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### Mental Health and Student Athletes

Meghan Shaye Barrasso

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Mental Health and Student Athletes

Meghan Shaye Barrasso

Merrimack College

2020

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

CAPSTONE SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CAPSTONE TITLE: Mental Health and Student Athletes

AUTHOR: Meghan Shaye Barrasso

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between mental health and collegiate student athletes. The participants of the study were Merrimack College student athletes and those strongly associated with Merrimack. The purpose of this study was to educate and bring awareness to mental health issues in collegiate student athletes, as well as topics associated with mental health; such as social stigma, personal stigma, social support, referral skills and resources. Participants participated in an online workshop that included three activities focused on stigma, social support and help seeking. Student athlete participants were asked to complete a post workshop evaluation. The findings from this research provided insight on the quality of the workshop as well as Merrimack College's student athlete's attitudes toward the importance of mental health issues, help seeking, social support and stigma.

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### Mental Health Awareness and Support for Collegiate Student Athletes

The awareness and support of mental health issues in individuals has become more prevalent throughout the years, especially most recently in college students. College students alone have difficulty handling many aspects of their life whether it is academics, career related issues, family and social relationships and finances. With trying to juggle all of these aspects, this can negatively affect their mental health. According to the Spring 2019 National College Health Assessment, approximately 50% of college students felt overwhelming anxiety and about 62% said they felt very sad (NCHA, 2019).

Within college students, are specific types of students who obey a rigorous daily schedule of responsibilities that go beyond just the normal school work load. These students are known as National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student athletes. Many of these student athlete's daily tasks may consist of, but not limited to, attending academic and athletic commitments, extracurricular club or organization commitments. A study published in 2016 found that 6.3% of collegiate student-athletes met the criteria of clinically significant depression (Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo & Gross, 2016). According to the same study, nearly 25% of collegiate student-athletes have reported clinically relevant levels of depressive symptoms.

With so many more responsibilities beyond the traditional college student, researchers Whitehead and Senecal (2019), studied the relationship between performance pressure and mental health in NCAA Division I student athletes. Whitehead and Senecal (2019) found that these athletes struggle with their health and well-being, development, and balancing of sports, school and social life. Other research done by Wirsberg (1996), also found in Whitehead and Senecal's research, was that the researchers discovered that NCAA collegiate student athletes found themselves not enjoying their sport anymore due to pressure from athletic departments to

perform and the struggle to handle academic and athletic obligations. Data was found through a response to an NCAA survey in 2015, where it was revealed that about 30% of collegiate student athletes self-reported that they had been “intractably overwhelmed during the past month.”

Additionally, when examining suicides of 35 NCAA athletes between the 2003-2004 and 2011-2012 seasons, the researchers found that NCAA male athletes have a significantly higher rate of suicide compared to female athletes, and football athletes appear to be the greatest risk (Rao, Asif, & Drezner, 2015).

Since collegiate student athletes are such elite performers and constantly idolized by the public, the pressure to excel in their athletic performance is high and adding the pressure of additional responsibilities on top of that is detrimental to their mental health. Additionally, without the proper social support from athletic departments, coaches, and teammates; collegiate student athletes will continue to struggle with mental health issues. The biggest issue with seeking help from coaches, trainers, teammates etc. is due to stigma. Athletes do not want to be viewed as weak or an unreliable teammate for their mental health struggles. A study from the University of Michigan found that 33% of students surveyed experienced significant symptoms of depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. Among that group, 30% sought help, but in comparison to collegiate student athletes with mental health conditions, only 10% do.

These statistics prove why it is imperative for collegiate student athletes to be aware, able to identify mental health issues in themselves, destigmatize and be supportive of one another, so that the athlete's overall performance and well-being does not decline. This workshop seeks to create a space to educate and bring awareness of mental health issues to collegiate student athletes. This will include educating on the signs, symptoms and interventions of mental health issues and will include a mental health professional to educate the student athletes on mental



health resources and referral skills. This workshop will help improve the student athlete's overall performance and well-being, build a supportive community between athletes and improve the collegiate athletic community as a whole.

### **Literature Review**

Mental health is a person's physiological, emotional, and social well-being and can affect how a person feels, thinks and acts in their everyday life (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Higher education institutions have noticed mental health issues within college students becoming a concerning trend. To show just how alarming mental health issues are becoming in higher education institutions, the American College Health Association (2017) designed a study and found that 45.1% of college students have experienced higher than average levels of stress and 84% reported feeling mentally exhausted. As a result of such high percentages of struggles, these students are at greater risk for non-completion of their studies (O'Keefe, 2013).

The most prevalent types of mental health issues that college students are struggling with are depression, anxiety, eating disorders, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Soet & Sevig, 2006). These issues can be linked with the research done by Newton, Angle, Schuette and Ender (1984) on prevention needs of college students where researchers identified that college students struggle with low self-esteem, autonomy issues, lacking purpose, relationship issues, and unsupportive environment.

To identify just how concerning mental health issues have become on college campuses, Porter studied 311 mental health-related crises on a college campus over a period between 2013-2016 (2018). From this research, Porter found that about 78% of crises were ideation of suicide

and 34% of the crises resulted in hospitalization of the student (2018). Porter also included intervention initiatives made by the school to benefit students, which included a follow up counseling appointment, safety plan, and the involvement of a loved one. In terms of mental health issues in student athletes, these intervention initiatives should be looked at by athletic departments when taking the next steps in helping and supporting their athletes.

### ***Mental Health and College Athletes***

The data provided from Porter's research on college students alone, shows that there is a significant issue of mental wellness on college campuses. Among college students, are students who are struggling more than the traditional student because of additional responsibilities that they hold. These students are known as Division I National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) student athletes and they are elite performers and have a higher mental capacity than traditional students due to the high stake environment and stress they're exposed to (Snedden et al., 2019).

A study done in 2019 (Whitehead & Senecal) identified three key issues student athletes deal with in their life and they are: health and well-being, development, and balancing of sports, school and social life. The three issues from Whitehead and Senecal's research has led collegiate student athletes to struggle with their mental health due to such a large amount of responsibilities on their plate; and in turn, have affected their performance in a negative way, as a result of constant exhaustion from the mental demands of their sport (NCAA, 2016b). A second study in 2018 done by Ryan, Gayles, and Bell identified three barriers to receiving help for mental health issues. In their study, one of the primary factors was the fear of possible negative reactions and backlash from coaches and athletic administration, which could manifest into the fear of experiencing personal discomfort. An additional factor is the fear of having a lack of time to get

the help needed to treat these issues. These factors reinforce the point that initiatives must be taken to support student athletes' overall well-being and performance, not only as an athlete, but also as a student. Engaging the athletic community by bringing awareness of mental health issues in student athletes could better the athlete and in turn, the athletic community at the institution as a whole (Hong, Keenan, & Putukian, 2018).

### ***Student Athletes, Gender and Mental Health***

Student athletes have a rigorous schedule between the sport they participate in and educational responsibilities. With it known that a number of collegiate student athletes struggle with mental health, identifying whether or not these struggles vary between gender and sport is also important. The World Health Organization also found that in specifically college-aged students, there is in fact a significant difference between mental health in comparison to men and women (2013).

Soet and Sevig's study on mental health issues came from a sample of 939 college students and can additionally be linked with the idea that mental health issues in college students differ among gender (2006). Women have reported higher levels of stress than men, which include time management struggles and pressure to succeed. These issues can be shown in a previous study done by Hubbard, Reohr, Tolcher and Downs (2018), on 564 college students that was aimed at identifying stressor categories and mental health symptoms (2018). In terms of mental health issues, the data from this research revealed that college aged men struggle more with depression and overall distress than women do; and women struggle more with anxiety. Also found in the same research, 37.5% of women from the data seek professional care, but only 16% of men do. The significant differences in percentage of help seeking behaviors by gender can be looked at with research on mental health stigma.

Additional research on gender and mental health from Moret-Tatay, Beneyto-Arrojo, Laborde-Bois, Martínez-Rubio and Senent-Capuz (2016) showed that “women have greater skills and different styles of coping strategies focused on emotion than men do” (p. 830). This data was collected from 131 college aged students by using the Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) Questionnaire and the General Health Questionnaire-28. The COPE Questionnaire was created by Carver in 1989 and is a coping inventory designed to assess the different ways people respond to stress. The inventory consists of a list of statements that the participants review and score to measure their coping skills. The General Health Questionnaire-28 was developed by Goldberg in 1978 and is used to identify possible psychological disorders and an individual’s well-being by comparing one’s current state to their usual state. The data collected from these studies on coping skills varying by gender are important when thinking about help seeking behaviors between different genders for their mental health struggles and how these stressors can be integrated into increasing social support throughout college athletic communities.

Data from an additional study on gender and sports revealed that female student athletes have a higher percentage of clinical and moderate levels of depression than males do, and track and field and cheerleading were shown to be the top two sports having the highest level of depression prevalence (Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo & Gross, 2016). This study is important because it can be linked with Hubbard, Reohr, Tolcher and Down’s (2018) study because it also revealed that men and women differ in mental health issues, as well as help seeking behaviors. The differences in help seeking behaviors by gender could be linked with the idea that men and women have different levels of social support from their teammates, as well as the college

athletic community as a whole. This may also mean that different help seeking approaches need to be implemented based on the gender of the sport or athlete.

### ***Mental Health Stigma and Help Seeking***

With data revealing that mental health issues are significant in collegiate student athletes, the decision-making approaches when coping with these issues varies from student athlete to athlete. The approach each athlete takes is based off of perceived stigma the athlete feels and how that will affect them as an athlete, student, teammate, etc. Coping skills are like any other skill that an athlete should practice, but sometimes these skills are not at the level they should be, which is why student athletes continue to struggle. According to a study on 644 collegiate student athletes, there is a statistical significance between greater perceived stigma and lower coping mechanisms (Kroshus, 2017). In other words, the more a student athlete believes they will be stigmatized for their mental health issue, the lower the coping skills they will have to deal with this issue. A big factor of this is because collegiate student athletes have a negative attitude toward help seeking practices for their mental health issues because they do not want to be identified as a weak or untrustworthy teammate due to the pressure of their elite “celebrity status” (Etzel et al., 1991). The “celebrity status” of always being in the public spotlight and held at a higher standard than a traditional student causes added stress and pressure on an athlete. Additionally found in Kroshus’ research, was differences of stigma between genders, where females were more hesitant to seek help to almost “prove” that they belong in the high stakes environment (2017).

Stigmatized individuals are those that do not have full social acceptance and are constantly striving to adjust their social identities, including those struggling with mental health issues (Goffman, 1963). According to Goffman, social stigma is a process where the reactions of

others spoil the person's normal identity. This can be seen when athletic departments, coaches, teammates, and even the public react negatively to a student athlete's mental health struggle. Goffman divides an individual's reaction to social stigma into three different categories. The first is the stigmatized; those who bear the stigma, which in this case are the collegiate student athletes struggling with mental health issues. The second group is the "normals", those who do not bear the stigma, which are the athletic departments, coaches, public and other teammates who are not struggling. The third group is the wise, which are those who are accepted; this is where every collegiate student athlete struggling with a mental health issue aims to fall under, to be accepted by others.

With collegiate student athletes experiencing more pressure than a traditional student, data reveals that student athletes have higher levels of personal stigma and perceived public stigma than traditional students do. This can be linked back to the idea and pressure of having "celebrity status" (Kaier, Cromer, Johnson, Strunk, & Davis, 2015) in the eyes of the public. This idea of personal stigma and perceived public stigma was found to inadvertently affect one another in a study done by Wahto, Swift and Whipple (2016). Additionally, from their study on stigma and help seeking, they found stigma from the public to be a big deciding factor in help seeking behaviors in collegiate student athletes and also found public stigma to affect the student athlete's view of themselves for seeking help (2016). While this research reinforces Goffman's theory of social stigma, it is clear that stigma surrounding the idea of mental health issues in student athletes is an issue that needs to be addressed, especially between student athletes and their teammates, in order to create a supportive athletic community at any higher education institution.

### *Social Support*

As stated before, collegiate student athletes are used to having “celebrity status” and being idolized by the public. With so much attention on them, these athletes feel the pressure to perform their best and rely heavily on other student athletes, the athletic department, coaches, trainers, etc. for support and with a lack of support, the student athletes will continue to struggle. A study of 4,000 NCAA D1 collegiate student athletes found that many mental health issues have generated negative feedback from the athletes on how the athletic departments are too focused on maximizing an athlete’s performance and how “sports are not as fun anymore” (Wrisberg, 1996).

With the information provided, it is clear that there can be an improvement in the way teammates, athletic departments, coaches, etc. support and facilitate balance in student athletes to help improve their mental health. Effective training to increase confidence in mental health care referral skills is essential for members of athletic departments to have (Dettl-Rivera, 2019). It can also be noted that depending on the gender of the team/athlete and the specific sport, athletic departments, coaches, etc. may have to take a different approach on which sports should be examined more thoroughly in terms of risk. Social support is a beneficial resource for mental health related issues and student athletes and athletic departments should take advantage of this idea. The differences of this type of support can be identified by gender, in a study on 204 NCAA student athletes. In this study, female athletes expressed that they gain more mental health benefits with social support than male athletes do (Goichi Hagiwara, Takehiro Iwatsuki, Hirohisa Isogai, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2017).

Knowing that the types and amount of social support differs by the gender of a team, college athletic programs lack in mental health awareness education and training for their

athletes, as well as their coaches. A news article was posted in 2019 by the European Union News on how mental health first aid training would be beneficial in boosting a student athlete's overall wellness because a teammate or coach would be more prepared to deal with the situation. Trainings on mental health could include researcher, Kaminski's four best practices, on how athletic departments, coaches, etc. can support and promote student athlete's mental health (2016). These practices include referring an athlete to a licensed healthcare provider; have procedures be put into place when referring an athlete, implement pre-participation mental health screenings and creating a culture of health-promoting and support. These best practices are extremely important for a coach and even student athletes to be aware of so they are correctly supporting and referring an athlete to get the right help they need.

Along with Kaminski's four best practices and referring back to Whitehead and Senecal's article on how collegiate student athletes are losing interest in their sport, an emotional coaching consideration is "encouraging athletes to express their complex feelings and concerns related to the competition" (Zakrajsek, Lauer, & Bodey, 2017, pg. 78). From this study, the authors discuss how emotional coaching and using self-confidence enhancing skills can help develop athletes mentally and would be a good tool for athletic departments to use when supporting their athletes.

Another model that can be implemented into student athlete and athletic department's training on mental health issues in student athletes is Beauchemin's outreach model. The outreach model is a one session workshop that "increases awareness and understanding of mental health, sport psychology principles and concepts, and reduces barriers to accessing mental health supports and services for student athletes" (Beauchemin, 2014, pg. 269). In this model, the Five Cardinal Mental Skills of sport psychology were presented to student athletes to open up the discussion of mental health in an easier way. The Five Cardinal Mental Skills are: relaxation,



concentration, imagery, self-talk, and routine (Henschen, 2005). Relaxation can reduce intense levels of stress and anxiety, which can lead to a negative performance. Concentration is maintaining focus and attention to perform better. Imagery is the process of recreating an experience in one's mind, such as a play or skill done in a previous game. Self-talk focuses on the negative and positive words an athlete says to themselves while at practice or at a game and routine is establishing a consistent foundation or state of mind. The next step in the outreach model were questionnaires with open ended questions aimed at help seeking perceptions on mental health and qualitative interviews to reinforce common themes about mental health from athletes. Beauchemin's outreach model could be used by teammates and coaches to increase conversation and support among one another on mental wellness.

With technology advancing and athletic departments having such busy schedules, web-based education and training could be a resource that athletic departments could take advantage of and share with their student athletes. Researchers Van Raalte, Andrews, Cornelius, Diehl, and Brewer created three studies on web-based education and training for athletic departments on mental health awareness, support and referral. Researchers found from the feedback, that the web-based trainings were useful and effective because of how easy the website was to navigate for the athletic departments. The facts and figures and the videos and role-playing in the website made the situations more realistic and relatable for the student athletes. The research also found after using the website, the users were found to have an increased mental health referral knowledge and efficacy (2015). Meaning that those who used the website became more educated on how and who to successfully refer an individual to when they are struggling with a mental health issue.

With the data and suggestions from the researchers in these articles, athletic departments can implement the tools, models and practices to fit each gendered sport and use them as tools to open up conversations of mental health with their student athletes. These models and practices should also be implemented into yearly mental health trainings for athletic departments and student athletes based on team. With these trainings for each team, confidence in referral skills for the athletes and administration can appropriately guide one to the correct help they need, while also being there to support them in an effective way.

### **Project Plan**

Collegiate student athletes have many responsibilities on their plate and some struggle with handling the intense pressure that goes along with these responsibilities. Collegiate athletic departments can put pressure on the student athletes' athletic performance, while at the same time, supporting them to excel in all aspects. The student athlete community on college campuses, especially one's teammates, is the biggest form of social support an athlete has. I provided an online mental health education, awareness and support workshop among Merrimack College student athletes to diminish the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Along with destigmatizing, resources and referral skills were provided and explained by a mental health professional. This online activity-based workshop was aimed at building a community of support among Merrimack College student athletes, in order to create a more supportive environment for the collegiate student athletes to flourish.

### ***Situation Statement***

Student athletes have a rigorous schedule between the sport they play, educational responsibilities and additional life factors. With so many overwhelming responsibilities, many

student athletes find themselves struggling with mental health issues, some staying silent about these struggles. The problems that create the barriers a student athlete deals with when seeking treatment for these mental health issues include: a lack of time, fear of possible negative reaction from teammates, coaches, and additional athletic administration, and fear of experiencing personal discomfort (Ryan, Gayles, & Bell, 2018). Social support of a student athlete from teammates, coaches, trainers, etc. is essential to the overall well-being of the student athlete and will help them flourish as an individual, generating an increase in academics, athletics and social performances.

### ***Define Your Goals***

By creating an activity based online mental health awareness and education workshop for Merrimack College collegiate student athletes, they now have an increased awareness of mental health issues and warning signs and a decreased stigma toward mental health issues. With this increase in education and awareness of mental health, Merrimack College student athletes now have the appropriate tools to address and self-check the overall health and well-being of themselves or another student athlete. These student athletes will hopefully be more willing to support one another and create a stronger community within their team as well as the athletic community as a whole. Student athletes are now better prepared to support themselves and/or another student athlete due to the resources and referral mechanisms provided from the workshop. Once the student athletes create a supportive community among one another and having the appropriate tools, then they will have improved overall health, personal development, social capital and coping strategies, and have the ability to conquer all responsibilities with confidence. Thus, this will lead to a more positive and supportive culture among Merrimack

College student athletes on campus and will trickle up to the athletic department to change their culture to provide for the student athlete as a whole.

### ***Target Audience and Stakeholders***

The target audience of this online workshop was Merrimack College collegiate student athletes. The target audience directly benefitted from the online mental health education and awareness workshop as a result of the tools and resources the workshop provided them with. Merrimack College and the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) were stakeholders of this workshop. Merrimack College is a stakeholder because the student athletes directly benefitted from this workshop; this results in a trickle up and benefits the Merrimack College athletic department and the rest of the Merrimack College community as a whole because of the increase in educational and athletic performances. As a result, since Merrimack College athletics benefits from this workshop, then the NCAA benefits because they now have student athletes with increased athletic and educational performances due to their overall increase of well-being.

### ***Crafting a Clear Message***

As a result of constant exhaustion from the mental demands of a student athlete's sport, performance is affected and pressure from the public only makes this worse. According to a study done by Wahto, Swift and Whipple (2016), public stigma affects a student athlete's own personal stigma and how they view themselves for seeking help. Mental health issues should not be viewed as a weak characteristic in college athletics. Student athletes should be able to reach out to their teammates, other student athletes, coaches, trainers, etc. for support of their mental health conditions and creating a supportive and resourceful athletic community will benefit the athletic community as a whole.

***Incentives for Engagement***

Stakeholder: Merrimack College student athletes

Incentive: Overall increase in well-being and performance, including academic performance. Stronger community and support within student athletes

Stakeholder: Merrimack College athletic department staff

Incentive: Increase in athletic performances, more athletes thriving, better athletic community as a whole.

Stakeholder: Merrimack College student health services

Incentive: Increase in student athlete help seeking behaviors

Stakeholder: National Collegiate Athletic Association

Incentive: Increase in student athlete's athletic and academic performance thus creating all around better NCAA community

***Identify Outreach Methods***

There were many steps taken to successfully implement this online workshop and achieve the goals of the workshop. One of the top priorities I took was communication to the Merrimack College athletic department in order to increase awareness of this workshop. I met with the Associate Athletic Director of Compliance and Administration to receive support and insight on the best outreach methods to student athletes and coaches. With this insight, I decided to email every Merrimack College student athlete, coach, trainer, and athletic department graduate fellow the workshop flyer. The email included information about the program and an RSVP Google form link to keep track of who is interested in attending the workshop. I also reached out to the Merrimack College athletic department to receive permission to post the workshop flyers throughout the athletic building, this was also essential to get spread the word about the

workshop. Additionally, I continued to reach out and keep in contact with those listed on the responsibilities chart, especially with the athletic department as this was the main source in ensuring my program was successful.

***Responsibilities Chart***

NAME	ORGANIZATION OR AFFILIATION	RESPONSIBILITIES	CONTACT INFORMATION
Meghan Barrasso	Merrimack College	Design and implement the project	barrassom@merrimack.edu
Kristina Cappello	VinFen, Clinical Care Manager	Discuss mental health resources and referral skills.	Krisitina_cappello@yahoo.com
Robin Muller	Merrimack College, Associate Athletic Director for Compliance/Admin.	Communicate the workshop information to coaches/athletic staff.	mullerr@merrimack.edu

***Tools/Measure to Assess Progress***

I held a meeting with Robin Muller from Merrimack College athletics prior to the program to define what the athletic department would like for their student athletes to get out of this workshop; met with Kristina Cappello, mental health professional, to discuss important mental health resources and referrals necessary to cover during the workshop; workshop flyers were posted in the athletic building; email communications about the workshop was sent to student athletes and the athletic department staff to spread the word and bring in athletes to the workshop; reflections and debriefs after each activity throughout the workshop; provided mental health resources and referrals to attendees after the workshop was complete and sent out a post evaluation to see if the toolkit and resources were helpful to participants.

**Implementation Timeline**

January 2020	Met with athletic department to get approval of workshop
February 2020	Booked space, date and time of workshop and mental health professional to speak.
March 2020	Workshop content completed. Communications & flyers sent out to student athletes, coaches, athletic trainers, etc.
April 2020	Implement workshop on April 1 and evaluate workshop.

**Logical Framework**

We will hold an online mental health education and awareness workshop for collegiate student athletes  SO THAT...
Collegiate student athletes will have more knowledge on mental health issues, stigma, social support, and referral resources  SO THAT...
Collegiate student athletes will have the necessary tools and resources to support their teammates/other student athletes and know the appropriate help seeking behaviors  SO THAT...
Student athletes will feel supported by one another; their coaches, athletic trainers etc. and stigma surrounding the topic will decrease  SO THAT...
Student athletes will have an improved overall health, personal development, social capital and coping strategies and know how to care for themselves  SO THAT...
Student athletes will be able to increase their performance academically, athletically, and socially  SO THAT...
A more positive and effective athletic culture and community will be created on campus  SO THAT...
The Merrimack College athletic community can provide for the athlete as a whole.

## Results

The *Sports, Stress, & Stigma* mental health education and awareness workshop took place on Wednesday, April 1, 2020 from 4:00 to 6:00 pm. The workshop was held through an online video conferencing format, ZOOM, and allowed for breakout rooms where attendees were able to participate in one of the activities in a much intimate group. The online workshop was geared toward Merrimack College student athletes only, with that said, a total of nine people attended the workshop, two left halfway through the workshop, and four student athletes completed a post-event evaluation.

### *Post Event Evaluation*

Participants were asked to complete a survey at the end of workshop before the workshop ended. Four respondents completed the post event survey, all of which were Merrimack College student athletes. Among the student athletes who completed the post event survey, two self-identified as female and the other two self-identified as male. All but one of the respondents were freshmen, and one was a graduate student athlete. When asked to identify their race/ethnicity, all respondents identified as White / Caucasian. Lastly, respondents indicated the various sports they play at Merrimack College, which included hockey and cross-country / track and field.

In the post-event survey, participants were asked to rate the overall workshop on a scale of 1 – excellent, 2 – good, 3 – fair, and 4 – poor. The average score was 1.75 (n=4), with three indicating the workshop was good and one stating it was excellent. Respondents were also asked their opinion on the importance of the issue of mental health struggles in collegiate student athletes, on a scale of 1 – extremely important, 2 – moderately important, 3 – of little importance, and 4 – not at all important. The average score of this question was a 2.0 (n=4), with



all of the respondents indicating that student athlete's mental health struggles are an extremely important issue. As for social support, respondents were asked if they would know how to support a teammate who was struggling with a mental health issue. On a scale of 1 – definitely, 2 – probably, 3 – possibly a little, and 4 – not likely, the average score was 1.75 (n=4), with three indicating that they would definitely know how to support a teammate struggling and one respondent indicating that they would probably know how to support a teammate.

Participants were asked a set of questions about how they understood the content of the workshop and what actions they might take as a result of the workshop. They were asked to rate their responses on a 4-scale: 1 – strongly agree, 2 – agree, 3 – disagree, and 4 – strongly disagree. The first question was, “I have a better understanding of what stigma is and what it looks like.” Respondents answered this with an average score of 2.0 (n=4), starting they agree. They were then asked to rate their understanding of social supports, with an average response of 1.75 (n=4), where three indicated they agree, and one indicated they strongly agree. The third question was, “I have a better understanding of the signs and symptoms of mental health issues.” Respondents answered this with an average score of 2.0 (n=4), starting they agree. The next three questions were focused on the understanding of the workshop content and how it relates to teammates. The respondents were asked to rate their consideration of how a teammate might be struggling with a mental health issue, if they will support a teammate struggling, and if they will discuss with their teammates what they have learned / their experience from the workshop. Respondents answered these three questions with an average response of 1.75 (n=4), where three individuals indicated they agree, and one indicated they strongly agree.

Respondents were asked to share what were the most valuable things they learned from the workshop. Responses included the importance of talking to each other (n=2), one noted that

they learned about different stigmas, and one noted that “we’re all in this together and we need to be aware of what can hurt someone.” Respondents were also asked to think about their previously held opinions / ideas of mental health and what from the workshop challenged them and these opinions. Two respondents expressed their struggle with the social support scenarios from the second workshop activity, and how they did not think of these scenarios as important before the workshop (n=2). The respondents were then asked to identify where or whom they would reach out to for help if they were struggling with a mental health issue. Responses included friends (n=3), a coach, family, and the Hamel Health and Counseling Center at Merrimack College.

Respondents were asked to provide their opinion on their mental health help seeking attitudes prior to and after attending the workshop through multiple choices. Help seeking attitudes prior to the workshop revealed an average response of 1.75 (n=4), where three indicated they did not having previous thoughts about help seeking and one respondent indicated they were willing to seek help if struggling with a mental health issue. Help seeking attitudes after attending the workshop revealed an average response of 1.0 (n=4), where two respondents would maybe seek help if struggling with a mental health issue and the other two respondents stating they would definitely seek help.

### ***Activity Reflections***

Throughout the online workshop there were three activities geared toward mental health stigma and social support with a debrief discussion after each. Activity one was a Word-Cloud created by participant’s responses on what characteristics they think an athlete should possess. Responses included: fearless, leadership (n=2), drive (n=2), tough (n=2), strong, competitive, relentless, hardworking, dedicated, good sportsmanship, commitment, passionate (n=3), agility

(n=2), mentally tough, positivity, kindness, and calm under pressure. After posting the Word-Cloud made up of these characteristics and giving the participants a chance to look it over, we began to debrief this activity. Participants were asked what they felt were the most important characteristics from the Word-Cloud that an athlete should possess. One respondent said “commitment and dedication are the most important because if you are not putting in the work, why should you deserve a spot on the team.” Another respondent talked about her experience in track and field and said “you can’t always be fearless because sometimes things are unknown and scary.” Two of the participants explained that they believe an elite athlete holds most of these characteristics.

The second activity in the workshop was social support and stigma scenarios. The participants were put into breakout rooms where they read each scenario and came up with a response or plan of action for the situation. The first scenario was a teammate who was overeating to deal with their stress and another teammate commenting that they were going to get out of shape. The participants struggled with this question, but said their response to this situation by being there for the individual and brainstorming coping ideas with the person struggling. The second scenario was a teammate struggling with depression and another teammate telling them they don’t want to be around them anymore because they are such a downer. The participants said they would ask the teammate who is struggling what is wrong and provide them with resources that could potentially help them get better. The participants said the teammate who was being unsupportive and mean was selfish and wondered if they could possibly be struggling too, so they would also reach out to them with resources.

The third scenario provided to the participants was “a teammate has just returned to school after being in the hospital for two weeks dealing with a severe bout of depression. They

are afraid to come back to the team out of fear of being stigmatized for their mental health issue”. One participant explained “I would tell the teammate I’m glad they’re okay, but I wouldn’t poke or prod too much because I would let them open up to me when they are ready”. Overall for this scenario, the participants said they would tell the teammate that the team has missed them, they would be there as a support for the teammate and tell them that they have a whole team also supporting them. The fourth scenario asked participants how they could be helpful to a teammate who was just diagnosed with ADHD and was struggling with pay attention at practice. In response to this scenario, the participants said when they’re in practice and the coach calls a drill to ask the teammate if they understood, but make sure to use positive language. Two participants also suggested creating a practice plan on paper for the teammate to review. One participant suggested to make sure the coach is aware of the teammate’s ADHD and have games, practices, and trips structured so there is no confusion and more of a routine for the teammate to adapt to. The final scenario was “a transfer student has just joined your team this semester. You and some of your teammates notice they struggle making friends and some people on the team have started to pick on them”. The participants struggled with this scenario because they explained that this is not something they have seen happen before. Three participants responded to this scenario by stating that the new teammate could be struggling with an issue, so it is never okay to pick on someone struggling. One participant suggested getting to know the new teammate by inviting them out or grabbing lunch. Another participant said “they transferred for a reason, maybe figure out what that reason is and how they’re beneficial to our team”.

The third activity of the workshop was called “Choose the Jersey”, where participants were encouraged to anonymously write something they wish their teammates/coaches knew about them on clipart jerseys for all to see on the PowerPoint. There were only three responses to

this activity; one respondent wrote “When I’m overwhelmed, I cry not from madness but from stress”. Another respondent wrote “my sport is how I cope with anxiety.”, and a third respondent wrote “I suffer from anxiety.”

### **Discussion**

The workshop activities, debrief discussions, post event evaluations and overall engagement of the workshop allowed me to assess the success of my online workshop. During the workshop, the participants were attentive and followed some basic directions listed on the logistics slide, such as keeping their microphones off to allow for a better learning experience for all to hear. In the beginning of the workshop the participants were willing to introduce themselves and create a welcoming space among one another.

Activity one of the workshop, the athlete characteristic Word-Cloud, allowed participants to get their minds thinking about internal pressures that an athlete might feel they need to achieve. The participants were more than willing to participate in this activity and provided a number of positive characteristics an athlete should possess. What was interesting about the responses from this activity was that no negative characteristics were mentioned, but one of the characteristics mentioned was “mentally tough”. We discussed this characteristic and if it is acceptable to not be mentally tough at times and if that makes you any less of athlete. The participants struggled with answering this question, which reveals that they have not thought about mental toughness in a negative way. When I asked the participants if they feel as though they possess all of the characteristics in the Word-Cloud, one answered yes and two other participants said an athlete should possess most of these characteristics. This shows that these

athletes have so much pressure to be all of these positive characteristics and if they are not, they feel like they fail as an athlete.

The second workshop activity allowed for participants to work together to create a social support response to scenarios surrounding the idea of stigma. For all of the scenarios, the participants came up with responses that supported the teammate who was struggling. From the responses to these activities, it is clear that the participants have an understanding of social support and how to be there to support a teammate who is struggling. As for the scenario about the transfer teammate struggling, the participants found this to be very surprising and struggled to agree on a response to this situation because they have not experienced a situation like this before. This response shows the participants willingness to accept new and incoming student athletes regardless of their struggles.

The last workshop activity where the student athletes were encouraged to anonymously share something with their teammates or coach knew about them revealed their hesitation and reluctance to share personal information about themselves. This could be a result of the limitations to this workshop. Those student athletes who responded to this scenario revealed that they indeed struggle with mental health issues.

The post evaluation workshop surveys revealed Merrimack College student athlete's perspectives and opinions on the idea of mental health issues, social support, stigma and referral methods. The evaluations revealed that student athletes believe mental health issues are of high importance and they are able to understand and identify the many different mental health issues. The data also revealed that if a teammate were struggling, Merrimack College student athletes have the knowledge and tools to support them. Data from the evaluations along with the scenario activity also revealed that Merrimack College student athletes have a lot of social support

between teammates, and are able to feel comfortable reaching out to coaches, teammates, friends and family in times of need. In terms of help seeking attitudes, after the workshop was complete, student athletes became more willing to seek help for issues and identified the campus counseling service, Hamel Health, as a resource.

There were many similarities between the literature and results and feedback from this research. From the post workshop evaluations, females were identified as more likely to seek help for mental health issues, which connects back to research done by Moret-Tatay, Beneyto-Arrojo, Laborde-Bois, Martínez-Rubio and Senent-Capuz (2016). Also connecting to the literature, social support was one of the most important factors to the participants when it comes to dealing with mental health issues. Respondents of the post evaluation identified sharing what they have learned from the workshop with their teammates, which connects with literature on trainings and best practices to continue to educate student athletes and athletic departments on mental health issues in student athletes. Despite the change in format from face-to-face to online, I believe this workshop was just as valuable in reaching student athletes. Those who participated in the workshop were looking to create a supportive space to hold a conversation about mental health and student athletes.

### ***Limitations***

Although the workshop was successful and held meaningful conversations, there were some limitations that could have hindered the workshop. A limitation from the program was the sample size of the participants I was gearing the workshop toward. Student athletes are only a small percentage of the Merrimack College student body, thus this created a smaller pool of potential participants for my workshop.

One of the main limitations I faced when creating my program was having to reconstruct the workshop to an online format due to the COVID-19, the Coronavirus global pandemic. My original workshop was supposed to meet face-to-face on Wednesday, March 18, 2020 in the athletic building on Merrimack College's campus. When the outbreak of COVID-19 occurred, a stay at home order was instructed by the Governor of Massachusetts. In response to this, on March 14, 2020 Merrimack College closed the campus as a whole and moved to remote and online learning for the remaining of the semester. With this drastic change, I had to take steps to transform my in-person workshop to an online workshop via an online conferencing platform, ZOOM. This drastic change created a limitation to the number of student athletes who wanted to take part in the workshop because it was no longer face-to-face.

Activities in the workshop had to be reconstructed to allow for learning through an online platform. Activities one and three, the Word-Cloud and Choose the Jersey, were originally supposed to be an anonymous, using a bucket that the participants could drop their responses in and I was going to read the off one by one and hang them on the wall for all to see. Instead, I changed this to privately messaging their responses to an individual who was helping me run my program. This is a limitation because with this change, participants might have felt more reluctant to fully answer due to their responses not being anonymous.

Another factor that could have possibly limited the attendance in my program was the fact that Merrimack College students and faculty have been constantly using ZOOM to connect for classes, meetings, etc. A study by Nichols and Levy (2009) revealed that student athlete's attitudes to online learning were neutral. The constant use of ZOOM by the Merrimack College community could have had an effect on the desire to attend a program through this platform, simply because of the over-use of it. At the same time, virtual classes for the Merrimack College



students may be a burden for some. Some students might not have the appropriate space where they can take part in the workshop and have the ability to safely speak about the topic of mental health and/or share their experiences. This could be because of backlash from their parents or whoever they live with.

A huge potential limitation to the workshop was the fact that a Merrimack College athletic department staff attended the program. Although the flyers for the workshop specified student-athletes only, somehow a Merrimack College athletic trainer was passed along the invite to the workshop. This created a possible limitation to the willingness for student athletes to participate and hold conversations throughout the workshop. Since the athletic trainer has worked with some of the student athletes who participated in the program, many might have felt reluctant to discuss their true thoughts on mental health issues.

### ***Implications for Future Projects***

For the future, from the positive feedback from this workshop, I would love to actually hold this program face-to-face on campus. The success of the RSVP for the face-to-face workshop was far higher than the online workshop RSVP, which suggests that student athletes might be more willing to participate in a program in-person rather than online. This could be linked with the idea of student athletes being used to having in-person practices, games, and classes. Since the discussions were so in depth during the scenario activities, and survey feedback mentioned having fewer PowerPoint slides, I would definitely implement more activities throughout the workshop.

The successful feedback on learning throughout the program revealed that Merrimack College student athletes are willing to learn more and have conversations on mental health, but providing a space with solely student athletes is an implication for future workshops. Many of

the student athlete participants identified a number of help seeking and social support resources they can turn to in time of need. An implication for the future would be to partner with Hamel Health or an additional mental health resource and have them explain their services to the participants. Additionally, since social support of teammates was such a large understanding throughout the program, opening up a conversation of social support by the athletic department, including coaches, trainers, and staff would be a future implication to discuss with the student athletes to understand their outlook on support of athletic departments to student athlete's mental health.

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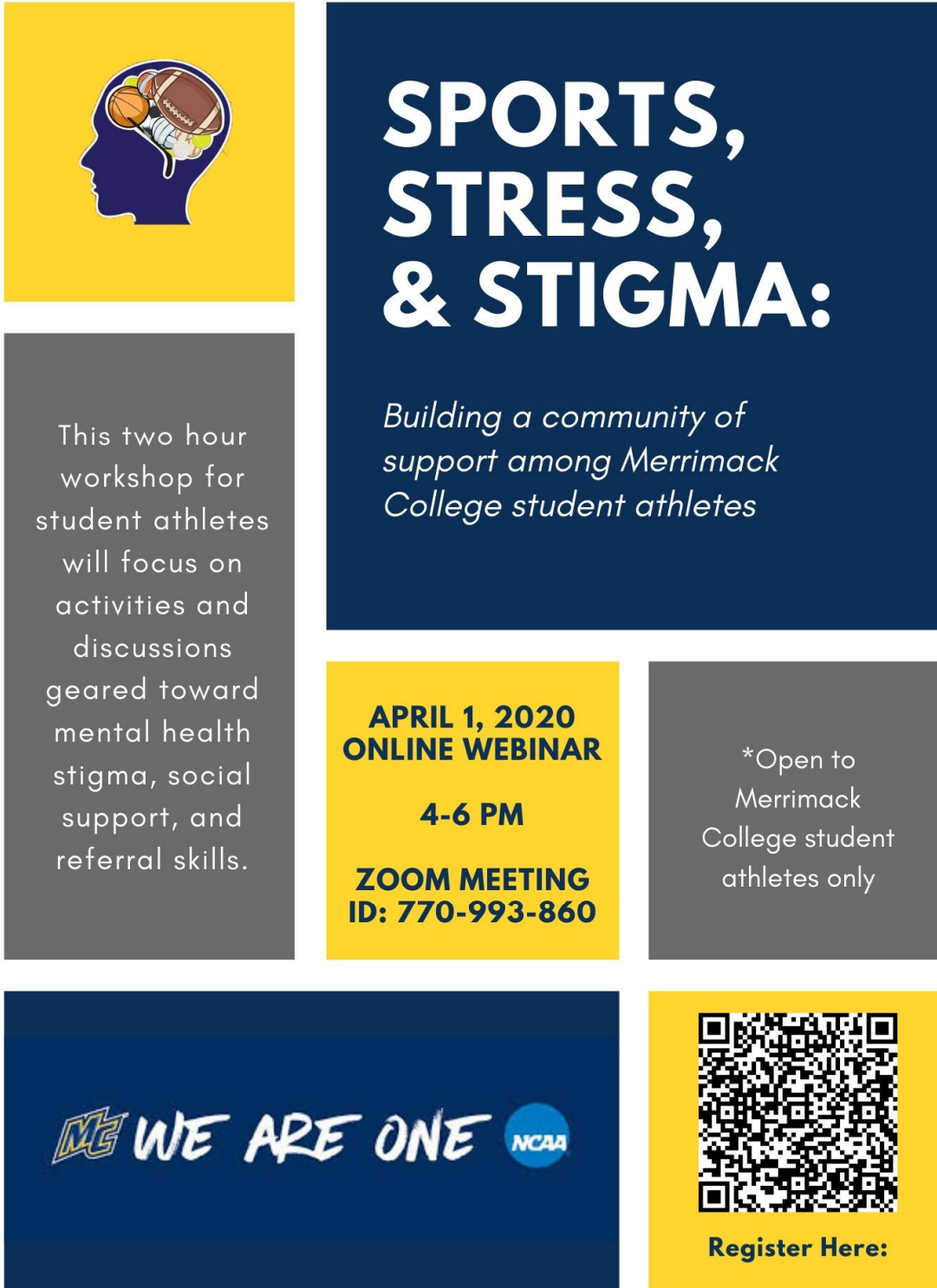
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**Appendix A: Event Flyer / Communications**



**SPORTS,  
STRESS,  
& STIGMA:**

*Building a community of support among Merrimack College student athletes*

This two hour workshop for student athletes will focus on activities and discussions geared toward mental health stigma, social support, and referral skills.

**APRIL 1, 2020  
ONLINE WEBINAR**

**4-6 PM**

**ZOOM MEETING  
ID: 770-993-860**

\*Open to Merrimack College student athletes only

**Register Here:**

**MC WE ARE ONE** 

For more information, contact Meghan at [barrassom@merrimack.edu](mailto:barrassom@merrimack.edu)

**Appendix B: Post-Event Survey**

Thank you for participating in the *Sports, Stress & Stigma* workshop. This post-event evaluation is being conducted as part of a student research capstone. The purpose of this evaluation is to gain your thoughts and opinions on the workshop. This evaluation should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Please **DO NOT** write your name on the evaluation; all answers will be kept confidential.

**First, please tell us your thoughts about the workshop:**

1. Overall, how would you rate this workshop?  
 Excellent       Good       Fair       Poor

<i>Thinking about the workshop...</i>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. I have a better understanding of what stigma is and what it looks like.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I have a better understanding of what social support is and what it looks like.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I have a better understanding of the signs and symptoms of mental health issues.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I will consider how my teammates might be struggling with a mental health issue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I will talk with my teammates about what I have learned / my experience from this workshop.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I will support a teammate who is struggling with a mental health issue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. What were the most valuable things you learned from today’s workshop?

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9. How could the workshop be improved?

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10. What from today’s event challenged you or challenged your previously held opinions / ideas?

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11. If you were struggling with a mental health issue and wanted help, where or to whom would you go?

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12. Prior to this workshop, what was your attitude toward seeking help for a mental health issue?

- I would never seek help if I was struggling with a mental health issue
- I did not know how to seek help or who to go to
- I did not have any previous thoughts about help seeking
- I was willing to seek help if I was struggling with a mental health issue

13. Now that you have taken this workshop, what is your attitude toward seeking help for a mental health issue?

- I would still not seek help
- I would maybe seek help
- I would definitely seek help
- I still don’t know how to seek help

14. How important of an issue do you think mental health struggles are for student athletes?

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely Important   | Moderately Important  | Of Little Importance  | Not at All Important  |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

15. If a teammate was struggling with a mental health issue, I would know how to support them.

- Definitely       Probably       Possibly a Little       Likely Not

16. I am a:

- Merrimack student athlete
- Merrimack coach
- Merrimack athletic trainer
- Other (please specify):

---

17. How do you define your gender? *Check all that apply.*

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / Gender non-conforming
- Prefer to self-describe:

- Prefer not to say

---

18. What class are you?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate student
- Other (please specify):

\_\_\_\_\_

19. What race(s) do you identify with? *Check all that apply.*

- Black / African American
- Caucasian / White
- Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Spanish Origin
- American Indian / Eskimo / Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern / North African
- Mixed Race
- Other, not specified:

\_\_\_\_\_

20. What sport do you play? If you play more than one sport, please indicate all sports.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you! Please return your completed survey to a workshop volunteer or leave on the table.**

Appendix C: Word Cloud Activity Results

