

# The Need for Sport Social Workers in College Athletics

Lawrence W. Judge, Adam Smith, and Jerry Reynolds

College sports place significant pressure on student-athletes and necessitate recognizing and resolving social, emotional, and environmental needs. To provide comprehensive support, integrating social work professionals with sport expertise in college athletic departments is proposed. By encompassing mental health support, advocacy, and the resolution of challenges pertaining to well-being and identity, the application of social work principles provides student-athletes with a well-rounded college athletic experience. Education and training for sport social workers are highlighted as crucial aspects for effectively navigating the complexities of college athletics. These specialized programs equip social workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide effective support to student-athletes. By considering their unique needs within the college context, sport social workers can contribute to the development and success of student-athletes. This article emphasizes the significance of addressing student-athletes' well-being in college athletics by integrating sport social work principles. In doing so, a supportive environment can be cultivated, promoting the student-athletes' overall development and success. Focusing on inclusivity and applying social work principles in youth sports further highlights the broader impact that social work can have in addressing social issues.

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## Introduction

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offers a vibrant and fiercely competitive arena where student-athletes can hone their athletic skills

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while advancing their education. However, the demanding nature of collegiate sports often leads to unique challenges that affect the holistic well-being of student-athletes (Purcell et al., 2019; Warehime et al., 2017). To mitigate such challenges, enhance the college sports environment, and address the increasing demand for specialized support systems, social workers could be used for the multifaceted needs of student-athletes (Beasley et al., 2021). Previous research from Anderson-Butcher and Bates (2021) emphasized the importance of social work in youth sports and highlighted the need to extend its application to college athletics. They argue that sport provides a valuable context for social work interventions due to its influence on emotional and psychosocial development (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). Furthermore, they propose that sport social workers can play a critical role in promoting positive youth development and addressing social-emotional challenges in sports settings (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Lawson, 2005).

Collegiate athletics offers a platform for talented student-athletes to compete at a high level while pursuing academic excellence. However, the rigorous demands of their athletic commitments can create a range of challenges, including managing time effectively, balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, coping with intense performance pressure, navigating career transitions, maintaining mental and emotional well-being, and addressing personal issues that can arise during their college journey (Purcell et al., 2019; Rettig & Hu, 2016; Van Rensburg et al., 2011). Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring the overall well-being and success of student-athletes.

This article aims to explore the need for sport social workers in the NCAA college sports environment. By synthesizing existing research, academic literature, and practical experiences in youth sports, this article intends to shed light on the importance of integrating sport social work as an essential component of collegiate athletic support systems. By examining the potential roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of sport social workers, we seek to illustrate how their expertise and interventions can enhance the well-being, performance, and overall experience of student-athletes in college athletics.

## **Overview of College Athletics and Challenges for Student Athletes**

As the complexities and demands of college sports have evolved, there has been a growing recognition of the need for specialized and multidisciplinary support systems to address the unique needs of student-athletes. While various support services exist within college athletics, such as academic advising, athletic trainers, and sports psychologists (Crooks, 2022; Otto et al., 2019), there is a growing realization that social work professionals with expertise in sports can

play a significant role in filling the gaps and providing comprehensive support (Otto et al., 2019).

Previous research has articulated that social work professionals in NCAA Division I athletic departments have offered mental health support and advocacy for student-athletes, and addressed various challenges related to well-being and identity for student-athletes (Beasley et al., 2021). These professionals have also been instrumental in facilitating life skills transfer for those student-athletes (Newman, 2020; Vella et al., 2020). Sport social workers' specialized skill sets help student-athletes navigate social, emotional, and environmental challenges, which improve their overall collegiate experience and could highlight the benefits of sport social workers' inclusion in collegiate athletic departments (Beasley et al., 2022).

The inclusion of sport social workers in youth sports has highlighted the important benefits reaped from their expertise. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014) discuss the LiFE Sports Camp as an example of a youth sports program designed to maximize positive experiences. Such initiatives could be adapted to college athletics to promote the well-being and holistic development of their student-athletes. Initiatives like the LiFE Sports Camp require the expertise of sport social workers who can provide valuable insight and skills to athletes at a variety of levels of sport.

The challenges faced by athletes at different levels require practitioners who understand those demands within the sport culture (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). To effectively address student-athlete needs, specialized education and training in sport social work are essential. Magier et al. (2022) discuss the opportunities for specialized education and training for social workers in sports settings. These programs can equip social workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the intricacies of college athletics while addressing student-athletes' mental health and well-being (Eubank et al., 2014).

In providing an overview of the complex demands of the collegiate student-athlete, our aim is to briefly highlight the importance of including sport social workers in this competitive and highly demanding environment. Since little research has explicitly explored the role of sport social workers in collegiate athletic departments, using previous research in the youth sports context could allow collegiate athletic departments to understand the critical role these valuable professionals play in meeting their student-athletes' needs.

## Overview of Social Work

Social workers experience comprehensive training and education that proves crucial in understanding how their expertise can be seamlessly integrated into the collegiate sport setting to address the multifaceted needs of student-athletes. Importantly, social workers are trained to consider an individual within their

environment while using a strengths-based perspective to empower and promote well-being for those they serve (Held et al., 2019; Horevitz & Manoleas, 2013; Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). The extensive training process for social workers includes both classroom and field training experiences, which allow them to holistically consider the circumstances for those they serve and advocate on their behalf toward well-being (Held et al., 2019). With this in mind, the holistic skills that social workers acquire through their training process allows them to apply those skills in various settings where they could be needed. An example of this can be found in youth sport where youth sport social workers have been incorporated to contribute to youth athlete well-being and development.

### **Social Work in Youth Sport**

Youth sports play a crucial role in shaping young individuals' personal and social development (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). The integration of social work principles in the context of youth sports has gained recognition for its positive impact on youth athletes. Social work in youth sports focuses on “fostering inclusivity, promoting healthy relationships, and addressing social issues that youth may encounter” (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021, p. 57). This approach acknowledges the potential of sports as a platform to facilitate multidimensional growth and well-being among young athletes.

Sport social workers play a crucial role in promoting positive youth development and addressing social-emotional challenges within youth sports settings (Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2017). By utilizing their specialized skills and expertise, they provide direct services to athletes, ranging from individual counseling to group interventions, while also collaborating with coaches, parents, and other stakeholders to create an environment that fosters overall well-being, inclusivity, and personal growth (Beasley et al., 2021; Lawson, 2005; Newman et al., 2017). Sport social workers collaborate with athletic departments to implement policies and programs that prioritize student-athletes' holistic development, ensuring their emotional, psychological, and social welfare within the college athletic setting (Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2017, 2019).

#### *Extending the Application of Social Work to College Athletics*

Building upon the value of social work in youth sports, its application in the realm of college athletics becomes equally essential (Gill, 2014). College athletics often serve as a formative period where student-athletes face unique challenges while striving for athletic excellence and academic success (Dean & Rowan, 2013; Newman, 2020). Integrating social work principles within college athletics can assist student-athletes in achieving a balanced and enriching experience (Gill, 2014; Newman, 2020).

Participation in sport has been shown to have a profound influence on emotional and psychosocial development of student-athletes (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). College athletes often face the pressures of rigorous training, competition, and academic demands. Amidst these pressures, they may encounter challenges related to self-esteem, identity formation, stress management, and mental health (Purcell et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2020). Sport social workers are essential in recognizing and addressing these concerns by providing supportive interventions tailored to the unique needs of student-athletes (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018).

## Psychosocial Challenges for College Student-Athletes

### Academic Stress and Time Management

College student-athletes face unique challenges when it comes to balancing their athletic commitments with academic responsibilities. The demands of rigorous training schedules, travel for competitions, and recovery time can often conflict with the time and energy required for academic success (Gómez et al., 2018). These challenges often result in increased academic stress and difficulty in effectively managing time (Rettig & Hu, 2016).

Research has shown that sport social workers can play a vital role in addressing academic stress and assisting student-athletes in developing effective time-management skills (Beasley et al., 2021). By providing academic support, such as study skills workshops, tutoring resources, and individualized guidance, sport social workers can help student-athletes navigate the demands of their dual roles as athletes and students.

### Balancing Athletic Commitments with Personal Life

Another significant psychosocial challenge for college athletes is the struggle to maintain a healthy balance between their athletic commitments and personal life (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018; Kroshus et al., 2019; Warehime et al., 2017). The intensive training regimens and travel obligations often limit their ability to participate in social activities, maintain relationships, and take care of their overall well-being (Kroshus et al., 2019).

Sport social workers can help student-athletes develop strategies for finding balance and maintaining healthy personal relationships (Dean & Rowan, 2013; Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). They can offer guidance on time management techniques, stress reduction strategies, and effective communication skills. Additionally, sport social workers can promote an athlete-friendly campus culture by collaborating with coaches, administrators, and other support staff to create opportunities for social engagement and personal development (Breitbach et al., 2017).

## Stigma of Mental Health Concerns

Mental health concerns among college student-athletes have gained significant attention recently (Bird et al., 2018; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). Student-athletes are susceptible to various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding mental health in the sporting world often deters student-athletes from seeking help for myriad reasons (Bird et al., 2018; Kroshus et al., 2019).

Sport social workers can mitigate this stigma by providing a safe and confidential space for student-athletes to discuss their mental health concerns (Magier et al., 2022). By offering individual counseling, group therapy sessions, and psychoeducational programs, sport social workers can support student-athletes in managing their mental well-being. They can also collaborate with athletic trainers, coaches, and mental health professionals to create a holistic support system for student-athletes. Within the college sport realm, sport social workers have also been involved in the advancement of NCAA recommendations for best practices to address these concerns for more than a decade.

## Transitions in College Sports

The transition to college sports and eventual transition out of college sports poses unique psychosocial challenges for student-athletes. Adjusting to the increased demands and expectations of college athletics can be overwhelming, while the eventual transition out of sports can lead to a loss of identity and purpose (Newman, 2020; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova & Samuel, 2020).

Sport social workers can play a crucial role in facilitating a smooth transition for student-athletes by offering guidance and support throughout these periods of change (Lawson, 2005; Newman, 2020). They can provide resources for career exploration, assist with academic planning for post-sports life, and help student-athletes navigate the emotional challenges associated with transitioning out of their sport (Mellin et al., 2011; Newman, 2020).

## Integration of Social Work in Sport

The role of sport social workers in addressing student-athletes' needs is an important aspect of college athletics. Sport social workers possess unique skills and competencies to provide support and assistance to student-athletes in navigating various challenges; they also play a crucial role in promoting student-athlete well-being and overall mental health.

Social workers are trained professionals who help individuals and communities in need by providing counseling, advocacy, and support services. They are equipped with a range of skills such as active listening, assessment, crisis

intervention, and resource coordination (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). By applying these skills within the context of sport, sport social workers can address the specific needs and challenges faced by student-athletes.

The unique skills and competencies required for sport social workers have been highlighted in various studies. Anderson-Butcher and Bates (2021) emphasize the importance of social-emotional learning interventions in youth sports, suggesting that social workers should design programs that focus on fostering emotional well-being and promoting positive relationships. This highlights the need for sport social workers to understand youth development and the ability to create effective interventions (Newman et al., 2017). Additionally, Beasley et al. (2022) and Eubank et al. (2014) have called for sport social workers and sport psychology professionals alike to be knowledgeable about sport culture and to employ optimization models that are sensitive to the unique needs and challenges of athletes.

As discussed, the potential benefits of sport social workers in college athletics are significant and wide ranging. They can provide mental health support, assist with academic and career planning, facilitate access to resources, and address personal challenges faced by student-athletes (Beasley et al., 2021). By integrating social work and athletics in higher education, sport social workers can contribute to the overall success and well-being of student-athletes (Magier et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2017). Moreover, their presence can help destigmatize mental health issues within the context of sports and promote a healthier and more supportive athletic environment (Bird et al., 2018; Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018; Purcell et al., 2019).

Sport social workers play a vital role in addressing the needs of student-athletes in college athletics. Their unique skills and competencies can provide support, guidance, and interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being and success of student-athletes (Gill et al., 2017). As the field of sport social work continues to evolve, ongoing education and training opportunities will be crucial in equipping social workers with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the specific needs of this population.

## Support Staff Collaboration with Sport Social Workers

One key aspect of integrating sport social workers into college athletic programs is collaborative efforts between sport social workers and the existing support staff. Research by Newman et al. (2019) demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing the complex needs of student-athletes. By working closely with athletic trainers, team physicians, coaches, and academic advisors, sport social workers can create a comprehensive support system that considers the student-athletes' physical and mental well-being (Breitbach et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2019).

## Training and Professional Development Opportunities for Sport Social Workers

To ensure the effective integration of sport social workers, providing them with adequate training and professional development opportunities is crucial. Specialized training in areas such as sport psychology, trauma-informed care, and ethical considerations specific to collegiate athletes can enhance the sport social workers' ability to address the unique challenges faced by student-athletes (Breitbach et al., 2017; Eubank et al., 2014). Professional development workshops, conferences, and networking opportunities should also be facilitated to keep sport social workers updated on the latest research and practices in the field (Magier et al., 2022).

### *Establishing Partnerships with Mental Health Organizations*

Effective collaboration with mental health organizations can further strengthen the support system for student-athletes. By partnering with organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) or the NCAA Sport Science Institute, college athletic programs can access additional resources and expertise in mental health support (Newman et al., 2019). These partnerships can facilitate the development of evidence-based practices and allow for a more holistic approach to addressing the mental health needs of student-athletes (Breitbach et al., 2017; Magier et al., 2022).

### *Funding Considerations and Overcoming Barriers to Implementation*

Implementing sport social workers into college athletic programs requires addressing funding considerations and overcoming potential barriers. To secure financial resources, universities can seek grants and funding from governmental agencies, philanthropic organizations, or alumni associations. Additionally, advocating for the inclusion of sport social workers within the college athletic budget is essential for sustainability (Magier et al., 2022). Overcoming barriers such as administrative resistance, limited awareness of the role of sport social workers, or concerns over confidentiality can be achieved through continuous communication, education, and highlighting the positive outcomes associated with integrating sport social workers into college athletic programs (Breitbach et al., 2017; Magier et al., 2022).

College athletic programs can successfully integrate sport social workers into their existing support framework by focusing on collaborative efforts, providing proper training, establishing partnerships, and addressing funding considerations. This integration can lead to enhanced overall well-being and increased success both on and off the field for student-athletes.

## Concerns and Limitations

### Resistance to Integrating Sport Social Workers

While the integration of sport social workers has the potential to benefit collegiate student-athletes and athletic departments greatly, it is important to consider potential resistance that may arise during this process. One concern could be the reluctance of athletes and staff members to engage with social workers due to various reasons such as stigma, fear of judgment, or concerns about privacy (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Beasley et al., 2021). To address this, it is crucial to implement an effective communication and education strategy. Further work could be conducted to articulate effective strategies for integrating sport social workers while incorporating other support staff crucial for promoting student-athlete development. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that resistance to the integration of sport social workers may not only stem from social or cultural concerns but could also be financially rooted, with budgetary constraints posing a significant barrier to adopting such services within collegiate athletic departments.

### Maintaining Ethical Standards

Maintaining confidentiality and upholding other ethical standards are of utmost importance when integrating sport social workers. Athletes and sports organizations must feel confident that their personal information will be handled with the utmost care. Therefore, it is essential to establish clear guidelines and protocols for protecting confidentiality and adhering to ethical standards (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). Sport social workers should be extensively trained in ethical principles and be closely supervised to ensure compliance. Adhering to rigorous ethical standards, including strict confidentiality protocols, is paramount in integrating sport social workers into athletic environments to ensure that the privacy and trust of athletes are meticulously safeguarded (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021).

### Evaluation of Sport Social Work Programs

To ensure that sport social work programs are effective and beneficial to athletes and sport organizations, it is necessary to establish mechanisms for evaluating their impact. This evaluation process should include qualitative and quantitative methods to gather relevant data and feedback (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018). Tracking outcomes such as improvements in mental health, reduction in substance

abuse, enhanced performance, and overall well-being can help measure the effectiveness of these programs (Newman et al., 2017). Additionally, gathering feedback from athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders is crucial to continually improve and refine these initiatives.

By addressing potential resistance (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Beasley et al., 2021), ensuring confidentiality (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021), and evaluating the effectiveness of sport social work programs (Gavrilova & Donohue, 2018; Newman et al., 2017), we can overcome limitations and maximize the positive impact of integrating sport social workers in the field of college sports. This proactive approach will enhance student-athletes' well-being and contribute to the overall success and sustainability of sport organizations.

## Conclusion

Sport social work is an emerging field that can significantly enhance the well-being and development of collegiate student-athletes. This article has underscored the vital roles sport social workers play in managing the mental health concerns of student-athletes, advocating for their needs, and promoting positive development within the high-pressure environment of NCAA collegiate athletics. By providing comprehensive support services, sport social workers foster a supportive environment conducive to athletic and academic success.

Furthermore, the long-term benefits of integrating sport social workers into athletic departments are clear. They address the multifaceted challenges faced by student-athletes, improving team dynamics and individual well-being. In conclusion, the inclusion of sport social workers in collegiate athletic programs is imperative, and higher education institutions must recognize this need, ensuring the allocation of resources for their seamless integration, thereby cultivating an atmosphere of growth and success for student-athletes.

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