

Social Work Ethics and Intercollegiate Student-Athlete Retention

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Abstract

Intercollegiate athletics is a large industry that includes a population of over 560,000 student-athletes between the NCAA and the NAIA. There has been a call for social work to become more involved in athletics and working with athletes. The vulnerabilities of athletes in collegiate settings has also been on display. To counteract these challenges, the social work profession, using the principles of using a trauma informed approach to working with individuals, considerations of the person in environment, and the guidance of the NASW Code of Ethics, can be a valuable resource and guide practice with this population. The current article uses the NASW Code of Ethics, ethical frameworks, and ethical considerations to evaluate ethical dilemmas to provide insight into how social work can benefit student-athletes and the institutions which sponsor athletic programs.

Keywords: social work, student-athletes, ethics, Deontology, Immanuel Kant, NASW

Introduction

“I am more than just a serious basketball fan. I am a life-long Addict. I was addicted from birth, in fact, because I was born in Kentucky and I learned, early on, that Habitual Domination was a natural way of life” (Thompson, 2018, p. 11). The love of athletic competition and the athletes who participate

in it has fascinated the world for thousands of years. Fans and enthusiasts decorate their homes with memorabilia of their favorite teams, get tattoos featuring team logos, and spend large amounts of money to attend sporting events. In the United States there is a passion for athletic competitions at the intercollegiate level. The industry of college athletics generated for the National Collegiate Athletic Association over one billion dollars in the 2016-2017 season, with 27 schools achieving over one hundred million dollars in revenue in 2016, and the highest revenue producing university bringing in \$182 million in 2016 (Blackstone, 2019).

For institutions, the benefits for having athletics programs can be large. Research has shown that when college sports team are successful, the universities profit in multiple ways (Chung, 2013). In what is known as the Flutie Effect, when universities have winning seasons or achieve championships, there can be a surge in their applications and new student enrollment, and some universities after winning seasons have seen application for enrollment rise 30% (Chung, 2013). The universities benefit financially through both the sports and the increased media attention bringing in new students. The primary individuals who make these college and university athletic programs so popular and generate such revenue are the student-athletes who wear the uniforms of their schools.

This relationship between the institutions and their players can benefit both sides, but there remains debate about the extent to which that relationship is actually one-sided in favor of the institutions, especially since it is well-documented that college athletes are often exploited.

“The exploitation of college athletes, particularly black revenue athletes, has been a persistent topic of controversy within American higher education for the past half century” (Rheenen, 2012, p. 205). There are currently over 460,000 student-athletes participating in NCAA competitions across the United States (NCAAb, 2018). The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletes has over 65,000 student-athletes (NAIA, 2018). The amount of money student-athletes receive from scholarships can lead too many to be living in poverty conditions while coaches and administrators make large salaries (Givens, 2013). Male student athletes have reported feelings of exploitation and social isolation, especially among football and men’s basketball players (Cooper, Davis, & Dougherty, 2017). Along with these concerns of exploitation and student-athletes’ financial well-being are those of being isolated from family, stereotypes about athletes, of a lack of trusted role models, and of being removed from their communities when they go to these institutions (Gill, 2008). With allegations of exploitation around intercollegiate athletics, and concerns about academic and individual development of student-athletes, institutions have been looking for solutions (Chartrand & Lent, 1987). There has been a call for social work to enter the arena of athletics to bring the discipline’s approaches and ethics to student-athletes and institutions. Social work can be of service on the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level to this population (Moore, 2016).

Social work is unique, in that it can look at collegiate sports and see beyond the athlete. “The guiding principles and training that characterize social work make it an appropriate profession for college athletics and student-athlete development” (Gill, 2008, p.86). At a clinical level, social workers are providing mental health support, coordinating

services to student-athletes and athletic departments, helping individuals learn needed life skills, and much more (Gill, 2008). According to the Council of Social Work Education, social work promotes human and community well-being that includes colleges and universities, as well as the student-athletes who participate on behalf of these institutions (Moore, 2016). The National Association of Social Workers (2018) provides the ethical guidelines and principles that direct social work practice.

To look at the challenges faced by athletes in collegiate sports, it is important to examine the NASW code of ethics, historical ethical frameworks, and ethical considerations to evaluate three areas of social work involvement in working with intercollegiate student-athletes. Ethical considerations will be evaluated for social work involvement in teaching, practice, and research involving student-athletes and the institutions they play for. The goal of evaluating ethical principles for working with student-athletes is to improve the quality of life and success for student-athletes while hopefully increasing the involvement of social workers in the field of intercollegiate athletics.

Retention of Student-Athletes

As a collective group, there are concerns about retention, especially for male athletes. Low graduation rates decrease university resources, decrease meeting educational objectives, and reflect universities’ ability to educate, meet social, and emotional needs of students (Mangold, Bean, & Adams, 2003). Some student-athletes enter post-secondary institutions with low entrance exam scores and high school GPAs and then enter universities where they must perform academically, while on top of academic responsibilities they must meet athletic demands (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). According to the NCAA Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for 2017, white males were graduating at 87%, African-American males at 72%, white females at 95%, and African-American females at 87%, with an overall student-athlete rate of 87% (NCAAc, 2018). The NCAA GSR has

been criticized for not accurately depicting the true graduation numbers, but the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) has also been questioned on accuracy (Southall, 2012). According to the FGR, for 2017 the graduation rates for student-athletes was 68%, for white males 66%, African-American males 55%, white females 78%, and African American females 67% (NCAAc, 2018). Using either GSR or FGR there are obvious differences between the graduation rates of African-American and white student-athletes.

Intercollegiate sports can be an escape mechanism for youth who come from hazardous environments that have crime problems, gangs, and poor educational conditions (Gill, 2008). There has been a decay in trust by the public towards student-athletes due to low graduation rates and student-athletes leaving academic institutions in poor academic standing, along with gross misconduct and academic scandals (Gayles & Hu, 2009). African-American male student-athletes, specifically, experience lower academic success, are socialized towards athletics, and lack diverse educational and career plans (Beamon, 2008). For universities there are benefits for having successful programs including financial and increased student enrollment (Chung, 2013). The benefits to the NCAA and universities are millions of dollars in revenue to have successful athletic programs, especially football and men's basketball (Blackstone, 2019). Evaluating the literature, it appears that while athletic organizations and institutions benefit from student-athletes, the players themselves are not benefitting at the same level.

Kant and Deontology

The ethical frameworks of Immanuel Kant and deontology provide one possible way to evaluate the relationship between student-athletes and the organizations/institutions they play for. In Kantian philosophy it is against moral law to use an individual as a means to an end, but instead individuals should be seen as an end to themselves (Freeman, 2000). The basis for this comparison is that student-athletes should not be viewed or treated

as a means to an end, i.e. making large amounts of money for organizations or institutions; but instead the student-athletes should be ends in themselves. The success of these individuals as students should be the mission of the organizations and institutions, not just their athletic development.

Following Kant's views, these organizations, institutions, and individuals who work for them should treat student-athletes in a way that they would want all students or themselves to be treated. It should be that individuals should act in a manner that can be willed that it becomes a universal law (Kant, 1988). The benefits and services provided to student-athletes should be done to enhance their success, and these should be done with good intentions from a sense of duty to the student-athletes. Kant's view on good will provides guidance on this sense of duty. Good will is defined as having good intentions, so that performing an act should be done out of that sense of duty, but not for personal gain or because of consequences (Freeman, 2000).

Universities present student-athletes with the opportunity of obtaining a degree (Gill, 2008). The NCAA claims the benefits of being a student-athlete are a college education, academic success, scholarship, academic and support services, medical care, life preparation, and more (NCAAA, 2018). The data on graduation rates using either the GSR or FGR present data that there are disparities at some point between the benefits promoted to student-athletes and the outcomes they experience. By telling the truth one is morally good, no matter the outcome, and it is immoral to lie or not tell the truth (Kant, 1988). Following Kant's reasoning, if organizations and institutions are telling student-athletes that they will have access to education, then it is those organizations or institutions' responsibility to ensure that is the reality. This view of honesty and truth-telling also returns to the need to treat people as an end in themselves and not a means to an end. If the organizations or institutions are promoting benefits, such as education and support services, then they assume a duty to provide those things and not just promise them to recruit players in an effort only to increase athletic success.

In “The Discipline of Pure Reason in Polemics,” Kant states that reason is not controlled by dictatorial or despotic power, but is found in the free expression of citizens to speak their doubts and criticisms (Kant, 2004). Student-athletes should have the ability to use their voice and speak out when they feel it is needed. These situations include about their academics, positives or negatives of their university experiences, and social issues they believe in, without fear of punishment. Student-athletes should believe that their voices and choices are their own and not being coerced by their university or athletic department. Deontology promotes that for a decision to be made of free will, it must be done without being forced into a decision (Kant, 1988).

NASW Code of Ethics and Principles

Social workers are guided by the National Association of Social Workers (2018) Code of Ethics which is divided into categories and sub-categories and the NASW Ethical Principles. For further evaluation of ethical issues for student-athletes this article evaluates section one of the NASW Code of Ethics which covers ethical responsibilities to clients and provides good guiding principles.

Commitment to client

An important ethical consideration for social work is the commitment to clients: the well-being of clients is the primary interest of social workers, but there is also a responsibility to society as a whole (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). Combining commitment to clients and treating individuals as an end means seeing that student-athletes are an important population who require treatment and services, which should be the primary focus of individuals working with them. When a student-athlete seeks services, there should not be a consideration as to how decisions on the athlete’s welfare will affect the team or athletic department, but instead practitioners’ only concern should be the welfare of that individual (Beamon, 2008). Social work is not just about resolving

sports-related issues or performance problems, but instead is more directed towards supporting individuals through aspects of life such as academic issues, mental health, financial problems, trauma, and much more (Gill, 2008).

Self-determination

A key ethical principle is that of self-determination which holds that an individual should identify and set their own goals and those working with these individuals should respect and promote those decisions as long as they do not pose risks to the individual or others (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). Student-athletes should be free to make decisions about their academic goals, career decisions, and their athletic futures. Research on black male student-athletes has argued that an student-athlete must notice exploitation from the inequitable structural arrangement, they must see the power in themselves to design their own outcomes, and they must be active in engaging in behaviors to disrupt inequitable arrangements to achieve their goals (Cooper, 2018). Student-athletes feel more empowered when they make their own decisions, but part of that comes with being given access to the knowledge to make such choices. Having access to knowledge so an individual can make informed choices is another social work ethical principle.

Informed Consent

For social workers, informed consent is ensuring that individuals have the proper knowledge of services being provided, potential risks, a duty to ensure individuals understand the information being given to them, and that they are mentally able to provide consent (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). The concept of informed consent can be a guiding foundation for working with student-athletes from academic services, support services, and the athletic department. If a student-athlete wants to study biology and is determined to get a nursing degree, then their academic goals should be promoted and not influenced by coaches, athletic staff, or advisors. When student-athletes have access to career development decision-making self-efficacy courses that educate them on making

career choices, they increase their beliefs in success in their chosen careers, and they feel less that their educational choices are being influenced by outside forces (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013).

Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity

Cultural awareness and social diversity are an important focus in the code of ethics. Social workers should understand how culture influences behavior, be sensitive to individuals' cultural differences, and obtain education and understanding about diversity and oppression (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). Student-athletes come from diverse areas, international communities, and socioeconomic backgrounds that are entering predominantly white institutions (Gill, 2008). When developing programs, working with student-athletes, and providing services, those programs and services should be culturally competent for the entire population, with emphasis on treating everyone equally. For black student-athletes there were multiple factors that effected their academic commitment and capability: racial and athletic stereotypes, campus events that did not appeal to black students making them feel more unwelcome, and white students being uncomfortable relating to black students from lack of exposure during their upbringing (Simiyu Njororai, 2018). If black student-athletes do not feel welcomed by white fellow students, and if they feel that the campus does not recognize their cultural identity, or that it is not working to be welcoming to diversity, then those student-athletes' academic success is negatively impacted. This is why it is important to promote cultural awareness and diversity.

Social Justice

One social work value is social justice, which encompasses the ethical principle that social workers challenge social injustice (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). When student-athletes, especially minorities, feel their voices are not heard, or that they are being discriminated against on campuses, their voices have a right to be heard and not impeded by the universities. Black student-athletes have started using their voices

to protest racism and racial discrimination on campuses, using their voices to threaten boycotts against racist comments from a university president and, along with coaches and staff, demonstrating against racist chants aimed at black students from a fraternity (Greenlee, 2016). As Simiyu Njororai (2018) found, environments that are hostile to black student-athletes have a negative impact on their academic performance. Social workers should pursue social change for individuals and groups who are vulnerable or face oppression, to combat social injustices (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). Social workers working with student-athletes should promote positive social change, bring awareness to inequality, advocate on behalf of their student-athletes, and support those standing against social injustice. The promotion of social justice for student-athletes, especially those from minority populations, is to help foster an environment that is inclusive and champions diversity.

Deontology and the NASW Code of Ethics

Using the Deontological approach in combination with the NASW Code of Ethics provides guidance for understanding and resolving issues related to ethical dilemmas affecting student-athlete retention. Seeing student-athletes as an end in themselves in combination with the commitment to student-athletes and using the concept of informed consent allows the student-athletes to make informed decisions that are in their best interest. By unifying Deontology's emphasis on free will with social work's focus on self-determination, student-athletes can have input into their academic futures and service needs. Social workers' striving for social justice is supported by Kant's views that individuals should have the ability of free expression and when student-athletes have concerns or view injustices they can feel supported in speaking out for their rights.

Though these concepts only scratch the surface of the many dilemmas facing the student-athlete population, it suggests how Deontology can

help inform the understanding of social work ethics regarding student-athlete retention. By combining the teachings of Deontology with the ethical code and principles of social work there is a foundation for resolving some of the ethical dilemmas surrounding the student-athlete population. Through the promotion of commitments to student-athletes, promoting self-determination, using the principles of informed consent, pushing for cultural awareness and diversity, and striving for social justice, those working with student-athletes can create an ethical environment that is inclusive. Through advocacy they can promote feelings of belonging, a sense of support, and academic success in student-athletes.

Implications for Social Work Teaching

Sports social work is a developing field that can offer different perspectives and approaches for universities, athletic departments, and student-athletes. In respect to teaching there are a few focuses that can help promote the ethical principles and values of social work. The first focus is the promotion of sports social work as a field of study at universities. Developing educational programs and specializations and hiring sports social work professors could help provide evidence for students that the field of social work is being recognized as a valid career field. Matt Moore and Ginger Gummelt designed the first sports social work textbook that was released in the fall of 2018 (Moore and Gummelt, 2018). The development of sports social work specific textbooks allows students to learn lessons developed specifically for social work that incorporate social work ethics and values. Education of current and future social workers about student-athlete issues just the first step.

Social work educators should then push to help fight unethical stereotypes and practices aimed at student-athletes. There are barriers that exist from some faculty that place negative perceptions towards student-athletes, that question the value of these students, and that there is a lack of academic goals from student-athletes (Gill, 2014). When presented with student-athletes in their classroom,

social work educators can work with student-athletes around their athletic schedules and hold them to the same standards as other students. One research study of 215 collegiate student-athletes found over 57% of participants reported some level of difficulty with getting accommodations from their professors (Parsons, 2013). If student-athletes are only able to be in these classes because athletic participation makes it possible, then professors should attempt to make reasonable accommodations to support their students.

There should also be a focus on removing the negative stereotypes associated with being a student-athlete, including that athletes are uneducated, not focused on academics, or only there to play sports. When student-athletes are confronted with their athletic identity in the classroom setting, it invokes the stereotype threat of the “dumb jock,” and there is a significant decrease in testing scores compared to student-athletes who are not primed with their athletic identity (Riciputi & Erdal, 2017). Being inclusive of student-athletes can reduce stereotypes and stereotype threats from faculty, staff, and students.

Practice

Social workers must seek and fight for their seat at the tables of university athletic departments and athletic organizations. If social workers are not even at the table, then it is virtually impossible to promote social works ethical principles and values for the benefit of student-athletes. Sports social workers must promote the values, principles, education, and practices they can provide institution, organization, and student-athletes. The field of sports social work enhances athletes in order to promote their psychosocial and mental health needs, view athletes as a vulnerable population, and support athlete self-determination (Gill, Rowan, & Moore, 2017). Through education in the skills, knowledge, and ethical practices of social work, the integration of sports social workers into athletics sets the foundations for integration of social work practice.

For social workers working with student-athletes, there must be an understanding of the range of services and support that student-athletes may

require. The relationship between the sports social work practitioner and student-athletes must be built and developed just as the coach/athlete relationships builds. “Knowledge in coaching, like social work, is gained through experience, observation, application of learned material, attending clinics, obtaining advanced degrees in athletic administration, coaching or social work, and through practice” (Felizza, 2017, p. 146). Through observing student-athletes, using education, and providing services, those working in sports social work positions can establish impactful and trusting relationships with the individuals they serve. As the NASW code of ethics states, social workers allow individuals to have self-determination (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). When providing services for student-athletes, respect must be given to the student-athletes’ needs and wants, even if it means going against the wants or wishes of the athletic department. When issues arise that raise ethical concerns for the social worker when providing services for the student-athlete, then there needs to be room both for providing advocacy and for policy changes.

Research

Research with student-athletes deserves the same ethical considerations as with any other population. There is a level of concern that must be acknowledged in conducting research with student-athletes, due to publicity and media attention. Care should always be taken to protect the identities of participants, their data, and records. Any breach of trust could negatively impact the student-athlete as well as future research with this population. There also needs to be a balancing of research of student-athletes. Research should be conducted across the different athletic organizations and divisions, and not just focus on the big revenue-generating sports. For example, research has shown that the experiences for black male student-athletes are different across the different NCAA divisions (Cooper, Davis, & Dougherty, 2017). If focus is placed on one division over another, or one sport over others, then research is not being inclusive of the entire student-athlete population.

Research with student-athletes must include social work ethical standards, practices, and knowledge for the rights of participants. Social work education takes into consideration many factors that influence the development of individuals that other disciplines may not consider. The Model of Academic Success for Student-Athletes proposed by Comeaux and Harrison (2017) is a dominant model in the study of academic success. The Model of Academic Success has a section of Precollege factors that include; family background, educational experiences and preparation, and individual attributes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). From a social work prospective the current model of academic success regarding precollege factors does not include precollege environmental factors that could influence academic success. Environmental factors are important aspects of a person’s development that can impact concepts of academic success such as growing up in poverty, exposure to violence, gangs, and diverse or homogeneous populations. By taking social work ethics and education into research there can be opportunities to bring attention to social considerations, cultural concepts, and diversity concerns that need to be addressed.

Sports social work researchers and researchers into student-athletes also have an ethical duty to promote the findings and interventions found through research to those organizations, institutions, and individuals that can benefit most. When research is conducted, it is published in specific journals and academic sources that may limit access or exposure of findings to individuals who can benefit. The ability to disseminate information can be enhanced by promoting sports social work research, promoting and accepting research for presentations at conferences conducted with student-athletes, and networking across disciplines. One tangible place this can be witnessed is the creation of the Early Scholars Committee within the ASWIS, which was founded by ten social work PhD students with young academics collaborating to enrich scholarship involving the intersection of social works and sports.

Conclusion

The potential exploitation of collegiate student-athletes has been of interest for decades yet has only in recent years been a focus of social work professionals. Questions have arisen around previous scandals involving apparel companies, universities, athletic departments, and individuals looking to profit from the hard work of student-athletes. Financial incentives around college sports are being produced, while student-athletes graduation rates, especially among African-American males, remain low. There must be integration of ethical practices, values, and principles to guide those entrusted with the futures of student-athletes. Social workers and NASW members could bring to universities, athletics departments, and institutions their established codes of ethics and ethical principles designed for the protection of vulnerable populations and individuals. The Alliance of Social Workers in Sports and its members have been a driving force in the promotion of sports social work, promoting education around athletic issues, and the benefits social work brings to the world of athletics. By enhancing aspects of teaching, practice, and research issues affecting student-athletes, social work can enhance these individuals' academic experience. Social work provides a discipline that can combat stereotypes, promote social work ethics and principles, enhance services, and expand research for the benefit of student-athletes, athletic organizations, athletic departments, and universities. Social work ethics focus on emphasizing an individual, their culture, and their community. It is time to remember the most important aspect of college athletics, which is not money, fame, or the donor base, but the retention to graduation of student-athletes.

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