesters. Each monthly module will address a specific topic and include a speaker from the Rowan community, which would enhance the interdisciplinary approach in the Program, with professionals from the Offices of Career Advancement, Student Affairs and its Counseling Center, and faculty members from Rowan’s Departments of Psychology and Health & Exercise Science. In addition, supplemental material and assignments will be provided in the online Blackboard shell. The design for the Blackboard shell will include specific modules that each student-athlete in PROF Academy would need to complete to graduate the Program. This would ensure their active engagement and participation. Examples of such experiential learning the student-athletes would be required to complete include uploading their resumes to receive feedback from the Office of Career Advancement or providing a self-reflection in response to the specific module concept. This online shell would be a place for self-reflection, application of material and an opportunity to receive feedback from Rowan University faculty and staff actively involved in this Program.
Interdisciplinary collaboration among various administrative and academic departments for this Project is paramount in this holistic approach to bolster the academic and professional success of student-athletes, while promoting their psychosocial well-being and wellness. On-campus collaboration will include the Office of Career Advancement, University Advising Services, The Wellness Center, Office of Academic Transitions, the Athletics Department, the Psychology Department, the Health and Exercise Science Department and the Office of Alumni Relations. Each constituent would be asked to contribute by either hosting a session, providing supplemental material for the Blackboard shell or providing their services to the student-athletes. Such paradigm will serve as an effective means to promote the awareness and use of these beneficial services and resources.

PROF Academy’s culminating event will be a student-athlete alumni-networking reception where former successful student-athletes who have either attended graduate school or worked in the professional environment, would be invited to share their experiences with those who have completed PROF Academy. The student-athletes will receive a certificate of completion for successfully completing the Program. In addition, the successful completion of this Program will be recorded in their co-curricular transcript.

PROF Academy seeks to develop a model that would continue to be implemented after the grant is complete, expanding these modules throughout all four years of each student-athlete’s experience at Rowan University. This Program also aims to serve as a model that is readily replicable and scalable with its established modules and curriculum by other Division III Institutions’ Athletic Departments, since it would be of little cost to implement with those institutions promoting the use of their existing campus resources.

c. Program evaluation plan

The relevant data/research guiding the proposed program includes student-athlete feedback in the 2016 NCAA GOALS Study of the Student-Athlete Experience. Providing components for academic success, job preparation, balancing athletics and academics, along with enhancing overall performance both in the classroom and in athletics will be addressed in this model.

To measure mental health factors, such as anxiety and depression, the NCAA Sport Science Institute screening tools will be utilized at the beginning of the Program and at the completion of the Program. In addition, a preliminary questionnaire will be provided assessing: gender, sport, major, GPA, resume completion status, internship status, job status, Rowan 101 student status and job interview experience.

Key findings will be applied in a practical environment in the educational setting since this program model will assess the needs of student-athletes and match them with available services already established on the Rowan University campus. Examples may include mental health services on campus, support from coaches and athletic administration, guidance from both the Office of Career Advancement and the Office of Academic Transition and Support Programs and collaboration with the Psychology Department.

Programmatic outcomes will be evaluated both in the short- and long-terms by measuring the initial follow up with student-athletes that will be conducted mid-semester in spring 2018, where they will retake the depression and anxiety screening scales, as well as a questionnaire, assessing their professional development (e.g., secured internships, job placement status, and status of applying or being accepted into graduate school).

An additional follow up will occur six months after graduation where previous participating student-athletes will be contacted via email and asked to complete the same questionnaires they completed mid-semester of their senior year, including the depression and anxiety scales and professional development questionnaires.
CITATIONS
THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION OF A MINDFULNESS BASED TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN STUDENT ATHLETES

I. Proposal Narrative
a. Problem Statement
The 2016 National College Health Assessment (ACHA, 2016) found that in the last 12 months, 58.4% of students experienced overwhelming anxiety, 36.7% felt so depressed it was difficult to function, 39.6% felt overwhelming anger, and 9.8% seriously considered suicide. The same questions asked to domestic USC students (2014) found nearly identical results for anxiety (56.1%), depression (32.8%), anger (35.9%), and suicide (6.4%). Among student athletes in particular, the 2015 NCAA GOALS study (Paskus & Bell, 2016) noted that college campuses have seen an increase in mental health issues, anxiety, and depression, and 30% of NCAA student-athletes reported having overwhelming distress in the last month, an increase of more than 5% since 2010. Researchers have routinely found student-athletes to experience unique sources of stress compared to their non-athlete counterparts, making this group “at risk” for psychological and academic difficulties (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). Thus, the primary issue this proposal seeks to address is reducing the rates of mental health distress in college student-athletes both locally and nationally. Through mindfulness-based training this proposal aims to increase overall well-being by equipping student-athletes with necessary tools to manage the inherent stressors of the athlete lifestyle.

Time demands not only contribute to student-athlete stress, they create the additional complication of how to deliver mental health services in an already overcrowded schedule (Finch, 2011). Compared to the typical college student, student-athletes have nearly every minute of the day programmed for them with practices, academics, team meetings, and mandatory events. Moreover, time allotted for rest is often minimal or non-existent. Providing mental health treatment without significantly adding to time pressures thus becomes even more challenging. For this reason, time-limited, evidenced-based interventions for anxiety and distress tolerance among student-athlete populations are greatly needed. Previous authors have noted that traditional sport psychology techniques focus on overcoming negative thoughts through control and suppression, but can also cause anxiety to increase (Goodman, Kashdan, Mallard, & Schumann, 2014; Sappington & Longshore, 2015). Alternatively, Mindfulness is an acceptance-based approach that emphasizes awareness and tolerance of emotion, from a non-judgmental perspective (Goodman et al., 2014). Currently, treatment modalities such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) have integrated mindfulness principles in treating many clinical presentations (Baer, 2003). While promising results have been found, a need for applied research among student-athletes still exists (Sappington & Longshore, 2015).

The purpose of this proposal is to develop, implement, and evaluate a mindfulness-based training program aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing among college student-athletes.
Specifically, this program aims to increase mindfulness training focused on three program goals; improve mindfulness skills, increase overall wellbeing, and reduce perceived anxiety within the student-athlete population at the University of Southern California. Furthermore, as described below, this program was constructed to promote generalizability and implementation within all NCAA institutions, regardless of size, facilities, or resources available. In evaluating the effectiveness of this program, the following research questions (RQs) will be asked pertaining to each of the aforementioned program goals.
RQ1: Does a mindfulness-based training program improve overall wellbeing and mindfulness ability among student-athlete participants? RQ2: Does a mindfulness-based training program reduce anxiety among student-athlete participants?

b. Description of campus-level pilot program

Due to the over-programming athletes experience, we are proposing a program model that is brief-focused yet effective. A reality of the college athletics landscape is that athlete resources vary significantly based on athletic department structure and financial support. This program model was designed to be accessible and easily implemented within campus departments and across NCAA-affiliated institutions. While the current proposal focuses on training players and coaches, this program has the potential to be broadened and implemented beyond athletes, to include administrators, support staff, and the university as a whole.

Our pilot program will function as an interdisciplinary collaboration between USC Student Counseling Services, USC athletics department, and a campus mindfulness initiative called Mindful USC. First launched in fall 2014 to integrate mindfulness principles into the college campus environment, Mindful USC offers trainings, workshops, and resources to the USC community. Collaboration with Mindful USC instructors allowed for expert consultation and guidance in planning and constructing each module. Our program is comprised of five, weekly, one-hour sessions, containing both didactic training on specific mindfulness skills and experiential training in learning meditation and accessing emotions. Table 1 outlines each training session.

[Table 1 here]

The five main topics covered in each session of the program are Introduction to Mindfulness, Mindfulness of the Body, Emotions, Thoughts, and Building a Mindfulness Practice. Several specific interventions will be used. For example, the RAIN and STOP exercises connect emotions and thoughts to the body when experiencing stress; Body Scan involves concentration on specific areas of the body; and Loving Kindness is a meditation on positive wishes and intention for one’s self. Each session also contains a meditation to complete throughout the week and self-guided readings. Additionally, smart phone applications will be introduced so participants can track their mood and complete corresponding meditations between each session.

Participation in the program will be open to the nine men’s and twelve women’s athletics teams and coaching staffs that comprise the USC athletics population. At least two groups will be formed consisting of up to 40 participants each, separate for male and female athletes. At present, several men’s and women’s teams have expressed interest in participation. By completing this training with coaches and athletes, development of mindfulness skills individually and as a team can occur. Coaches can implement mindfulness practice collectively, before and after training sessions/competitions, and athletes can practice individually, outside of team events.

After the initial training, mindfulness practice can continue with as little as five minutes a day to be effective, making it easily integrated without adding to the already overloaded non-practice obligations in the student-athlete’s schedule. A strength of this program is the adaptability and ease of implementation that exists for other member institutions to apply. Mindfulness as a practice does not require specialized equipment, customized facilities, or uniform procedures. While we collaborated with Mindful USC, we are aware most universities do not have such an office. This collaboration was used in designing the program but is not required for implementing it on other campuses. To promote generalizability at member universities, we plan to use our findings to create a handbook for building similar mindfulness
training programs. By making this handbook available to other NCAA institutions, guidelines and recommendations will be set forth for others to begin utilizing these techniques. The resources needed are minimal; only a space large enough for a group of participants to meet, copies of selected articles and readings, and a general knowledge of mindfulness practice are required. Ideally this study will provide a foundation for integrating mindfulness within NCAA athletics programs across the country.

c. Program evaluation plan

i. Literature Review
Mindfulness helps teach awareness and understanding emotions in the present moment, and perhaps most importantly, with a non-judgmental approach to one’s experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). It has been associated with reductions in perceived stress and improvement in positive affect, quality of life and overall mindfulness ability (Nyklicek & Kuijpers, 2008). Through practice of deep breathing and meditation, individuals enter a relaxed, contemplative state in which thoughts and emotions are examined and observed (Baer, 2003). Compared to cognitive-behavioral interventions, the goal is not to reframe, control, or revise negative/self-critical cognitions, but rather to identify thoughts and emotions only as temporary states that pass through the body and mind. Insight into one’s own anxiety and distress is developed (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), as well as the understanding of one’s choice in how to manage this distress.

As applied to college student populations, first-year students completing a mindfulness-based program had better adjustment to college, improved psychological wellbeing, and reduced physiological stress compared to a control group (Ramler, Tennison, Lynch, & Murphy, 2016). These students also showed improvements in observing, describing, and reducing reactivity to negative emotions. As applied to college-student athletes, brief mindfulness training combined with yoga contributed to reduced anxiety, increased energy, and improved overall mindfulness ability (Goodman et al., 2014). Researchers have also found these effects to be long-standing. After a 4-week program, archers, golfers, and distance runners reported increases in overall cognitive awareness and mindfulness, and decreased worry at one-year follow-up (Thompson, Kaufman, De Petrillo, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2011). Furthermore, programs similar to the one described in this proposal have been found to be effective. A five-week program with two-hour meetings promoted psychological health and self-compassion (Bergen-Cico, Possemato, & Cheon, 2013) and a three-session model with 45-minute body scans, was associated with decreased anxiety and stress compared to controls (Call, Miron, & Orcutt, 2014). Despite these results; however, a need still exists for more applied research to inform guidelines for practical implications and programing (Sappington & Longshore, 2015, Thompson et al., 2011).

ii. Application
Mindfulness practice can benefit more than just student-athletes and is generalizable to all aspects of university functioning from administrators, to faculty, and athletics department staff. By collaborating with Mindful USC, this program will apply the results from this study to the larger university community in which similar brief-focused trainings will be conducted. Given the potential for improving stress management and overall mental health, we designed each session to be applicable to the student-athlete experience but also generalizable to the myriad of campus populations. Mindfulness itself is a non-threatening introduction to stress management and meditative practices. It is likely that for individuals apprehensive about traditional counseling practices, mindfulness may present an opportunity to receive more practical mental health services. We plan to create a program handbook and make recommendations based on our findings for member institutions to apply this program throughout their campus communities in addition to disseminating our findings at national conferences (i.e. NCAA, APA, Big Sky).
iii. Evaluation
Several different measures will be used to evaluate program outcomes. Baseline measures will be collected prior to beginning the program and at the end of each session to obtain short-term and incremental changes. Post-training measurements will be taken at the end of the final session. At approximately one-month, follow-up measurements will be conducted to examine longitudinal effects. Prior to beginning, participants will be presented with study information and informed consent will be obtained. Participants will create unique pseudonyms as identifiers for data collection to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Repeated measures data collection will be utilized to measure change across each training group, and within each individual participant. Data will be collected using the following (or similar) measures:

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness will be defined as one’s attention regulation, ability to remain present-focused, awareness of experience, and acceptance of emotion, as measured by the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised (CAMS-R; Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007), a 12-item self-report measure of mindfulness ability.

**Wellbeing.** Psychological Wellbeing will be measured using the Behavioral Health Measure (BHM-20, Kopta, Owen, & Budge, 2015), a 20-item measure of wellbeing, psychological symptoms, and life functioning and the College Student Athletes Life Stress Scale (Lu, Hsu, Chan, Cheen, & Kao, 2012) a 24-item self-report measure of overall student-athlete life stress.

**Anxiety.** Perceived anxiety will be measured using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI, Beck & Steer, 1993) a widely used, 21-item self-report measure of overall anxiety levels in adolescents and adults.
II. References


Paskus, T. and Bell, L. (2016, January) Results from the 2015 GOALS student of the student-athlete experience. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Collegiate Athletic Association Convention, San Antonio, TX.


