

Examining Athletic Academic Advisors' Experiences: A College Athlete Mental Health Approach

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Mental health is a critical and timely topic within college athletics. As such, athletic departments have created initiatives to enhance the experience of athletes. However, research indicates college athletes often feel uncomfortable seeking mental health support and, in turn, look for alternative outlets. This study examines the role of National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I athletic academic advisors with college athlete mental health, seeking to understand how they use their role to enhance college athlete mental health and the training they receive to do so. Using Ecological Systems Theory, we identify college athlete academic advisors rely heavily on microsystem relationships to enhance the well-being of college athletes. As such, these individuals make decisions that directly impact their lives, like working weekends, to ensure the success of college athletes. Additional findings indicate college athlete academic advisors are often underprepared for their role, and lack support from their departments, further isolating them in their journey to enhance the well-being of college athletes. We suggest athletic departments invest in the professional development of athletic academic advisors, including providing mental health training and partnering with on-campus resources to better support these professionals.

Keywords: mental health, college athletes, athletic academic advisor, advising

Mental health has long held a negative stigma in sports, leading to a lack of public discourse and support for athletes (Bauman, 2016). This all changed when Kevin Love and other professional athletes publicly shared their struggles with mental health, shifting some of the narrative and stigma in sport to be more open and understanding about mental health challenges. However, the past decade has been increasingly troublesome for fans of college sport, with the suicides of college



athletes such as University of Pennsylvania track athlete Madison Holleran (2014), Washington State University football player Tyler Hilinski (2016), Binghamton University lacrosse player Robert Martin (2022), and Stanford University soccer player Katie Meyer (2022), to name a few. These athlete deaths have brought a larger and critical media presence to the issue surrounding athlete well-being and mental health (Walton et al., 2024).

To address the issue of mental health in sport, there has been an increase in research to identify factors that could be inhibiting (or enhancing) mental health, specifically for college athletes (Breslin et al., 2017; Küttel & Larsen, 2020). Much of this research has focused on individual-level factors such as social media use and help-seeking behaviors (Daltry et al., 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2019; Watson, 2005), with some work being conducted on coaches and their knowledge and attitudes toward player mental health (Breslin et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2019). Accompanying this research is an increase in investment by athletic departments toward athlete mental health, led by the recently formed National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Mental Health Advisory Group (NCAA, 2022). However, while the NCAA has established best practices and recommendations for athletic departments, many departments lack the financial resources to hire new staff focused on college athlete mental health. Acknowledging this gap for many athletic departments, this study sets forth to better understand the role of athletic academic advisors as mental health support for college athletes.

Research indicates college athletes often feel uncomfortable seeking mental health support due to concerns about negative perceptions from coaches and administrators, leading to potential loss of playing time or athletic scholarship (Cosh et al., 2024; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). As a byproduct of these concerns, athletes are unlikely to reach out to coaching staff to voice their challenges and, therefore, look for alternative outlets (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). An important group of professionals outside of the realm of athletic decision-making includes the athletic academic advisor. Athletic academic advisors meet with college athletes on a regular basis to provide academic and life skill guidance, forming strong relationships with athletes beyond their sport (Thompson, 2013). Investigating the role of academic advisor, Thompson (2013) found college athletes were often willing to share private matters (i.e., academic, professional, and personal) with athletic academic advisors. These professionals are a potential outlet for athletes to share experiences of mental health struggles or challenges. This study seeks to better examine the relationship between academic advisors and college athletes' mental health. Furthermore, this paper seeks to understand the preparedness of individuals in the role of academic advisor to handle and support mental health issues.

Literature Review

In the following section we explore the current research on college student and college athlete mental health. As such, we discuss the support systems available to

the college athlete population, their help-seeking behaviors, holistic care, and the battle of stigma within sport.

College Student Mental Health

Understanding college student mental health has become increasingly important for campus officials (Watkins et al., 2012) as research has linked depression and anxiety with lower GPAs, increased alcohol use, and withdrawal from college (Arria et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2009b; McMichael & Hetzel, 1975). The importance of understanding mental health issues in the college student population is reflected in the increase in usage of mental health resources on college campuses. Gallagher (2015) noted college counseling center directors across the U.S. reported an 8% increase in patients with severe psychological problems from the year prior. The prevalence of college students facing mental health issues is widespread, with research suggesting about one-third of undergraduates present with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Oswalt et al., 2020). More recently, studies have suggested this number might even be higher, with around 60% presenting with symptoms (Abrams, 2022). While research exploring the utilization of on-campus resources by college students remains scarce, work in this area does raise concerns about usage. One study showed that among college students reporting moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression, only 39.67 and 39.53%, respectively, used on-campus resources (Lee et al., 2021).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in mental health issues among college students. The sudden changes to normalized schedules and the shelter-at-home policies significantly impacted the college student population. This led the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and Children's Hospital Association (CHA) to declare a national emergency for adolescent mental health (AAP, 2021). While there are resources on campus for college students (e.g., counseling centers), the college athlete population has extended resources regarding their mental health challenges.

College Athlete Mental Health

While college students face high levels of mental health issues, college athletes potentially face significantly more stressors during their college experience. Recent research on college athlete mental health indicates they suffer from mental illness at a similar rate to their college student counterparts (Edwards et al., 2019). However, college athletes were 1.5 to 2 times more likely to report mental health concerns compared to pre-COVID levels (NCAA, 2022).

Mental health research in college athletics covers a wide variety of mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicide. NCAA (2023) research identified that 29% of women sport participants felt overwhelming anxiety "constantly" or "most every day" and 17% of Division I men and 33% of Division I women felt mentally exhausted. McDonald et al. (2020) examined eating behaviors of athletes competing within the NCAA to understand differences in those competing in "lean" and "non-lean" sports. While prior research has emphasized the dangers of

eating disorders for athletes in lean sports (i.e., distance running, gymnastics), their findings highlighted that athletes competing in “non-lean” sports can also be affected by eating disorder symptomatology. Research exploring the mental health of NCAA college athletes has identified that over a 20-year period of 1,102 deaths, 128 were reported as suicide. Whelan et al. (2024) explored the 20-year period breaking it into two decades. The first decade reported suicide as a cause of 7.6% of deaths, with this number more than doubling to 15.3% in the second decade (Whelan et al., 2024). Further, Hensley-Clancy (2022) also noted there has been a recent increase in the number of suicides by NCAA college athletes. Understanding this increase in NCAA athlete suicides requires understanding factors that could negatively impact college athlete mental health, as well as examine the use of support services through better understanding help-seeking behaviors.

One way scholars have examined college athletes’ mental health is through exploring their social media usage. For example, Brougham (2021) examined the impacts of social media on the mental health of college athletes, finding that in general there were little impacts from social media use on the mental health of college athletes. Qualitative responses in the study suggested athletes used social media as a tool for procrastination and escape. Similarly, David et al. (2018) completed a 75-minute focus group with athletes who discussed advantages and disadvantages of Twitter use, sharing it could be used for advocacy, team cohesion, and support, but that at times could result in receipt of critical tweets which they felt could impact performance. Further, Barry et al. (2022) found overall screen time was not associated with well-being, but use of social media during daily activities was related to lower self-esteem, and higher stress, anxiety, and depression.

Other research examining factors impacting college athlete mental health include rigorous time demands. Specifically, college athletes are often required to engage in additional programming outside the 20-hour sport-specific time limit imposed by the NCAA. This can include volunteer practices and lifts, civic engagement, study hall, and other athlete development workshops (e.g., resume development, mock interviews) (Brougham et al., 2023). However, it must be noted that some of this programming has been developed as a mechanism to help prepare athletes for future professional success and relieve stressors (Turick et al., 2021). Researchers confirmed the importance of this programming, suggesting that due to the schedules of college athletes and their focus on sport, college athletes often fail to explore other facets of their identity, resulting in a traumatic transition to life after sport (Tyranee et al., 2013; Wendling & Sagas, 2020).

To enhance athlete experiences within college athletics, the recently formed NCAA working group on athlete mental health adopted policies that require college athletic departments to have mental health professionals (MHP) readily available for college athletes, whether that be in the athletic department or on-campus (NCAA, 2024). While this is a strong step toward addressing potential mental health issues, the stigma surrounding seeking help and actual scope of resources available to college athletes still allows for many barriers to support. While not directly tied to mental health support, college athletes have additional support within their athletic

department including athletic trainers, academic support, athlete development professionals, strength coaches, and nutritional staff.

Mental Health Stigma

Challenges remain for campus officials with encouraging students to utilize their support systems. Research indicates both public and personal barriers impact individuals' help-seeking behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2009a; Wood, 2024). For example, Wood (2024) found that while around 70% of college students struggled with their mental health, only 37% of the population sought support. Perceived public stigma is an individual's perceptions of other people's negative stereotypes and prejudice about mental illness (Corrigan, 2004), whereas personal stigma refers to an individual's own stigmatizing attitudes around mental health (Griffiths et al., 2004). Research has indicated gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status were significantly and negatively associated with help-seeking behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2009a).

Similar to the general population, college athletes also struggle with mental health stigma. However, these challenges can be exacerbated in sport with athletes trying to avoid looking weak (Kim & Tamminen, 2025; Lopez & Levy, 2013). While some scholars have argued that educating college athletes will help overcome stigma, others have identified college athletes already have above average mental health literacy (Beasley & Hoffman, 2023), highlighting how college athletes are aware of mental health signs, symptoms, and services, but are fearful of seeking help. As Beasley et al. (2021a) found in their examination of mental health professionals (MHPs) in college athletics, the MHPs expressed concern from athletes about seeking help, even if they knew it could benefit them. Knowing this, it is likely that college athletes engage in vulnerable conversations in locations viewed as non-threatening to their athlete identities, like with athletic academic advisors who help athletes explore their identity beyond sport.

Holistic Approach to College Athlete Mental Health

College athletes have greater access to care within their athletic departments, with access to athletic trainers, doctors, and in some cases in-house mental health professionals (Gross et al., 2020). As such, these individuals can work together to create integrated care plans. Following an integrated care plan, athletic trainers, doctors, and mental health professionals can work together to develop treatment plans and goals for an athlete (Sudano et al., 2017). Pecukonis et al. (2008) stated that interprofessional care teams must work together to ensure complementary services. In the context of college athletes, all individuals interacting with athletes have a duty to promote a culture of inclusivity surrounding mental health.

It is important to note the differences in support for college athletes. As mentioned prior, college athletic departments have been slow-moving in specific positions associated with trained clinicians on mental health support, but some exist. For example, support systems with a clinical background may include psychologists, therapists, and social workers (Jones et al., 2022; Meanaker et al., 2023). While these clinical support positions might hold various backgrounds (e.g., performance

based vs. mental health), they still act as trained professionals to work with athletes (Beasley et al., 2021b). Athletic departments also have various levels of non-clinical support, which would include, academic advisors, athletic trainers, coaches, and faculty. While these individuals are not specifically trained in handling challenging conversations, they often have the ability to create strong relationships with athletes that may foster an inviting environment for discussing athlete mental health.

While the integration of this programming could improve the holistic care of athletes by ensuring all medical professionals are working toward a common goal, each institution has a different policy for information that is reported to administration and the head coach and as such, college athletes may continue to perceive sharing information with these individuals as a threat to their playing time or scholarship (Sudano et al., 2017). As Saxe et al. (2022) suggested, a collaborative approach to athlete mental health includes all facets of the athlete's experience, including strong relationships with coaches and MHPs. Another group that has continual interaction with student-athletes and has not been explored from the lens of their experiences with college athlete mental health is athletic academic advisors.

Athletic Academic Advisors

As mentioned previously, college athletes have greater access to support services within their department, extending to athletic academic advisors. To ensure compliance with the NCAA, Division I athletic departments typically have in-house athletic academic advisors (Rubin, 2017). While not mental health professionals, these individuals assist college athletes with the development of their identity beyond sport (Watkins et al., 2022), often engaging in sensitive and difficult conversations with college athletes because of their trusting relationship with students (Thompson et al., 2012). This suggests athletic academic advisors are vital resources to college athletes in their college experience, potentially their first "go to" person outside of their on-field performance with issues and challenges. Professionals, including athletic academic advisors who support college athletes, provide holistic development, including psychosocial and cognitive well-being (Navarro et al., 2020). Through developing strong relationships with athletes, athletic academic advisors provide a safe space in which athletes may share about mental health issues, whether the advisor is trained in this area or not.

College athletes face a lot of pressure to perform athletically at this highest level. However, athletic academic advisors face pressures too, including maintaining eligibility for their students, and justifying the nature of their work as revenue sharing as a result of the *House vs. NCAA* case is causing athletic departments to make cuts to both roster spots on teams and to support staff (Marcello, 2025; Postin, 2025). In their study of 38 professionals in the field on burnout, Rubin and Moreno-Pardo (2018) found athletic academic advisors struggled with work overload, lack of recognition, and health issues. Though they are key in a college athlete's support system, these professionals experience stress along with physical and mental health challenges as a result of their jobs (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). Thus, it is important to better understand the role of these individuals. The purpose of this paper is

not to evaluate athletic academic advisors' knowledge of mental health; rather, it is to examine the experiences and perceptions of athletic academic advisors at the NCAA Division I level regarding their interactions with college athlete mental health to understand how they use their role in relation to college athlete mental health. Doing so shows where college athletic departments are struggling to meet the needs of college athletes regarding mental health, and highlights which collaborative inter-department pathways need to be strengthened to alleviate athletic academic advisors and support college athletes.

The Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST), developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding athlete well-being by examining the multiple environmental systems that influence an individual's development. This theory posits that well-being is shaped by interactions across five nested systems: the micro-system (immediate influences such as coaches, teammates, and family), the meso-system (interactions between these entities, such as coach-parent relationships), the exo-system (indirect influences like sports organizations and media), the macro-system (cultural values and societal norms surrounding sports), and the chrono-system (how these influences change over time). Studies emphasize how well-being is not solely an individual concern but rather a function of broader socio-environmental interactions (Holt & Tamminen, 2016).

The recent research utilizing EST has demonstrated the importance of fostering supportive environments at multiple levels to enhance athlete well-being. For example, Harwood et al. (2020) found athletes with strong meso-system support—where communication between parents, coaches, and teammates is positive—report lower stress levels and higher motivation. Similarly, studies indicate burnout and reduced psychological resilience are a byproduct of negative macro-system influences, such as toxic performance culture or stigmatization of mental health issues (Stambulova et al., 2021).

In the context of college athletics, there have been multiple studies that have examined the five systems to better understand the current mental health crisis and how to better create systems of support for athletes. Past studies have found significance in the meso-level as the most important for integration of holistic athlete mental health care (Beasley et al., 2021a; Kloetzer & Beasley, 2025; Saxe et al., 2022). For example, Beasley et al. (2021) examined the experiences of MHPs in college athletics, with findings suggesting the meso-level system was the key driver in mental health care. With the unique dynamic of college sports, these MHPs suggested the most important aspect of their roles was referrals from coaches, showing that the micro-level systems were important, but the interaction between key micro level stakeholders (coaches & athletic administrators) with MHPs was vital to a culture of mental health support (meso-level system). From the athlete's perspective, Saxe et al. (2022) found similar results, with the most important aspect of supporting a culture of mental health beginning with the head coach. However, meso-level sys-

tems were most important to a team culture of support, as head coaches are often not trained specifically in the nuances of mental health support. These authors called for collaborative support across groups, suggesting collaboration (meso-level) across athletic departments is the best way to support the mental health of college athletes. These findings underscore the need for holistic support systems that recognize the interconnected nature of individual and environmental factors in shaping an athlete's well-being.

In the context of this study, we examined the micro- and meso-system from the lens of the athletic academic advisor. For example, this role meets directly with athletes (micro) and also serves as a connection between the athletes, coaches, and other support staff (meso). As the collaboration process has been shown to be important in holistic athlete support, academic advisor roles hold a unique position in the athletic department inter-workings. Athletic academic advisors interact and create strong relationships with college athletes throughout the year (micro), while they also interact with coaches and other athletic staff (meso), as such, they hold an important role in the collaborative holistic care of student-athlete mental health. Through the lens of EST, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do Division I athletic academic advisors use their role to enhance college athlete mental health?

RQ2: What educational training, preparation, and support do Division I athletic academic advisors receive to be successful in their roles?

Method

This study was developed through a social constructivist paradigm, where knowledge and understanding are developed by an individual's interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In the context of positioning the researchers of this paper in the greater context of intercollegiate athletics, all researchers have worked in this space, with two of the three having held specific roles in athletic academic advising at various institutions. Below is the positionality of each researcher. Positionality statements are a tool promoting reflexivity from authors, an important tool given the interpretive nature of this research study (Milner, 2007).

Author #1 is a woman and a former NCAA Division I college athlete at a Division I Power 4 institution, with past experience working in athletic academic advising at a mid-major institution. She earned a sport management master's degree while serving as an advisor. Her research focuses on organizational policy and enhancing athlete well-being. Author #2 is a man and a former Division I mid-major and Division III college athlete, with past experiences as a director of baseball operations at the Division I level and coach in Division III. His master's degree was in sport administration while coaching. His research focuses on providing more equitable and inclusive experiences in high school and college athletics, more specifically examining leadership experiences and college athlete experiences. Author #3 is a woman with experience working as an athletic academic advisor and athlete development

coordinator at both Power 4 and mid-major institutions. She earned a master's in sport management before working as an athletic academic advisor. Her research focuses on college athletes and the professionals who support them. Each author possesses a PhD, with focuses in Sport Management, Educational Leadership, and Higher Education respectively.

Prior to completing interviews, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, then used purposive sampling to identify participants for the study. Specifically, the goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of athletic academic advisors at the NCAA Division I level through an interpretive qualitative inquiry; therefore, we wanted to ensure we had participants that represented Division I Power 4, mid-major, and non-football schools. Interpretive qualitative inquiry allowed us to explore and understand participants' interpretations of their experiences within the athletic department and with college athletes (Smith & Smith, 2008). We did so by conducting 10 semi-structured interviews with participants. After seven interviews the participants presented initial findings and had identified several similarities in the responses of participants, the inclusion of three more subjects allowed the researchers to be confident that saturation in the study had been achieved, an appropriate number of participants according to Fugard and Potts (2015) when using reflexive thematic analysis.

A semi-structured interview method was chosen for this study as it allows for follow-up questions or probing outside of the original questions developed (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This flexibility allowed us to better understand the experiences of athletic academic advisors within Division I athletic departments. The semi-structured interview method also allowed us to revise the interview guides early on to ensure we could gather as much information from participants as possible (Bhalla et al., 2023). Through interpretive qualitative inquiry, conducting semi-structured interviews allowed us to better unpack participant answers to our questions depending on their interpretations of what was asked. Interviews were conducted via Zoom. After the two researchers completing interviews had each conducted one, they met to discuss thoughts on the interview guide, opting only for minor changes. Interview questions for the study included background questions such as "describe any educational training that you have completed that helps you to be successful within your job." and situational questions such as "recently there has been a push toward college athlete mental health. Can you describe what resources are available for college athletes in your department and do you feel these resources are adequate?" A full interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Participants

To participate in this study, individuals had to currently be working as an athletic academic advisor in an athletic department at the NCAA Division I level and at least 18 years of age. A total of 10 individuals participated in this study, nine of whom were women. Table 1 indicates the role, level of institution, sex, and master's education field. To promote personification of the participants, they were each assigned

a pseudonym. While research is split on the random assignment of pseudonyms, we chose this as participants consented to this study under the agreement of anonymity (Lahman et al., 2023).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Role	Sex	Education	Institution Type	Previous College Athlete
Lauren	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes
Kevin	Athletic academic advisor	M	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes
Georgia	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	No
Mary	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	Yes
Elizabeth	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	No
Rebecca	Athletic academic advisor	F	Education	Power 4	Yes
Sarah	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	No
Carissa	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Power 4	Yes
Madison	Athletic academic advisor	F	Sport	Mid-Major	No
Lucy	Athletic academic advisor/compliance	F	Sport	Mid-Major	Yes

Analysis

Audio files were saved directly to password protected personal devices from Zoom, in line with the IRB protocol. The audio files were then transcribed verbatim and formatted by the first author, who was conducting the analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun et al. (2023) was used to analyze the data. To begin, five transcripts were reviewed and coded by both interview conducting authors prior to a scholarly presentation. During this process, we were able to ensure that we had similar experiences and findings with our interviews and felt confident that one author could code the remainder of the interviews. Following the conference, the remainder of interviews were conducted, and the transcripts were coded by one author. The interviews were coded initially by the two authors who conceptualized the study to ensure the interview guide was appropriately designed to answer our research questions. As reflexive thematic analysis is interpretive in nature, the goal is

not to achieve quantitative measures like intercoder reliability (Byrne, 2021), and as such, once the authors were confident in the data collection from the interview guide, shifting to one coder was appropriate.

Reflexive thematic analysis was the most appropriate choice for this study as each researcher had significant experience with intercollegiate athletics and knowledge of academic advising. As such, the researchers were able to inform their interpretation of the data based on their theoretical assumptions and their prior experiences (Byrne, 2021). The specific process followed by the researchers involved: an initial step of coding where specific statements were copied into an excel file (Braun et al., 2023). Next, the codes were placed into groups of similar statements that generated initial themes. Themes were then adjusted to ensure they accurately represented the coded data, at this stage some themes were adjusted or removed (Braun et al., 2023). The authors then met to discuss the codes, some of which were refined for publication. For example, one participant stated, "Do they know where to find you? Are you easy to find? Are you available now?" This quote was copied verbatim as an In Vivo code into an Excel spreadsheet, coded with the word connections, and then shifted to other quotes specifically focused on availability. Availability is a sub-theme of Importance of Building Connections.

Trustworthiness

The section below outlines the four criteria of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), highlighting how we applied each of these to our study.

Credibility

Through our time in the field, or working adjacent to the academic advising discipline, we developed strong knowledge of the challenges faced by these individuals allowing us to develop an informed research study. By engaging in reflexivity, we have been able to ensure we acknowledge any biases and preconceptions throughout the development and analysis process, offering credibility to our findings.

Transferability

The research context within this study is NCAA Division I. However, there are large discrepancies in the resources within Division I institutions. To combat this challenge, we were purposeful in our sampling, ensuring participants appropriately represented the different levels of resources within these athletic departments. As such, we used this information to guide our findings section, to better highlight to the reader the different contexts.

Dependability

Our methodology section covers the research process used to gather and understand the data shared below, including documenting the author involvement and reflexive activities such as a conference presentation, used to refine our final findings.

Confirmability

Within the methodology section we highlight research team meetings and involvement in the data collection and analysis processes. Within these meetings we were able to review our understanding of the data and discuss the implications of the findings. By having two researchers code the data we were able to confirm our understanding of the results was similar, and using the third author, an expert in the academic advising discipline, as a resource for contextualizing the results ensured we were appropriately applying the research findings.

Findings

The purpose of this study was two-pronged. First, we sought to identify the participant's experiences with handling college athletes' mental health. To do so, we explored how they use their role to enhance college student mental health. Our first set of findings falls under *Athlete Support Professionals and College Athlete Mental Health*. Within this section we cover themes of navigating athlete interactions and importance of building connections, with the sub-themes of fostering relationships, authentic conversations, and availability. The second goal of this study was to better understand the preparedness of athletic academic advisors to handle their role with college athlete mental health, more specifically, their educational background, access to ongoing education, and their perceptions of the role prior to starting and now that they have worked in the industry. We titled this section *Academic Advisors and Perceptions of the Role*. Within this section, we cover themes of lack of preparedness for the role, with sub-themes of balancing building connection and role responsibilities and work-life balance and comes with time with subthemes of learning on the fly and professional development and seeking support.

Athlete Support Professionals and College Athlete Mental Health

The following section shares how college athlete academic advisors use their roles to enhance the mental health of college athletes. Results showed how they navigate challenges with the information shared by athletes and recognize the critical role of building relationships with the athletes supported by the subthemes of authentic conversations, fostering relationships, and availability.

Navigating Athlete Interactions

Athletic academic advisors have an athlete-facing role, meaning these individuals have frequent interactions with college athletes. As such, navigating these interactions is critical to completing their role to the best of their abilities. Participants in the study were quick to acknowledge that building relationships with athletes is different from person to person in the length of time it takes and the information they are trusted with. Georgia shared,

I should have known, but maybe I wasn't sure I was going to be just thrown into student-athletes that are just so open and honest and will have a conversation in front of me. Where I'm pretty much a stranger starting off to them.

However, while Lucy agreed some athletes open up quickly, it can also take others much longer as reflected in her statement, “Men tend to hold back because of, you know, emotions and stigma around [their mental health].” When athletes do eventually open up, the conversations can consist of several different issues. Georgia expanded on her previous statement saying,

I don't think I was prepared for all the questions that I have gotten on all kinds of topics. But once I was in the role a little bit I was like, well I'm getting academic questions, I'm getting financial aid questions, I'm not that but if they're comfortable asking me then I can point them in the right direction to you know, get their answer.

Meanwhile, Carissa discussed an athlete who had a severe head injury playing their sport and how this injury impacted their academics. To mitigate the situation, Carissa engaged in conversations with the player about learning services available to them as well as discussed having conversations with the athlete about making sure they are treating their head injury with as much care as they would a physical injury.

Importance of Building Connections

Building connections with athletes was critical for participants in this study. Through a combination of authentic conversations, fostering relationships, and being available to athletes, participants felt they were best able to meet the needs of the athlete and successfully complete their job.

Fostering Relationships. Participants were quick to highlight the importance of developing relationships with their athletes but indicated the way to reach these athletes could change from person to person. For example, Lauren shared,

I have the highest touch point with most of our student-athletes, especially the ones that struggle academically, or are young or transfers. And so, for me it's really getting to know them and sometimes it takes three weeks, and sometimes it takes four months, and so that's different for every student.

This quote by Lauren indicated the journey to athletes feeling comfortable and opening up changes from person to person, possibly because the journey of each athlete is different. Georgia highlighted the sentiment that different people need to be reached in different ways, sharing,

I think a lot of it is the conversations too. I will say there's multiple ways of doing it. Most of our student-athletes may follow me on social media, and I'm okay with that on certain platforms. And I do promote and push out stuff about mental health and the power of it. I think it's one thing that you say it, but like, do they really see that you're meaning it? I'm very cognizant that I'm making sure I'm saying stuff publicly, because then they're like, wait, maybe I can go talk to her, even if they may not have had that conversation yet.

The participants above indicate various ways in which they foster relationships with student-athletes, acknowledging different students will be reached differently. However, Rebecca explained at their institution, it was important for them to use their role to foster relationships between the athletes and mental health professionals rather

than taking on that role themselves. Rebecca said, “First-year seminar is used to connect counselors to the student-athletes and build relationships” and elaborated that in their role they still “take the time to learn about each of the student-athletes and what their needs are.” However, when it came to mental health, fostering relationships with the hired professionals in the department could be beneficial for success.

Authentic Conversations. To build connections, participants emphasized the importance of having authentic conversations. For participants, authentic conversations occurred when they actively listened to the concerns of the athletes and helped them feel heard. They could show the athlete this sentiment by sharing their voices to upper administration:

I think one of our main roles, and it goes back to like what people don’t necessarily see on the outside of what an academic services or athlete development role within an athletic department is, is being there to truly and wholeheartedly support the student-athletes that we are working with. Some days that is making sure that their opinions and their thoughts/ideas are being heard by the people who have the kind of access that people in my position do and so my biggest hope is that there’s always an academic staff person and student-athlete development staff person that has a seat at those senior level administrator meetings and at the meetings with the head coaches, and that we’re present enough and courageous enough to be able to voice the concerns that we have or the ideas that we’ve heard on behalf of our student-athletes, so that their four- or five-year careers here are everything that they’ve wanted to be and that they’re able to accomplish everything they wanted. (Kevin)

The idea of supporting the athletes’ voice is shared by Lauren who stated, “But you hope with those developed relationships you are really advocating [so] that the student who’s sitting across from me at my desk has a voice.” These quotes highlight the role of advocacy that individuals in these positions take on due to the conversations they can have with college athletes.

Availability. Participants discussed being available for athletes when they needed their support. By being available, they found participants were more likely to contact them regarding issues they were having. Participants highlighted availability through late night conversations and weekend work:

I do check-in with my students. I FaceTime them, I call them. It’s one of those things where you’re developing that relationship and you want them to know that you care about them. And so sometimes that may look like getting a facetime or call at 9 PM because they’re struggling and want to talk about something. (Mary)

While Mary indicated she was available for calls late at night, Rebecca shared she will come in to work on the weekends to ensure athletes are able to get their work done.

I care about this position, and I want the best for everybody. So, does that mean me coming in the weekends and getting things done? For sure. Yeah, there’s Saturdays and Sundays, I don’t know, I give up my times on those

days. Come in and like work on things. But again, I know it's gonna help out in the long run. (Rebecca)

While both of these approaches differ in the availability they are offering the athletes, the goal remains the same, to provide them with the best chance of success in the long run.

Academic Advisors and Perceptions of the Role

Participants shared how their role is much larger than advising college athletes on their academics or preparing them for life after sport. The following section highlights a lack of preparedness for the activities of the position and their development in the position over time.

Lack of Preparedness for the Role

During the interviews, we explored participants' perceptions of their roles prior to entering the field and then what they have found their job to entail. Through this process we identified two key themes which were balancing building connections and role responsibilities, and work-life balance.

Balancing Building Connection and Role Responsibilities. Participants in this study were asked to discuss their initial expectations and their current experiences in the role. When asked about expectations of the job, participants were quick to share tasks such as "communicating students' progress in the classroom" (Kevin), and "making sure athletes were hitting the targets and dealing with coaches" (Lauren). However, when participants were asked about what their job actually entail, one explained,

A lot more interaction with other staff members other than just the coaches.

Daily communication with strength and conditioning and athletic trainers about dealing with student scheduling. (Lauren)

Meanwhile, Elizabeth discussed how she finds herself in a position where she often need to motivate athletes to complete their work because their primary focus is sport, and they often just go through the motions to remain eligible. She further shared,

I think, prior to actually being in the field, I kind of had the mindset going in that people would value the work that I do. People would value what we're trying to have them accomplish. (Elizabeth)

Participants highlight their perceptions of the role were much more target oriented than relationship building; however, they have found building relationships with athletes and staff are critical to be successful in the role.

Work-life Balance. Previously, we highlighted how academic advisors use availability to connect with athletes and support their mental health. However, this same activity impacts the experiences of academic advisors. Participants indicate they are engaged in their role outside of typical work hours including over the weekend, like Rebecca who said, "Reporting and communicating with students even over the weekend to make sure they had everything completed."

Similarly, Carissa explained one of her duties is to travel with their teams and lead study hall on the road to ensure their athletes remain on top of their academics. Despite being a formalized duty, it extends significantly beyond working a typical work schedule. Lucy was the only participant to explicitly state knowledge of this not being a healthy approach sharing,

Yeah, I'm the kind of person that has not the most healthy approach, but I have an open door policy and I also have an open phone policy. I guess now like with that, there's stipulations. But I tell my students, "Need me? I'm always here."

While participants did not explicitly use the term work-life balance, significant amounts of research on college athletics indicates that employees are leaving the field due to the long, demanding hours. While the participants may not yet be at the point of burnout, their openness to working these hours (i.e., non-traditional hours, weekend work) indicate it is a likely outcome.

Comes with Time

For many of the participants, longevity in the role helped with their comfortability and ability to complete the job well. They were able to learn the necessary functional skills for their jobs, as well as become more confident in their positions. Through time in the role, these individuals were able to access external networks and participate in professional development activities which were found to be helpful for their careers.

Learning on the Fly. As evident by the findings above, athletic academic advisors are often unaware of the duties of their role when entering the field. In combination with this, these professionals also found themselves building deep relationships with the college athletes beyond their sport. Therefore, understanding the backgrounds of these individuals allows insight into their preparedness to deal with these factors. Our interview guide explicitly asked about the educational journey participants had taken revealing each participant in the study had completed a masters' degree, most commonly in sport studies with one participant completing their master's degree in education. Importantly, participants did not indicate their educational background had an impact on their ability to perform their role, rather often discussed how their time as graduate assistants or interns helped to prepare them for their career. For example, one participant illustrated how they were able to learn on the job during their internship year, learning directly from other individuals who had been in the field:

I really kind of started from the ground up. I think my internship really helped me a lot. I worked with [Professional at Division I Institution], who prior to that worked at [Power 4 institution]. So, she brought a lot of her programming from [Power 4 institution] to [Division I mid-major institution]. And my initial start date of at [Division I mid-major institution] was her first year so we were learning and operating together on that. [The internship] was just a great learning experience working alongside her, really getting to know this space and college athletics, and just like working at

different universities, too, and learning how they operate with their different systems, protocols, expectations, I think, really helps, too. (Rebecca)

Another participant highlighted using their graduate program to explore different roles within the athletic department, and settling on the academic advising position they moved into full-time post-graduation:

[During] my grad program I ended up becoming an assistant academic counselor, not only working with our men's basketball student-athletes, but a couple of other different teams, and that's where I found another passion, being able to mentor people to understand the value of an education and being able to pour into the lots of young athletes. I went the academics route because when you think about what is required of a student-athlete a lot of times, the academic piece is the requirement of being able to compete, and not much emphasis is put on the development side...But that's kinda my path to this role, just being able to fill in the gaps and being able to be a support system for student-athletes. (Mary)

Learning on the job is a big deal for those entering the athletic academic advising space. While participants all had a master's degree education level, the content of their programs was not cited as preparing them for success in the role.

Professional Development and Seeking Support. Given that advising is not a key topic learned about in sport study programs, we sought to understand how athletic academic advisors learn skills to ensure competence in the role. Therefore, we specifically asked about continuing education opportunities. All participants shared they have engaged with National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) webinars, NCAA conferences, or Women's Leaders in Sport conferences. However, the participants also shared how department support for these opportunities can be restricted. For example, Elizabeth shared, "The department sends half of the staff to the N4A conference one year and the other half of the staff the following year."

Meanwhile, Lauren and Kevin openly discussed how COVID increased their ability to attend these continuing education opportunities as the formats were shifted online. Participants emphasize the importance of these professional development opportunities in gaining leadership positions and keeping up with changing rules. Further, Madison explained she attend the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) – College Student Educators International, an organization they learned of when serving as a primary-role academic advisor prior to entering the athletics world where they are able to learn about current trends among college students, helpful for staying ahead of the curve with the athletes.

Discussion

The mental health of college athletes is a crucial topic that deserves deeper understanding. The purpose of this paper was to examine the role of the athletic academic advisor on college athlete mental health through the EST framework. From

our research, we identify there are a lack of meso-level interactions which could potentially negatively impact the overall culture of mental health in college athletics. First, we examined athletic academic advisors and their perceptions of handling mental health issues within their role with college athletes, including how they use their role to enhance college athlete mental health. The findings related to this question suggested athletes were willing to engage in honest and forthright conversations with these athlete support professionals, a positive finding as past research finds athletes are less likely to seek support surrounding mental health due to potential stigma (Chow et al., 2020; Wahto et al., 2016). Further, the participants suggested to gain the trust of athletes to share their experiences, they had to cultivate strong relationships with their college athletes.

Micro-level findings from our study emphasized participants focus on fostering relationships and authentic conversations to build a trustworthy environment for athletes to lean on the support staff. According to EST, micro-level relationships and interactions are critical to developing a supporting culture around mental health (Beasley et al., 2021b; Saxe et al. 2022). The athletic academic advisors emphasized the unique role they play in engaging with athletes differently from other athletic staff, such as coaches and athletic trainers. They also highlighted the importance of fostering a space where athletes feel comfortable having conversations beyond their sport. This is especially important as past research suggests athletes struggle to find outlets outside of sports, and stressors are enhanced in the competitive environment of college sports (Brewer et al., 2022). The relationship building was emphasized in various ways by participants, as different approaches were needed for different athletes. A key motivator for the participants to develop these relationships was to enhance the athlete's voice and comfortability. Recently, there has been a push in the athlete well-being literature to promote athlete voice and outside identities within their sporting experience and amongst their organizations (Brougham, 2024; Brougham & McLeod, 2023), especially considering organizational behavior literature suggests a connection between employee voice and improved well-being.

The participants in this study suggested building connections and fostering relationships ensures athletes feel valued as humans in the athletic department. Participants indicated they prioritized their relationships by going above and beyond for the athletes. Specifically, individuals talked about working outside of traditional working hours, including late night phone calls, office visits on weekends, and going on team travel trips. While this does pose challenges for academic advisors in their work-life balance, they highlighted the importance of being always available, which leads to more authentic and open dialogue with athletes, potentially helping break down the stigma of sharing mental health struggles. As Newman et al. (2015) suggested, once one feels comfortable and supported in various relationships (especially with MHP), they can start to discuss mental health struggles more openly. Interestingly, this finding also highlights the direct impact athletes can have on academic advisors. While we share academic advisors have a direct impact on athletes at the micro-system level, it is likely this is at least somewhat mutually beneficial given the additional hours without pay that academic advisors invest in their athletes.

While relationships between college athletes and the participants in the study are important, these individuals are not MHP, despite being seen by college athletes as trusting people to share challenges with, in confidence. In terms of using their role within the meso-system of EST, only one participant in the study talked about using their role to foster relationships with other resources within the department, specifically using meetings to introduce athletes to the department's mental health resources. This individual worked at a large Power 4 institution with a significant budget and investment in mental health resources. This might suggest a silo effect for athletic academic advisors as they struggled to build quality partnerships across their department, especially those focused on mental health resources. This is a troublesome finding, as they are vital to the "pulse" of the athlete population. Further research should examine the impact of "breaking trust" from the academic advisor. For example, an academic advisor has a duty of care to college athletes to connect them with proper MHP resources when an athlete expresses troublesome mental health rhetoric, which might create negative perceptions from college athletes of who they can trust, based on the continued stigma around seeking mental health support. This may challenge the positional framing of the academic advisor as a support system to athletes.

The role of academic advisor becomes interesting when put in the context EST, as "trust" and collaboration (meso-level system), might be a challenging balance. For example, past works suggest that referrals are the best way for MHPs to properly serve college athletes (Beasley et al., 2021a). With the continued stigma associated with seeking mental health resources (especially in athletic departments without a culture of support), college athletes might view meso-level systems (relationship between athletic academic advisor and MHP) as breaking the trust of their relationships. Thus, challenging the role of meso-level systems in college athletics. It has been shown that the meso-level systems are vital to supporting college athletes (Saxe et al., 2022); however, how this collaboration is executed in the context of athletic academic advisors will need to be explored further to examine how the meso-level system relationship between athletic academic advisor and athlete might be damaged.

The second goal of this study was to better understand the preparedness of individuals for the roles of athletic academic advisor in college athletics by understanding their educational background, access to ongoing education, and perceptions of the role both prior to starting and after they have worked in the industry. The results from this study suggest a disconnect between expectations and reality for participants, with the role being much more human-facing than anticipated (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). For the participants, success in this role came from learning on the job. They expressed a lack of concerted effort from athletic departments in their orientation phase and transition, potentially leading to some of the disconnects. This is especially true when resources pertaining to mental health concerns from athletes.

If this is a student-facing role in athletic departments, leadership must emphasize the importance of handling athletes' mental health more in the interview process and provide resources to ensure the staff are well educated and prepared to do so.

This speaks to the meso-level system and how athletic departments are collaborating across systems to provide the utmost support for athletes. With the growing number of MHPs being hired directly into athletic departments, the only way to create a culture of inclusivity surrounding mental health is for micro-level actors to buy into this culture, a good example of a starting point, is the academic advisor role.

Participants also explained how continuing education was important to be successful in the role. Individuals achieved this through joining webinars and attending conferences from various other organizations/entities. During this process they were able to learn about topics specifically related to mental health, minority groups, and other timely topics such as completing their role through a pandemic. The opportunity to engage in continuing education was made easier for participants during the pandemic as they were able to join free webinars, rather than travel to conferences, which athletic departments only sometimes supported. As participants have suggested a lack of knowledge about the role prior to entering the career field, being able to engage in continuing education programming is critical to enhancing the mental health of college athletes. Despite this, the support from athletic departments appeared to be lacking.

While the level of care from these individuals is apparent, these behaviors raise several concerns, including work-life balance. Research has indicated employees within intercollegiate athletics have poor work-life balance, and therefore high levels of burnout (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019). These behaviors continue despite no relationship being found between work hours and program success for coaches and administrators (Huml et al., 2024). This seems especially true for the athletic academic advisor. These roles have morphed into more than just academic and career support, with the relationship between these professionals and college athletes becoming more ingrained in mentorship and guidance (Thompson, 2013). While this level of support for athletes is critical, we argue this falls outside the scope of the role, as currently outlined in the role responsibilities, evident by the lack of understanding by participants on what is actually required to be successful in the role.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that while athletic academic advisors are aware of meso-systems within the athletic department, they rely on micro-systems as outlined by EST. It is possible that due to the expectations placed on athletic academic advisors, they feel the most effective way to ensure success is to focus on their independent relationships with the athletes especially given they are well positioned in the athletic department to have conversations surrounding the burden of college athlete mental health issues. However, findings also suggested these individuals lack the proper training to handle these conversations and while they learn on the job and engage in various professional development opportunities, they face a challenging balancing act. This finding sheds light on college athletic departments failing to address the meso-system and collaboration that is needed for a culture of mental health support. They have to hold athletes accountable in their academic endeavors, career development, and skill-building, while also trying to develop and maintain quality relationships. This study sheds light on the challenging position our current system puts on athlete support professionals. Furthermore, the

findings of this study suggest a shift in the training these individuals receive when entering the career could have positive impacts on their success both professionally and personally.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study indicate a significant area for athletic departments to invest in. The roles of athletic academic advisors are critical to the growth experiences of college athletes and fostering their mental health. Despite this, these individuals often enter the role with little knowledge of the field and face a lack of support from the athletic department. Immediate changes for athletic departments can include better onboarding processes that educate individuals on the role, expectations, and policies in place to be successful in the role. It should also include a more robust collaboration (meso-level) process between multiple groups in athletics. Most specifically, athletic academic advisors and MHPs. As Beasley et al. (2021a) found, MHPs in college athletics struggle for referrals, with the athletic academic advisor self-identified role to foster positive relationships with athletes, they represent a quality group to collaborate with MHPs for more referrals.

Athletic academic advisors engage with ongoing education to be able to better complete their role; however, they found this much easier during the pandemic, suggesting a gap for sport organizations focused on this space to create engaging online programming for these individuals. Individuals indicated ongoing education had limited support from the athletic department and was often sought out in their own time and therefore, athletic departments should incentivize and provide time and compensation for completion of this programming.

While beyond the scope of this study, it is important to outline the impact of the House settlement on athletic department's structure. Since the official adoption of the House settlement on July 1, 2025, there have been increases in layoffs amongst college athletics staff (Shelton, 2025). A challenge for athlete development staff is the lack of evidence for return on investment (ROI) with their jobs, making this critical to this study as these positions can be quickly reduced. Athletic academic advisors are often situated alongside student-athlete development staff in the same unit, leading to a shifting of roles, potentially directing advisors to take on more holistic athlete development responsibilities. The shifting landscape of college athletics will not be understood for many years, but continuing to monitor the well-being of academic athletic advisors should become important for athletic administrators in the new era of college athletics.

Athletic departments can partner with campus counseling centers to offer training to staff. In addition, they can organize and offer trainings like Mental Health First Aid and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST; Gross et al., 2020). Further, Gross et al. (2020) introduced a Mental Health Toolbox to provide a one-page resource which helps practitioners start conversations about mental health with college athletes. Lastly, for athletic departments with in-house MHP, there should be intentional collaboration and the exchange of ideas amongst MHP and the athletic academic and athlete development staff.

Improving collaboration between departments within athletics could improve the mental health of college athletes by ensuring they receive the support they need from individuals trained to provide it. Additionally, by enhancing these measures, athletic departments could reduce the emotional labor placed on college athletics academic advisors who feel responsible for supporting college athletes, including outside of standard working hours. Doing so could help to improve these individuals' work-life balance, and encourage their longevity in the role.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on Division I athletic departments across Power 4 and mid-major, and non-football institutions. Doing so allowed us to speak with professionals in athletic departments with a wide range of financial support. However, the experiences of those in NCAA Division I athletic departments is not always representative of NCAA Division II and III, therefore additional research should be conducted at those levels. Additionally, the findings of this research are eye-opening to understand the athletic academic advisor perspectives; however, completing surveys using these findings with a larger number of professionals could provide more quantitative insights that can better enhance the understanding of trends within the role, leading to generalizability of the findings. Given these professionals also have taken on additional duties related to helping athletes with name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals and excessive transcript evaluations for transfer students as a result of the transfer portal, further exploration of their roles and influence on students' well-being is warranted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of athletic academic advisors in their roles supporting the mental health of college athletes. Our findings illuminate the fact that these athlete support professionals are a valuable asset to college athletes, but more attention should be paid to the training of these individuals, along with the potential long-term burnout effects of the role. Our work contributes to the mental health and college athlete literature by exploring the athletic academic advisors' role in the well-being of college athletes. We find the need to reassess the role of these professionals in the college athletics landscape is far overdue. The hope of this study is to sharpen focus on the shifting needs of college athletes to better support athletic academic advisors in their roles supporting the next generation of college athletes.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Describe your journey into your position within athletics. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: previous college athlete? Years of experience?
2. Describe any educational training that you have completed that helps you to be successful within your job. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: undergraduate or master's degree, NACDA training sessions.
3. Describe what you thought would be the main roles of your job prior to starting. (RQ2)
4. Describe what you think the main roles of your job are. (RQ2)
 - a. Probe: Explain the disconnect in your responses.
5. Recently, there has been a push toward college athlete mental health. Can you describe what resources are available for college athletes in your department and do you feel these resources are adequate? (RQ1&2)
6. As a college athlete academic advisor, you interact more often with the college athletes than many other people in the department. Explain how you ensure that you use your position to amplify college athlete wellness. (RQ1)
7. Describe your vision for college athlete mental health and well-being. How does your role in academics or development play into that vision? (RQ1)