

“Constantly Fighting a Battle”: Identifying Factors and Strategies to Prevent Learning Specialists from Leaving Athletic Academic Support

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Learning specialists within athletic academic support units on college campuses support the most fragile, neurodiverse learners. Learning specialists provide individualized academic support to prioritized collegiate student-athletes who are most at-risk for academic difficulties (Steinberg et al., 2018). While previous research has emphasized the value this role contributes to the academic success (McCarthy, 2019) and winning success (Stokowski et al., 2020) of college student-athletes, individuals who served as learning specialists have decided to leave the athletic academic support field. The purpose of this study was to identify the primary factors that influenced this decision. Using snowball sampling method, an online questionnaire was disseminated to former learning specialists ($N = 22$). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze closed-ended responses. Open-ended results were coded for common themes. Six themes emerged related to the dimensions of burnout—workload, control, reward, fairness, values, and community—which all encompass the three domains: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). The implications of this study provide a critical opportunity to reflect and invest in learning specialist resources to minimize burnout and maximize retention efforts within collegiate athletics academic support units across the nation. Suggestions for additional education and development opportunities focused on learning specialists are offered along with specific retention strategies.

Keywords: learning specialist, burnout prevention, collegiate sports, academic support, NCAA, resignation, higher education

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Introduction

Being an educator in today’s world is not for the faint of heart; reports from schools across the nation suffering from a labor crisis continue to emerge on the nightly news and have been dubbed the Great Resignation (Kaplan, 2021). Professionals who provide support services to student-athletes at the post-secondary level have an especially challenging job because of the diverse population they serve. Couple these challenges with the demands of practice schedules, team travel, coaching staff opinions, the transfer portal, post-COVID-19 pandemic education, NIL (name, image, and likeness), and underprepared students and the result can be a perfect storm.

One group of academic support service professionals who help college student-athletes navigate this turbulent world are learning specialists. Developed as an extension of the academic counselor position within college athletics, this role emerged in the mid-1990s due to a combination of the increasing number of student-athletes disclosing education-impacting disabilities (NCAA, n.d.) and the NCAA’s more rigorous academic standards based on initial and continuing eligibility concerns (Newman et al., 2016). Learning specialists serve a crucial role on student-athlete academic support teams as they “provide(s) individualized skill development and learning strategy instruction to student-athletes who are identified as academically underprepared” (Steinberg et al., 2018, p. 92). Learning specialists within college athletics academic support teams work tirelessly to assess for learning concerns and help student-athletes improve metacognition and self-regulation skills (Lawson et al., 2021) embedded within routines that encourage consistency in attendance, attitude, and effort in structured academic support time that includes prioritizing course-specific objectives and task analysis (McConomy et al., 2022). These routines also emphasize the importance of communication with professors and instructors, as student-athletes are encouraged to proactively work ahead of deadlines to allow for the necessary time to seek and integrate instructor feedback as much as possible prior to their submission of final drafts.

To support students who are academically underprepared or at-risk academically, it is often necessary to provide individualized interventions (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Kitsantas et al., 2008; Lawson et al., 2021; Steinberg et al., 2018;

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Stokowski, Blunt-Vinti, et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2020; Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). These interventions may remediate basic skills, address motivation, and/or provide the students with the skills necessary for increasing classroom success (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). They may be focused on time management, self-efficacy, academic motivation and engagement, self-advocacy, self-determination, and technology skills that will help them succeed in and out of college (Steinberg et al., 2018). Within college athletic academic support units, it is often learning specialists with advanced degrees in education, special education, psychology, or a related field who provide these types of services (Ledbetter, 2021; Steinberg et al., 2018; Wolverton, 2016). Learning specialists play an important role in identifying academic risk (Birch et al., 2019) and supporting academic success (McCarthy, 2019). In doing so, these individuals often establish a critical campus partnership with Student Disability Service (SDS) units on college campuses as they serve as liaisons for the student-athlete population, and tailor support services to prioritized caseloads of student-athletes in academic-focused sessions to nurture development and growth in learning strategies, task analysis, metacognition, executive functioning skills, self-regulation, critical thinking, reading comprehension, writing, and other academic areas.

As the number of student-athletes disclosing education-impacting disabilities (NCAA, n.d.) continues to increase, demand for experienced learning specialists within college athletics will likely mirror this trend, as several researchers have stated that meeting with a learning specialist contributes to positive long-term educational outcomes for student-athletes (Steinberg et al., 2018; Stokowski, Blunt-Vinti, et al., 2017). Further, learning specialists have also been shown to significantly contribute to winning success (Stokowski et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to learn how to prevent burnout and the voluntary exit of individuals serving in this role. So, how can we minimize the Great Resignation (Kaplan, 2021) and maximize the retention of learning specialists within college athletics? The current research seeks to answer this question by exploring the phenomena of job burnout as it relates to this field.

As the number of individuals leaving the field of student-athlete academic support increases, there is a wealth of data to be collected to fully investigate the scope and impact the Great Resignation (Kaplan, 2021) has had on athletic academic support staffs across the country and to reflect on the battle former learning specialists describe constantly fighting “to have our work valued and the importance of it acknowledged.” Now more than ever, the need for highly qualified learning specialists within college athletics is at an all-time high. The students who are entering our postsecondary institutions are the same students who missed one to two years of high school education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who have enrolled at a new institution via the transfer portal

may have previously attended college during a time of 100% online classes and in many cases with more relaxed academic standards due to the pandemic. Student-athletes deserve learning specialists who are qualified and capable of supporting the most fragile neurodiverse learners as they navigate current university course loads.

Literature Review

Support staff within college athletics are not immune to the phenomena of burnout. Increased difficulty in hiring and retaining personnel has been noticed by leaders within the athletic academic support field over the last three to five years. In the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) President’s Report to the N4A Listserv, Dr. Brian Russell’s Region III update shared concerns about the possible trend that people are leaving the [athletic academic support] profession and workforce pools are not as deep as they used to be (personal communication, November, 30, 2021). Hardin et al. (2020) explored this trend when they examined burnout among intercollegiate athletic academic advisors and reported that this phenomenon, along with diminished job satisfaction within the field, is caused by the pressures and demands that athletics department staff encounter daily. While the implementation of the transfer portal has had a positive impact on student-athlete success, it has also negatively impacted graduation rates (Dohrn & Lopez, 2022; Rutledge II, 2023). These pressures can contribute to the disruptiveness, inconsistency, and costs associated with burnout, which adversely affects higher education institutions and, more importantly, the students these institutions serve.

The concept of burnout is not a new one; in 1974 a psychiatrist named Dr. Freudenberger coined the phrase burnout. According to Freudenberger (1974), *burnout* was defined as an emotional depletion, with a loss of motivation and commitment. Fourteen years later, Pines and Aronson (1988) discussed burnout in terms of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion caused by stressful situations that are emotionally demanding. In 2012, Larrivee defined burnout as mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion that is caused by chronic frustration and stress. Previous research acknowledges an increase in burnout and turnover among athletic academic support professionals prior to, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Crooks, 2022; Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018).

Since no previous research specific to burnout among learning specialists within intercollegiate athletic academic support currently exists, research related to educators (K-12) and academic support staff was examined. According to Santoro (2018), the majority of (K-12) teachers leave the profession due to dissatisfaction related to feeling as though they have a lack of input concerning matters of assessment, how and when to teach “what,” testing pressures, administration

concerns, and unhappiness with their working conditions. Rumschlag (2017) found that the cornerstone of teachers' frustrations developed from feeling as though they did not have a voice in decisions in their environments (school/district/state) that had a direct impact on their classroom instruction. Furthermore, teachers experienced a 'precipitous drop' in job satisfaction, which has led to an 'undercurrent of despair' as many respondents to a national survey reported that when they began their careers, they were 100% enthusiastic about their profession, but several years later only 53% (of those same teachers) were still enthusiastic about their work (Santoro, 2018).

In roles where there is a provider-recipient relationship (e.g., human services roles, teachers, etc.) job factors such as large caseloads and scarcity of resources add to feelings of burnout (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Maslach et al. (2001) defined burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 397) and identified three key dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (inefficacy). Rather than experiencing physical exhaustion, one begins to create emotional and cognitive distance from their work in an effort to cope with feeling overwhelmed by the workload. Similarly, the depersonalization process becomes an attempt to distance oneself from service recipients by actively ignoring qualities that correlate to their uniqueness (Maslach et al., 2001). This distance can then make work demands seem more manageable and lead to the development of an indifferent or cynical attitude as an immediate reaction to exhaustion. Reduced personal accomplishment or inefficacy can emerge sequentially with exhaustion and depersonalization, as the latter can directly impact effectiveness. Maslach et al. (2001) also describe the following six domains of worklife presented in a mismatch model that addresses the individual within their situation and the chronic mismatches between the person and their environment that can lead to burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values.

Previous research (Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018) focused on burnout within all student-athlete service professionals (directors, associate/assistant directors, advisors, learning specialists, and student-athlete development professionals). The current research study focuses specifically on burnout in learning specialists, professionals who serve in a critical role assisting student-athletes academically (McCarthy, 2019) and contributing to both positive long-term educational outcomes (Steinberg et al., 2018; Stokowski, Blunt-Vinti, et al., 2017) and significantly contributing to winning success (Stokowski et al., 2020). The disruptiveness, inconsistency, and costs associated with learning specialist burnout adversely affects higher education institutions and, most importantly, the fragile learners these student-athlete academic support professionals serve on a daily basis.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of learning specialists within college athletics by exploring the factors that contribute to their burnout and voluntarily exit of the field. In doing so, the present study was framed to answer the following research question: What are the primary factors that cause learning specialists to burn out and leave college athletics?

Methods

Participants

Former learning specialists ($N = 22$) who voluntarily exited academic support units within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) athletic departments participated in the study. The sample consisted of former full-time learning specialists with an average of 5.82 years of experience in college athletics. Participants possessed additional job titles and responsibilities including “hybrid” positions such as academic advisor ($n = 9$), tutorial coordinator ($n = 7$), and mentor coordinator ($n = 6$). The majority of respondents ($n = 17$) voluntarily exited an academic support unit affiliated with an NCAA Power-Five athletic conference including the Southeastern Conference (SEC) ($n = 8$), the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) ($n = 4$), the Big Ten Conference ($n = 3$), and the PAC-12 Conference ($n = 2$). Most respondents ($n = 20$) had observed another learning specialist voluntarily exit the field as well.

Materials and Instrumentation

Approval to conduct this descriptive quantitative research study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author’s institution prior to recruiting participants. Initial participants were identified based on a convenience sample (Gall et al., 2007) of former learning specialists who were known to the researchers. Snowball subject recruitment (Allen, 2017) was utilized, as participants who completed the survey were offered the option to share the researchers’ contact information with other potential study participants whom they believed also met the criterion for the study.

Participants completed an online questionnaire that requested demographic information and responses to questions related to influencing factors that contributed to their voluntary exit of the learning specialist field. Questions were based on previous literature (Dillman et al., 2009; Pines & Anderson, 1988; Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Rumschlag, 2017; Santoro, 2018), developed based on the findings of Maslach et al. (2001), and modified to encompass the three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and inefficacy) and the six domains of the job environment (workload, control,

reward, community, fairness, and values) specifically for this study. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by a statistical consultant and piloted by two current athletic academic support professionals for content validity. The final survey consists of a combination of 10 closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions that were disseminated using the Qualtrics survey tool.

For emotional exhaustion, a closed-ended question provided a definition of emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001) and asked participants to select factors “related to emotional exhaustion that influenced your decision to leave the learning specialist field” (see Table 1). A follow-up question asked participants to then rate the degree of importance of each emotional exhaustion factor selected as related to their leaving their learning specialist position using a four-point Likert scale. Depersonalization was assessed by providing a definition (Maslach et al., 2001) and a closed-ended question that asked participants to select any of the following factors related to depersonalization that influenced their decision to leave the learning specialist field (see Table 2). Participants were also asked to rate the degree of importance of each depersonalization factor selected as related to their leaving their learning specialist position using a four-point Likert scale. For inefficiency, a definition (Maslach et al., 2001) was provided and participants were asked to select factors related to inefficacy that influenced their decision to leave the learning specialist field (see Table 3). The degree of importance related to how much each inefficacy factor selected influenced the participant’s decision to voluntarily exit their learning specialist position was rated using a four-point Likert scale.

Two open-ended questions provided the survey participants with the opportunity to share additional factors (not included in the survey questions) that influenced their decisions to leave the learning specialist field, additional comments, insights, and thoughts on the topic of burnout, or to provide advice to others who may review this research. Responses to these questions were coded by two researchers and compared for interrater agreement ($Q12 = 94\%$, $Q11 = 92\%$) and sorted into the six domains of worklife presented in the mismatch model (Maslach et al., 2001) that addresses chronic mismatch between the individual within their environment that contribute to burnout.

Results

The results showed that regarding emotional exhaustion factors and their influence on the decision to leave the field, personal stress concerns ranked the highest ($M = 3.60$), followed by the number of weekly work hours ($M = 3.41$) and mental health concerns ($M = 3.33$). Working on weekends, taking work home, lack of ability to disconnect, physical exhaustion, and number of students on caseload all produced mean responses greater than 3.00, indicating they were also significant factors in an individual’s decision to leave the field. Only one

Table 1. Importance of Emotional Exhaustion Factors in the Decision to Leave the Field

	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important	<i>M</i>
Personal stress concerns	0	1	2	7	3.60
Number of weekly work hours	0	2	6	9	3.41
Mental health concerns	0	1	4	4	3.33
Working on weekends	1	2	6	8	3.24
Taking work home	1	2	5	7	3.20
Lack of ability to disconnect	1	2	8	6	3.12
Physical exhaustion	0	3	4	4	3.09
Number of students on caseload	0	3	1	3	3.00
Lack of vacation time	1	2	8	6	2.75

potential response—lack of vacation time—produced a mean lower than 3.00 (2.75). See Table 1 for data regarding the importance of emotional exhaustion factors in the decision to leave the field.

Regarding factors relating to depersonalization and their impact on each individual's decision to leave the field, feeling unappreciated ranked the highest

Table 2. Importance of Depersonalization Factors in the Decision to Leave the Field

	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important	<i>M</i>
Feeling unappreciated	1	1	2	12	3.56
Feeling ineffective due to lack of student-athlete accountability	0	2	5	6	3.31
Lack of student-athlete time management leading to academic "emergencies"	1	2	7	7	3.18
Lack of student-athlete academic motivation	0	4	6	4	3.00
Lack of student-athlete boundaries: information related	0	1	3	1	3.00
Lack of student-athlete boundaries: time related	0	3	5	2	2.90

among respondents ($M = 3.56$), while feeling ineffective due to lack of student-athlete accountability ($M = 3.31$), a lack of student-athlete time management leading to academic “emergencies” ($M = 3.18$), lack of student-athlete motivation ($M = 3.00$), and information-related boundaries ($M = 3.00$) were also significant factors. Table 2 contains the analysis for this question.

Results related to the influence that depersonalization and inefficacy factors had on the decision to leave the field provided the most significant impact on the study, as all of the inefficacy factor options (see Table 3 for a complete list of factors) were significant ($M = 3.00$); 90.9% of respondents reported that low salary relative to work demands, expectations, and skill set required were a factor in their decision to leave the field, proving that compensation needs improvement.

Researchers categorized responses to the two previously referenced open-ended questions around the following six domains of worklife presented in the mismatch model: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach et al., 2001). Table 4 provides descriptive characteristics used by the researchers when coding these open-ended responses.

Table 3. Importance of Inefficacy Factors in the Decision to Leave the Field

	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important	<i>M</i>
Low salary relative to work demands, expectations, and skill set required	0	1	0	19	3.90
Lack of input or involvement in decision-making	0	0	2	7	3.78
Lack of supervisor support	0	0	3	9	3.75
Low status of the profession relative to required education and training	0	1	3	7	3.55
Personal values conflict with policies/practices preventing moral rewards	1	1	0	9	3.55
Lack of coworker support	0	0	3	3	3.50
Lack of clear expectations or evaluation criteria	0	0	6	2	3.25
Lack of support from athletics (AD, etc.)	0	1	5	3	3.22
Lack of coach support	0	2	4	3	3.11
Lack of professional mentor/professional learning community	0	1	4	1	3.00

Table 4. Thematic Areas and Researcher's Interpretations of Each Theme

Theme	Meaning Used for Coding
Workload	Excessive workload; too many demands; lack skill to do the job; display emotions that are not true feelings (putting on a brave face); exhaustion
Control	Inefficacy or reduced personal accomplishment; insufficient control over resources needed to do the job; insufficient authority; overwhelmed by responsibility; responsibilities exceed authority
Reward	Insufficient financial reward (low pay); not receiving salary or benefits based on achievements; one's work and effort is ignored by co-workers; lack of intrinsic reward; work done is not appreciated by co-workers
Community	No positive connection with others in workplace; feelings of isolation; un-resolved conflict with co-workers
Fairness	Inequality in workload or pay; cheating; evaluations and promotions are not managed appropriately; lack of a voice in decisions, grievances, or dispute resolution; cynicism about workplace
Values	Asked to do unethical things that are not in alignment with values; lying; mismatch between career goals and institutional goals; conflicting values

Workload

As previously discussed, workload refers to a mismatch of excessive demands and the wrong kind of work from a lack of skills or inclination that results in an exhaustion of energy that becomes impossible to recover (Maslach et al., 2001).

Several survey participants shared that they left academic support because of the time demands of the role. One former learning specialist stated, "I just needed/wanted more work/life balance and not to be 'on call' 24/7" and another acknowledged that "My current job ... does not require me to be available always and does not require me to work nights and weekends." Time spent away from family was also noted by a participant who said, "I was rarely home in the evening to be with my child ... working on the weekends, that's not fair to my child or my spouse." Another respondent emphasized, "Ultimately, while I loved my work, my family came first, and my health and well-being and my relationship/s." The sacrifice of personal time due to the time demands of the role were also noted as a former learning specialist noted, "... I just didn't have personal time for myself ...". One respondent stated, "I was devoting so much time and mental capacity to my role and my students that my personal life took second place" and another specified the time demands of the role by saying, "The last semester I worked [as a learning specialist] before I left, I worked 24 days in a row. I couldn't meet the support expectations without working that many days in a row."

A former learning specialist also confirmed that workload issues developed from the need to “wear multiple hats” while another participant served in a similar capacity as a learning specialist, advisor, mental health & wellness counselor, and held player development responsibilities. One respondent described being responsible for a learning specialist caseload of 25 and a football advising caseload of 30, in addition to being the mentor coordinator and the Disability Resource Center and testing coordinator. Another former learning specialist summarized the workload by saying, “The job was mentally and emotionally exhausting.”

Control

Control refers to inefficacy or reduced personal accomplishment from a mismatch related to responsibility or control over resources and authority (Maslach et al., 2001). Some sub-themes that emerged from the open-ended responses were control over time and boundaries, control over how others perceived the role and work of learning specialists, and managing expectations. Regarding controlling time and boundaries, one survey participant shared, “I would advise anyone getting into the field to set boundaries with your time early. Although you may feel like you need to prove yourself early in your career, it will eventually catch up with you.” Another respondent said they were not able to disconnect from work and the job “ate” into their personal life. When people cannot control others’ (e.g., student-athletes, advisors, coaches) access to them during non-work hours, burnout may result.

Another facet of control that the respondents commented on was the lack of control over how others perceived the role of the learning specialist and their work. A former learning specialist stated that there was a “lack of understanding of the learning specialist role and scope of responsibilities from department administration.” Another participant shared that “I knew it was time to leave athletics when I realized how little my supervisor and others ranked above me valued or respected what I was capable of accomplishing with my students.”

The last sub-theme of control had to do with managing expectations. One former learning specialist noted, “We received less and less time with athletes who were academically lower and lower and expected to churn out the same academic results.” The frustrations felt by these learning specialists stem from feeling stakeholders’ (e.g., coach, student-athlete, parent, athletic academic advisor) expectations are not being managed effectively, leading to learning specialists having less and less control over what their schedules and workload look like.

Reward

Reward refers to a mismatch of appropriate compensation for work and is closely associated with feelings of inefficacy. Insufficient financial, social (appreciation),

and intrinsic reward can devalue work and the workers (Maslach et al., 2001). Numerous survey participants referenced inadequate financial compensation or low pay relative to required skill sets and work demands. One participant stated:

Early on the money was not a motivator for me to do the job and I was enjoying what I was doing, so I didn't feel like I wasn't missing out on time in my personal life. However, as I got older, I realized the amount of work and effort I was putting in was not being adequately compensated.

Another respondent ultimately left the field due to a mismatch in required work hours and compensation that does not incentivize “strong learning specialists to continue in the field long-term”. Another stated, “I decided if I was going to work 80-hour weeks I could do it in a less stressful job with better money.”

Pay disparities among positions within athletic academic support units were also described by survey participants as a contributing factor to their voluntary exits. One participant stated, “I saw advisors with less experience and less degrees earn more money than I was” and another emphasized that “the pay disparities between the advisor and SADev (Student-Athlete Development) role vs the learning specialist position are insulting.”

Several participants also mentioned insufficient social reward or appreciation as a factor related to their exiting the field. One participant described a lack of respect from superiors for “what I was capable of accomplishing with students in my role and the positive impact it could have on students' futures” while another respondent commented that “it felt like we were constantly fighting a battle to have our work valued and the importance of it acknowledged.”

Beyond financial and social rewards, a general lack of growth opportunities for learning specialists was reinforced as a contributing factor referenced in responses to the open-ended questions; one participant stated, “I like Athletics but there was no space for promotion past my director role (encompassed mentoring, tutoring, and learning specialists) and no opportunity for increased salary.” Another respondent noticed a discrepancy in opportunities for advancement across units within athletic academic support:

There are not many opportunities to easily transition to leadership or administration from the LS (learning specialist) role, which, compared to the advisor role, seems to be a ‘logical’ next step. Also, opportunities for sport supervision or other key athletic/campus leadership or decision-making roles are not often presented to those in the LS role. In general, there is a lack of clear or even encouraged path to pursue from the LS position.

Insufficient financial, social, and intrinsic rewards each influenced the decision-making of former learning specialists when considering exiting the field.

Fairness

Fairness refers to inequity of workload or pay, evaluations, and promotions, or “when there is cheating” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 415). The mismatch model notes that this exacerbates burnout due to emotional exhaustion and a deep sense of cynicism (Maslach et al., 2001). Respondents to open-ended questions acknowledged concern related to the need for a greater understanding of the learning specialist position. One described “... fatigue from this as well as not having a voice, despite having the same amount of experience as my supervisor. These factors greatly influenced my decision to leave the field.” Another respondent echoed this need and stated, “I think it’s absolutely critical for advisors, administrators, and coaching staffs to understand the role and importance of the learning specialist!!!”

Furthermore, another respondent noted “the lack of respect within athletic departments for academics, including coaches. Specifically, the learning specialist position and how it is viewed among some academic advisors as less than,” which is consistent with the findings of Steinberg et al. (2018), who warned of the implication that the learning specialist position can be perceived as subservient due to a lack of role definition and expectations.

Values

As previously discussed, Maslach et al. (2001) describe instances related to a mismatch or conflict in values that can occur due to job constraints that encourage unethical conduct, personal aspirations that do not align with organizational values, or a discrepancy between the mission statement and actual practice.

Respondents to open-ended questions acknowledged discrepancies between ethical considerations and self-serving interests of athletic departments as contributing factors to their departures, as one stated:

The biggest factors that influenced my decision were the ethical dilemmas I encountered in the field (in general and specific to things being asked of me directly) and the disregard in collegiate athletics culture for what is in the student’s best interest.

Another former learning specialist echoed the concern of prioritized self-serving interests:

From acknowledging their legal rights to confidentiality to caring about the skills we were teaching them for success in life after college as learning specialists, I repeatedly saw athletics departments act in their own best interests over those of the students.

In response to this concern, a respondent offered, “My biggest piece of advice is to always do what you feel is right.”

Community

According to Maslach et al. (2001), a mismatch in community relates to a loss of positive connection and social support through emotional exchange and instrumental assistance that reaffirms membership in the group. One former learning specialist emphasized the need to feel connected and supported in the workplace:

I think working at the right institution with the right people is so important. I don't think I would have gotten all the way out of the field had I been surrounded by supportive staff members. I wish I made a more informed decision before applying to work at a school that felt like I wasn't accepted.

Beyond a mismatch in community serving as a factor that leads to burnout, the last alarming theme that emerged from information provided in response to open-ended questions was related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) challenges, as one participant described:

I was the only Black member of the learning specialist staff at my last institution and greatly felt as if I didn't belong on the team, which added an extra layer of fatigue. My ideas were constantly shot down, which always took a lot of building up before I'd speak up. I had to be careful about how I addressed coworkers so as to not be labeled. I was also heavily utilized by the football staff to meet with recruits since I was the only learning specialist that looked like them.

Insufficient social and emotional support provided through a sense of community also contributed to the decision-making of former learning specialists to exit the athletic academic support field.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the primary factors that contributed to the burnout of former learning specialists and influenced their decisions to leave college athletics. The results indicate that these primary factors include a lack of understanding of the role and the value that learning specialists add, a lack of support within the athletic department, and low salaries relative to time commitments, responsibilities, and required skill sets. In the words of the participants, “not having a voice” in the decision-making that directly affected

their environments influenced their decision to leave. This is commensurate with previous research related to (K-12) educators (Rumschlag, 2017; Santoro, 2018) and suggests that opportunities to be involved in decision-making are necessary to prevent burnout among learning specialists. The value learning specialists add in reducing risk in their athletic department and the institution can also be recognized through increased involvement in decision-making to ensure their voices are heard.

Findings suggest a gap in the competitive salary expectations of learning specialists as it relates to time demands and increased responsibilities without adequate rewards or compensation. The importance of aligned work expectations, compensation, and support communities cannot be overemphasized, as former learning specialists confirmed that other “less stressful” professional settings can offer better salaries and more flexible work schedules. While the reward of social support serves as a buffer against emotional exhaustion and burnout (Singe et al., 2020), challenges related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) can require increased institutional support to create, foster, and promote a sense of community within the campus environment and national professional network landscape. Additional training and support resources to increase awareness and educate on differences are helpful. However, the application of new knowledge is paramount as performance improvements are also associated with a proactive culture that promotes diversity and inclusion (Cunningham, 2012). The results support previous research (Steinberg et al., 2018) illustrating the importance of leadership that not only understands the role and the value of the learning specialist profession, but also provides adequate financial and social rewards to bridge the gap and retain experienced learning specialists long-term.

Results also indicate that challenges and barriers in supporting learning specialist caseloads are consistent with previous athletic academic support burnout research focused on all college student-athlete academic service professionals (Hardin et al., 2020; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). These challenges and barriers include lack of access to support resources and broader internal support within their units and the athletic department. Results are commensurate with previous research that found the preparedness levels of learning specialists with less than three years of experience in DI college athletics are significantly lower than those with more than three years, which also suggests the importance of support and guidance for novice learning specialists (Ledbetter, 2021). When coupled with the fact that the average length of time a learning specialist remains in the athletic academic support field is approximately four to seven years (Newman et al., 2016), the investment in learning specialist support becomes even more vital. Council et al. (2018) caution that practitioners who do not possess backgrounds specifically related to academic support may not have or ever received adequate

training necessary to support student-athletes. Having the structure in place as a model for learning specialists to learn and continue to grow and develop to advance in their careers, alongside athletic academic advisors/counselors, on athletic academic support teams only reinforces the value this position also adds in decreasing risk for the athletic department and the institution.

Limitations and Conclusions

Despite the contributions of this study, there are several limitations. Although burnout has been studied extensively (Maslach et al., 2001; Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Rumschlag, 2017; Santoro, 2018), there is a dearth of research that examines learning specialists within college athletics. Limitations related to the sample size and sampling technique also exist. While the sample size is potentially lower than what ideally would be achieved, the 91.6% response rate should be noted as a reflection of the passion for advancing the field that former learning specialists still possess. The method should also be viewed as a limitation, as this study did not use a validated burnout scale. It is also of note, however, that the items were adapted based on findings directly from Maslach et al. (2021), reviewed by a statistical consultant, and piloted by current athletic academic support professionals for content validity evidence.

Several respondents reported DEIB concerns within the field of learning support. Because learning specialists serve diverse populations (both in backgrounds and neurocognitive abilities), an area to expand current research would be the impact community has on a learning specialist's overall job satisfaction and the decision to stay in the field (the inverse of burnout). Primary factors related to creating an environment conducive to learning and growth for both novice and veteran learning specialists should also be identified and analyzed to engage them "with formal guidance and support as they prepare to enter and persist in this role" (Ledbetter, 2021, p. 89). In doing so, additional research should be undertaken to analyze the consequences of not having the model for an education curriculum and training regimen specifically devoted to developing novice and experienced learning specialists as currently exists for athletic academic counselors at various institutions across the country (Ledbetter, 2021).

Implications

Findings from the study offer those within and outside of the athletic academic support community an essential opportunity to reflect. This starts with learning specialists, academic counselors, and student-athlete development professionals coming together to reflect on why the learning specialist position was created in the mid-1990s (Newman et al., 2016). Learning specialists have an opportunity

to reflect and recognize the factors identified in this study and take action to prevent burnout. Additionally, learning specialists should invest in themselves as they serve as primary advocates for the position to increase understanding of the role and ensure that it is accurately defined or professionalized in a way that is reflective of who we are and what we do. While learning specialist duties can vary based on the needs of the student-athlete population and the size of athletic department resources, essential duties of this role have been identified (Steinberg et al., 2018). On a foundational level, learning specialists assess academic indicators of student-athletes (Birch et al., 2019) and support the most fragile, neurodiverse learners within college athletics (Steinberg et al., 2018). Student-athletes should be prioritized on learning specialist caseloads to receive support with critical components of the learning process (i.e., preparation & reflection) (Lawson et al., 2021). Therefore, educational curriculum opportunities and a training regimen for those who serve as learning specialists, especially those who are new to the field, are necessary and should be provided as are currently offered for athletic academic advisors/counselors. Furthermore, these opportunities and regimen should be preceded by additional research focused on the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to effectively prepare and develop learning specialists “from an ‘evolutionary’ rather than a ‘revolutionary’ perspective” (McLean et al., 2008, p. 577).

The importance of educating internal and external stakeholders on the role and investing in resources devoted to learning specialists within college athletics cannot be understated. Professional development and career advancement opportunities reflect how much the position is valued within athletics departments. While the Learning Concerns and Enhancements Committee (LCEC) within the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) has played a vital role in providing learning specialists an opportunity to connect, support each other, and “discuss specific issues and concerns that arise while working with student-athletes” (Newman et al., 2016, p. 6), no formalized set of professional guidelines or standards currently exist for the learning specialist position outside of the N4A Learning Specialist track within the Steve McDonnell Professional Development Institute (PDI). Therefore, the turnover acknowledged by this study’s participants is not surprising and cannot be expected to change without the necessary investment in resources devoted to the development of an educational curriculum and training regimen focused on learning specialists.

Investment in the learning specialist role is also reflected on organizational charts that illustrate equitable access to leadership opportunities among athletic academic support units (i.e., Academic Services, Learning/Student Services, and Student-Athlete Development). Organizational charts that do not provide

equitable opportunities for the upward movement of learning specialists serve to reinforce the perception that the role is somehow lesser than or subservient to the advising role (Steinberg et al., 2018) and contribute to burnout. Advanced positions for learning specialists on athletics department organizational charts not only provide growth opportunities and promote career development, but also confirm the professionalization of the field. When leaders advocate for career advancement opportunities and compensation that is commensurate with educational backgrounds and experience, this reflects their investment in the development of learning specialists, provides learning specialists the opportunity to flourish in their roles, and minimizes the costs associated with turnover from the outside competition of industries that provide flexible work schedules for more pay.

It is also paramount for leaders to analyze their department's structure, policies, practices, and employees for potential blind spots and signs related to primary factors of burnout identified in this research study. Leaders should be aware that the six domains of worklife (workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values) can present differently in each employee due to the deeply personal and complex nature of the phenomena. Therefore, the importance of implementing a tailored approach to prevent burnout through proactive retention strategies is critical. One strategy, known as the Stay Interview, can help generate meaningful dialogue between supervisors and the individuals they lead (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015). The tone of these conversations should be positive, inclusive, and solution-oriented as leaders ask questions to better understand factors that contribute to an ideal workplace and essentially influence the individuals they lead to stay. Example questions to guide these conversations could include: (1) What do you look forward to at work each day? (2) Describe any recent frustrations and solutions and/or support necessary to address them? (3) Do you have the right resources to be successful in your position? (4) Do you feel valued/appreciated? (5) Do you feel you are being prepared for your next step professionally? (M. Steward, personal communication, February 2, 2023). Learning specialists are also responsible for taking the time to reflect on their answers to effectively communicate their needs to their supervisors. As leaders listen and even the smallest need is met, this can speak volumes and confirm learning specialists are valued and their voices are heard. Stay interview conversations can prevent exit interviews that could be avoided through proactive, intentional communication. Retention of experienced learning specialists is imperative to sustain development and ultimately improve the services provided to our most fragile, neurodiverse student-athletes.

In the ever-changing landscape of intercollegiate athletics, academic support units are not immune to the Great Resignation (Kaplan, 2021). This research study confirms for administrators across college campuses (e.g., provosts,

athletics directors, faculty athletic representatives [FAR], senior woman administrator [SWA]) that the strength of teams lies not only in the retention of the members but also in creating environments for every member to thrive (Cunningham, 2012). Failure to adjust inherent flaws in the current structure will continue to contribute to the burnout and turnover of learning specialists. However, a great reflection and consistent commitment to investment in learning specialist resources will benefit athletic departments and profoundly positively impact college student-athletes across the nation.

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