

Winona State University

OpenRiver

Leadership Education Capstones

Leadership Education - Graduate Studies

6-2020

Leadership Change for Athletic Academic Advisors Serving Student-Athletes with Self-Reported Mental Health Issues

Tyler Schoh

tyler.schoh@go.winona.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/leadershipeducationcapstones>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schoh, Tyler, "Leadership Change for Athletic Academic Advisors Serving Student-Athletes with Self-Reported Mental Health Issues" (2020). *Leadership Education Capstones*. 34.

<https://openriver.winona.edu/leadershipeducationcapstones/34>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Leadership Education - Graduate Studies at OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leadership Education Capstones by an authorized administrator of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.

Leadership Change for Athletic Academic Advisors Serving Student-Athletes with Self-
Reported Mental Health Issues

Tyler Vern Schoh

Winona State University

Abstract

Athletic academic advisors find themselves in conversations about the personal lives and issues of student-athletes as mental health issues become more prevalent in college athletics. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues in relation to leadership styles, traits, and strategies. This study involved interviewing current athletic academic advisors who are affiliated with NCAA Division I or Division II schools. Geographically, the sample included athletic academic advisors in the Midwest. All of the sample participants have earned a master's degree. The interviews were analyzed with the Constant Comparative Method. Results from this process were used to draw conclusions and leadership implications as related to Communication Privacy Management theory and Leader-Member Exchange Theory. The study found that student-athletes frequent the help of athletic academic advisors due to strong, naturally occurring, personal relationships built over time. Along with this, the researcher found that athletic academic advisors show fluidity in their leadership styles, traits, and strategies. The conclusions led to three major leadership implications: situational, authentic, and delegation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.....	1
INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Problem.....	2
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Theoretical Framework	4
Research Questions	5
Research Method.....	5
Rationale for the Research Design	6
Definition of Terms	7
Limitations.....	7
Delimitations	8
Significance of Study	8
Summary	9
CHAPTER II.....	10
History of Academic Advisors	10
Leadership Styles of Academic Advisors	11
Leader-Member Exchange Theory	11
Communication Privacy Management Theory	12
Mental Health in the United States.....	12
Policies and Procedures	13
Mental Health Issues in College Age Persons	14
Impact of Mental Health Issues on Student-Athletes	14
Stresses of Athletics	15
Player-Coach Relationship.....	15
Stigma with Mental Health Issues	16
Changing Roles of Academic Advisors	16
Summary	17
CHAPTER III	19
Introduction	19

Research Design	19
Rationale for the Method.....	20
Research Questions	20
Setting.....	21
Sample	21
Selection of Participants	22
Role of the Researcher	22
Assumptions	23
Institutional Review Board Process	23
Data Collection.....	24
Triangulation	25
Data Analysis	26
Summary	26
CHAPTER IV	27
Introduction	27
Review of Problem Statement.....	27
Review of Research Design	27
Participant Demographics	28
Findings	29
Table 1	29
Table 2.....	29
Breakdown of Emergent Themes	30
Theme 1: Caring	30
Theme 2: Training.....	31
Theme 3: Accessibility	32
Theme 4: Listening	34
Theme 5: Situational.....	35
Theme 6: Delegation.....	37
Summary	39
CHAPTER V	41
Introduction	41

Conclusions	42
Discussion	42
Leadership Implications	45
Recommendaitions for Future Research	46
Summary	47
References.....	48

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Athletic academic advisors serve student-athletes to ensure athletic eligibility, provide guidance in coursework, and give direction for challenges that come with being a college student (Thompson, Petronio, & Briathwaite, 2012). These roles are fulfilled through one-on-one meetings with student-athletes and communication with coaches (Doubleday, 2013). The effectiveness of athletic academic advisors relies heavily on the strength of relationship built between student-athletes and advisors (Thompson et. al.). The leadership styles of athletic academic advisors are fluid and intentional because of the differences in experiences and backgrounds of student-athletes (Leach & Wang, 2015).

Student-athletes face challenges with transitioning to the college setting similar to those college students who are not involved in athletics (Kaiseler, Poolton, Backhouse, & Stanger, 2017). On top of these transitions, student-athletes have the added stresses of time management around practices, travel schedules, and making up for missed classes (Gard, 2017). The added stresses of being a student-athlete has shown an increase in self-reported mental health issues (Ryan, Gayles, & Bell, 2018). Mental health issues among student-athletes are often overlooked because of the stigma that student-athletes need to be mentally tough and that they chose to be involved with sports (Giroux & Geiss, 2019). Student-athletes find that they have less outlets to discuss mental health issues because of this stigma (Ryan et al.). Athletic academic advisors need to be equipped with the ability to discuss mental health issues because student-athletes associate athletic academic advisors with more personal development rather than athletic development (Gill, 2014).

Academic advising has changed into a multipurpose activity that requires discussion about the personal and private lives of student-athletes (Thompson et al., 2012). The leadership practices of athletic academic advisors further changes with the introduction of mental health issues (Gill, 2014). Student-athletes seeking mental health care requested that they have access to a practitioner with an understanding of the student-athlete experience (Ryan et al., 2018). Athletic academic advisors are this outlet, but they shift their leadership styles, traits, and strategies from academics or sports focused to personal life focus (Thompson et al.).

Background of the Problem

Mental health disorders are common in the United States. A survey conducted in 2013 found that 18.5 percent of adults experienced mental illness in any one year (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). Student-athletes are not immune to these trends on college campuses. For young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 years, 19.4 percent of them experience some form of mental health disorder (Ryan et al, 2018).

The increase in mental health issues among college age persons comes in all forms (Booth, Sharma, & Leader, 2016). Each situation requires different assessment and treatment (Rehagen, 2019). Per the National Council for Behavioral Health (2015), many first aid actions are specified to mental health issues that may be encountered. The number and complexity of mental health issues requires unique action based upon the symptoms and situation (National Council for Behavioral Health).

The increasing number of student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues calls for a system of services which can help them through situations of need (Gill, 2014). Almost 50 percent of incoming full-time freshmen and high school seniors anticipated finding personal counseling while in college (Ryan et al., 2018). Personal counseling is sought out in part because

communication between coaches and student-athletes can be difficult due to the stigma that student-athletes must be mentally and physically tough (Beauchemin, 2014). The job description of athletic academic advisor is not changing, but people in these positions are taking on more responsibilities, like helping student-athletes through personal life situations rather than athletic or academic issues (Thompson et al., 2012). Athletic academic advisors must work alongside campus counseling and psychological services to get student-athletes in the right hands because some cases require professional help (Thompson et al.).

Student-athletes need the attention of athletic academic advisors, so these advisors need to pay attention to how and why they are treating student-athletes the way they are (Leach and Wang, 2015). Especially when serving student-athletes with mental health issues, athletic academic advisors should serve each situation uniquely (Beauchemin, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The National Collegiate Athletics Association has seen a growth in the conversation about the mental health of student-athletes (NCAA, 2017). Mental health awareness for athletes across the Division I, Division II and Division III levels has increased, however, the leadership approaches that can benefit student-athletes have not been analyzed. Athletic academic advisors are in a position of comfortability with student-athletes where conversations can be conducted without the pressures of athletics (Thompson et al, 2012). Analyzing the leadership practices of athletic academic advisors can provide a baseline of how to address student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues in relation to leadership styles, traits, and strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Communication Privacy Management theory and Leader-Member Exchange theory shaped the study to investigate in one way, or they shaped the process of interviewing participants in order to get the most descriptive experiences of athletic academic advisors while protecting the privacy of all parties who were involved.

Athletic academic advisors need to change leadership styles in order to accommodate for the diversity among student-athletes (Leach & Wang, 2015). Leader-Member Exchange theory challenges the assumption that leaders treat all their followers the same way (Northouse, 2015). This theory can be translated to the relationship between student-athletes and athletic academic advisors. Athletic academic advisors fill more roles than just academic assistance to student-athletes (Thompson et al., 2012). Leader-Member Exchange theory was used in the framework of this study because it emphasizes the fluidity of leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors (Northouse, 2015).

Student-athletes experience extra stresses that can cause self-reported mental health issues (Gard, 2017). Studies among student-athletes show that anywhere from 10 to 21 percent of student-athletes suffer from depression (Ryan et al., 2018). Depression is just one form of mental health issues that student-athletes can encounter. There are numerous mental health issues that student-athletes can experience, and mental health issues typically overlap with other mental health issues (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015).

Athletic academic advisors can find themselves in conversations with student-athletes that are not about academics or athletics (Gill, 2014). This expanded role comes from the comfortability that student-athletes feel in the relationship with academic advisors (Thompson et al., 2012). These conversations are a way for student-athletes to seek help for mental health issues if they do not feel comfortable talking with coaches or administrators about the topic (Leach & Wang, 2015).

Student-athletes dealing with self-reported mental health issues require more specific changes in leadership styles, traits, and strategies (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). Along with this, athletic academic advisors must use Communication Privacy Management theory when serving student-athletes with mental health issues (Thompson et al., 2012). Communication Privacy Management theory suggests that athletic academic advisors must analyze situations and information before disclosing information (Thompson et al., 2012).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are athletic academic advisors' experiences with student-athletes self-reporting mental health issues?

RQ2: How are athletic academic advisors interacting with student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues?

RQ3: What leadership practices do athletic academic advisors find useful in supporting student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues?

Research Method

A qualitative research method was used in this study to explore and better understand the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental

health issues in relation to leadership styles, traits and strategies. This type of research aims to clarify the experiences within a natural setting (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Qualitative research uses the researcher as the key instrument and uses diverse data sources which are connected to the purpose of the research (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

For this study, data was collected through individual telephone interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol was used in order to allow for some deviation from the written questions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Throughout the interview process, appropriate interview protocol was written and followed.

Rationale for the Research Design

Qualitative research is used when openness and flexibility are necessary as the researcher's understanding deepens or situations change (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The focus of this research was to explore the naturally occurring experiences of athletic academic advisors in relation to leadership styles, traits, and strategies. The leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors as related to self-reported mental health issues has not been directly explored in the past. A qualitative research design allowed for the researcher to explore these leadership experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues.

The interviewing of athletic academic advisors also eliminated the risk of getting information from student-athletes. The stigma surrounding mental health issues makes it difficult for those suffering from mental health issues to initiate the conversation about the topic (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). Athletic academic advisors were able to share their experiences without disclosing personal information of student-athletes involved.

Definition of Terms

Listed below are definitions of key terms that are relevant to this study.

Athletic academic advisor: This is a person within an athletic department whose main purpose is to assist student-athletes in managing their sports and academic responsibilities (Thompson et al., 2012). For this study, it is defined as a paid position at a four-year university whose typical duties include providing academic assistance to student-athletes.

Student-athlete: This term is inclusive of all students who are a participant in any varsity sport at a university (NCAA, 2015).

Self-reported mental health issue: A mental health problem is a term that describes both mental disorders and symptoms of mental health disorders than may not be severe enough to warrant a diagnosis of a mental health disorder (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). For this study, a self-reported mental health issue can be any condition under the defined mental health problem that is reported by an individual.

Leader-Member Exchange theory: This theory is focused on the interactions between leaders and followers. Leader-Member Exchange theory makes the relationship the focal point of the leadership process (Northouse, 2015).

Communication Privacy Management theory: Communication Privacy Management theory provides a better understanding of how people manage private information. Thompson et al. (2012) lists the three main principles of managing private information as ownership, control, and turbulence.

Limitations

The research design had the intention of bypassing all limitations, but some limitations were unavoidable. Within qualitative research, there are limitations that persist. The dishonesty

of participants and biased responses were out of the control of the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Honest responses based on actual experiences were requested, but the participants may or may not have followed these directions. To encourage honest responses, the participants were assured that identities were kept confidential and were asked to refrain from giving names of student-athletes within their experiences. Another limitation is the allotted time to collect the data. Participants were allowed the convenience to select an interview time, but total amount of time set aside to reach all participants was limited.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the guidelines that narrow the scope of the study. This study was restricted to athletic academic advisors at four-year universities that are active members of the National Collegiate Athletics Association—also known as the NCAA. Four-year universities in this study included members of the NCAA at the Division I and Division II levels. The experiences of these athletic academic advisors were delimited to specific situations in which they were serving student-athletes who had self-reported mental health issues. Self-reported mental health issues provide a broader base of experiences from which athletic academic advisors can share. Finally, this study restricted the participants to be persons employed in the athletic department of their university who had a regular job duty of advising student-athletes academically.

Significance of Study

Many groups within the fields of collegiate athletics, mental health, and counseling may find the results of this study to be beneficial. Athletic academic advisors may use the results of this study to understand the differences in approaching student-athletes with mental health issues. Student-athletes may also use the results of this study to further understand why athletic

academic advisors are approachable about non-athletic and non-academic issues such as mental health. Finally, counselors and the general public may use the results of this study to better understand what leadership styles, traits, and strategies are being used to connect with the new generation of student-athletes and those with self-reported mental health issues.

Summary

Chapter one introduced the research related to mental health issues, student-athletes with mental health issues, and the relationship between student-athletes and athletic academic advisors. Furthermore, the shift of leadership styles, traits, and strategies among athletic academic advisors was discussed. The background of the problem is rooted in the growth of mental health issues in the United States which is also discussed in chapter one. The statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and theoretical framework were all derived from the initial research and interpreted in depth throughout chapter one. Finally, the research questions, definition of terms, limitations, and delimitations were discussed in chapter one to provide background knowledge about the study.

Chapter two reviews the literature about the relationship between student-athletes and athletic academic advisors, studies mental health issues among student-athletes, and the leadership practices of athletic academic advisors. The literature review also discusses the Communication Privacy Management and Leader-Member Exchange theories.

Chapter three focuses on the methodology of the study. The research design, rationale for the research design, and research questions are all justified here. This chapter also discusses the setting of the participants and how they were selected. Finally, chapter three explains the role of the researcher, instrumentation, data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER II

History of Academic Advisors

Academic advising began when colonial colleges wanted to improve the moral and ethical development of the students (Harborth, 2015). In 1991, the NCAA required member universities to provide academic advising within the athletic department for student-athletes (Thompson et al., 2012).

Athletic academic advising has the major motive of making sure that student-athletes are able to manage both sports and academic responsibilities (Thompson et al., 2012). Most higher education academic advising takes place within the first year of attendance because it helps students become acclimated with the college lifestyle (Leach & Wang, 2015). Doubleday (2013) explains that students see academic advisors as someone to assist with only course registration. However, Harborth (2015) explains that multiple professional organizations recognize the developmental side of an academic advisor's occupation. Academic advisors play the role of showing options to students with undecided majors and assisting with degree completion for those with decided majors (Doubleday, 2013).

Presently, there is a high number of higher education institutions that provide developmental advising for at-risk freshman and students with disabilities, and these advising roles are anticipated to grow (Harborth, 2015). Academic advising operations as a whole are growing on college campuses as a result of trying to increase retention and graduation rates (Doubleday, 2013). Success Centers, where many academic advisors work, are used as a central location where students can get assistance with classes, course scheduling, or career planning (Doubleday, 2013). Ambrose, Martin, and Page Jr. (2014) demonstrate that academic advisors are in an advantageous role between students and campus administrators/staff; this connecting

role of academic advisors allows for easy communication between advisors and students which eases the access to administrators/staff for students.

Leadership Styles of Academic Advisors

Many universities have academic advising roles on campus, and these roles vary between the different institutions (Harborth, 2015). Leach and Wang (2015) noticed developmental advising, prescriptive advising, proactive advising, and appreciative advising as styles that academic advisors use with their students. John Carroll University uses a leadership style that is hands-on in getting students to declare a major early in the process (Doubleday, 2013). University of North Carolina at Charlotte recently began a program that reaches out to students who left the university without finishing their degree (S.B., 2015).

Undergraduate students often prefer an academic advisor that they connect with on some level (Leach & Wang, 2015). S.B. (2015) conducted a survey that showed that the returning students appreciated the concierge-style of advising that included one advisor readily available to field questions for those students.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-Member Exchange theory challenges the assumption that leaders treat all of their followers the same way (Northouse, 2015). Marc Lowenstein, as cited, explains that academic advisors should decide what is best for each student rather than have all students earn a degree in the shortest time possible (Doubleday, 2013). Advisees find the most satisfaction when the academic advisor's advising style is closely in line with their own (Leach & Wang, 2015). Doubleday shows that Leader-Member Exchange theory is represented at John Carroll University where they ask the question "Where do the world's needs meet your joys?" Specific

to athletics academic advising, Rehagen (2019) says that moving to a less abrasive style when you notice fatigue or exhaustion can be helpful for student-athletes.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Athletic academic advisors must use Communication Privacy Management theory (Thompson et al., 2012). Privacy management can play a major role for student-athletes when it comes to mental health issues (Sport Science Institute, 2017). Communication Privacy Management theory suggests that athletic academic advisors must analyze situations and information before disclosing information (Thompson et al., 2012). It is important that coaches are aware of what is going on with their student-athletes, but student-athletes have the right to dictate who comes in contact with that information (Sport Science Institute, 2017).

As young adults, students use the separation from their parents and coaches as a way to individualize; academic advisors can support this by keeping student information private from parents and coaches (Ledbetter, 2019). The study by Leach and Wang (2015) included participants who valued the ability to share personal information with their academic advisor that they did not let most people hear. Students in their first year of college strive for autonomy (Ledbetter, 2019).

Mental Health in the United States

Today is the “age of anxiety” because people claim that it is commonly found due to factors new to today’s society (Booth, Sharma, & Leader, 2016). The transition period from adolescence to young adult sees the most occurrence of mental health issues as compared to other groups in most societies (Wizner, Lindbald, Sorjonen, & Lindberg, 2014). National Council for Behavioral Health (2015) reported that a majority of people who experience mental

health issues experience more than one. Booth et al. agrees in showing that anxiety has been linked to mental health issues like depression.

Mental health services have increased in the US, and Medicaid was one of the primary funders of these services (Hudson, 2018). “Other changes in mental health, specifically in the USA, have been associated with changes toward more materialistic goal setting, unrealistic expectations, and individualism” (Booth et al., 2016, 193). New technologies within the field of medicine have also shown an increase in the biological models of mental health issues within the last 25 years (Hudson, 2018). Surveys in the US have shown an increase in anxiety of 5.23 percent between 1990-1992 and 2001-2003 (Booth et al., 2016).

Policies and Procedures

Rehagen (2019) shows that talking about mental health issues is one step in the right direction, but athletics departments as a whole can create a positive culture among student-athletes, coaches, and administrators where it is acceptable to talk about the issues that student-athletes might be having. Sport Science Institute (2017) and National Council for Behavioral Health (2015) agree that mental health issues should receive a formal evaluation by a licensed practitioner. On the importance of a formal evaluation, Giroux explains, “Those who do not seek treatment are more likely to develop a longer, more intensified comorbidity with other mental illnesses” (2019, 63). Sport Science Institute expresses the importance of having strong communication strategies to support student-athletes who may be experiencing mental health issues.

It is also important to understand the signs of mental health issues; noticing the signs can tell coaches, administrators, or other student-athletes where to direct those who are in need (Rehagen, 2019). Student-athletes who are in need should receive support from a licensed

physician that has experience working with athletes and the training that they endure (Sport Science Institute, 2017).

Mental Health Issues in College Age Persons

The Sport Science Institute (2017) says, “Approximately one in five adults experiences mental illness in a given year, and this rate tends to be highest among young adults, many of whom are college students” (3). Douce and Keeling (2014) understand that the need for mental and behavioral health services is increasing on college campuses because first year students with diagnosed mental health issues have other issues with acclimating with college life. Booth et al. (2016) found that the majority of anxiety increase in the US was found among students, and anxiety is closely linked to other mental health issues, like depression. Along with this, half of students in counseling services on campuses are new to mental health issues, and around one-third of those have issues that continue after visiting counseling services (Douce & Keeling, 2014).

Impact of Mental Health Issues on Student-Athletes

Sport Science Institute (2017) and Douce and Keeling (2014) claim there is a direct link between physical and mental health, and student-athletes are at a higher risk of encountering a physical injury than their non-competitive counterpart students. Along with them, Giroux (2019) states, “Further, distressed students have worse academic performance and exhibit high drop-out rates” (62). Between 10 and 15 percent of student-athletes have issues strong enough to require a clinical counseling visit (Beauchemin, 2014, 268). NCAA Research (2017) found that 44 percent of female student-athletes and 29 percent of male student-athletes strongly agreed that the instances of a practitioner who understands athletes needs to increase (NCAA Research, 2017). These needs go along with the claim that student-athletes should seek help from a licensed

physician who has experience in the physical and mental regimen of athletes (Sport Science Institute, 2017).

Stresses of Athletics

The stresses of athletics begin in high school where those stresses are coupled with the intense academic expectations of the high school and the NCAA eligibility standards (Gard, 2017). Kaiseler, Poolton, Backhouse, and Stanger (2017) and Gard (2017) explain that rigorous training, travel schedules, and pressures to succeed in competition are a few of the added stresses that student-athletes experience as opposed to their non-competing student counterparts. Gard even says that the demands of athletics and academics become more demanding as a college freshman. Collegiate student-athletes are under a microscope from fans and critics via social media; 42 percent of male and 52 percent of female student-athletes claimed to be attentive to the conversations on social media about themselves or their team (NCAA Research, 2017).

Just participating in athletics can be an added stressor (Beauchemin, 2014). The study by Kaiseler et al. (2017) explained that risk of injury was an added stressor to student-athletes. Student-athletes are at a risk of going through physical injury in competition which can cause stress in aspects of life other than sport (Douce & Keeling, 2014). These findings are supported by Beauchemin (2014) who claims, “Balancing the substantial time demands that student-athletes must devote to practice and participation can pose problems that can lead to increased susceptibility to mental and physical exhaustion” (268).

Player-Coach Relationship

Coaches use direct communication on the field or court of play, but this relationship can be harmful when discussing sensitive matters (Rehagen, 2019). Sport Science Institute (2017) demonstrates the importance of a supportive environment by providing resources and

suggestions on how to support student-athletes in order to make them comfortable while talking about mental health issues.

Student-athletes feel more comfortable bringing up athletic issues to academic advisors rather than coaches because student-athletes have engaged in difficult personal conversations with academic advisors in the past (Thompson et. al., 2012). Thompson et. al. (2012) uses the experience of one athletic academic advisor who explains that many student-athletes share personal information with academic advisors based on the personal relationship that they have built.

Stigma with Mental Health Issues

Student-athletes everywhere see seeking help as a sign of weakness, which is contradictory to typical characteristics that are supposed to be found in competitors: strength, self-reliance, etc. (Beauchemin, 2014). David Wyrick is a former student-athlete at Elon, and he described his experience of talking about mental health as “strictly taboo” (Rehagen, 2019). Student-athletes with mental health issues often do not seek counseling because they are worried about being stigmatized by their coaches and teammates (Beauchemin, 2014). Persons who seek help for mental health issues can be seen as “mentally unstable” by the public (Giroux, 2019, 62).

Changing Roles of Academic Advisors

Charlie Nutt—former Executive Director of the National Academic Advising Association—explained that each university has a different requirement of their academic advisors (Harborth, 2015). With the main goal of keeping up retention and graduation rates, academic advisors need to put students on the degree path that suits the student (Doubleday,

2013). Nutt also believes that academic advisors need to improve their professional network in order to assist students into moving into their career fields (Harborth, 2015).

Charlie Nutt explains that the roles of academic advisors has changed from being a parent role into assisting students into improving their life skills (Harborth, 2015). The emotional availability of academic advisors is also appreciated among advisees; the role of an open ear or personal-life advice giver has fallen into the hands of academic advisors (Leach & Wang, 2015). Athletic academic advisors must be able to discuss personal matters and give advice about general life choices of student-athletes (Thompson et. al., 2012). Doubleday (2013) used an interview with Eric Baldwin, Marymount University's first professional and academic advisor, to state the importance of relationship building between student and advisor.

Specific to athletic academic advisors, some student-athletes reveal information about playing time or issues with the coach; academic advisors must then take on the role of mediator or show the importance of open communication by encouraging the student-athlete to initiate the conversation (Thompson et al., 2012). Student-athletes do not typically use counseling services offered on campuses; this is where student-athletes tend to use academic advisors in their role in academic support and career development units to fill the void of counseling services (Gill, 2014).

Summary

Chapter two reviewed the literature about the relationship between student-athletes and athletic academic advisors, studies mental health issues among student-athletes, and the leadership practices of athletic academic advisors. A brief history of academic advisors and the integration of that role into athletics departments was provided. The occurrence and effects of mental health issues across the US is touched on and related back to the impact on student-

athletes. The literature review also discusses the Communication Privacy Management and Leader-Member Exchange theories. Finally, chapter two provides a look into how athletic academic advisors are shifting their role and what that means.

Chapter III

Introduction

The NCAA has seen a growth in the conversation about the mental health of student-athletes over the last few years. Mental health awareness for athletes across all levels has increased, however, the leadership approaches that can benefit student-athletes have not been analyzed. Athletic academic advisors are in a position of comfortability with student-athletes where conversations can be conducted without the pressures of athletics (Thompson et al., 2012). Analyzing the leadership practices of athletic academic advisors can provide a baseline of how to address student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues.

Chapter three discusses the specifics of the research methods, design, and layout of the study. Along with this, the researcher as a human instrument is interpreted. General background of the participants and how they were gathered is also established.

Research Design

A qualitative research method was used in this study to explore and better understand the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues in relation to leadership styles, traits and strategies. This type of research aims to clarify the experiences within a natural setting (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Qualitative research uses the researcher as the key instrument and uses diverse data sources which are connected to the purpose of the research (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

Participants were recruited based on their career field and their professional connection with the researcher. Some participants were recruited through their involvement with the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals. The researcher is a member of this organization that contains many members within the career field.

For this study, data was collected through individual telephone interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol will be used in order to allow for some deviation from the written questions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Throughout the interview process, appropriate interview protocol was written and followed.

Rationale for the Method

Qualitative research is used when openness and flexibility are necessary as the researcher's understanding deepens or situations change (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The purpose of this study was explore the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student athletes with self-reported mental health issues in relation to leadership styles, traits, and strategies. The leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors has not been fully explored in the past, and further research is necessary. A qualitative research design allowed for the researcher to explore the leadership experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues. The interviewing of athletic academic advisors also limited the risk of getting information from student-athletes. There is a negative stigma attached to mental health issues which makes it difficult to hear personal stories from those who have battled with those issues (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). Athletic academic advisors shared their experiences without disclosing personal information of student-athletes involved.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are athletic academic advisors' experiences with students self-reporting mental health issues?

RQ2: How are athletic academic advisors interacting with student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues?

RQ3: What leadership practices do athletic academic advisors find useful in supporting student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues?

Setting

The setting of this study was four-year universities that participate in intercollegiate athletics. Furthermore, the study was specific to universities that compete through the NCAA at the Division I or Division II level. This setting was chosen because the NCAA has similar guidelines for academic eligibility between these two divisions. The difference in academic eligibility guidelines influences the role of an athletics academic advisor. Finally, the NCAA has recognized the issue of mental health among participating universities. Narrowing the study to NCAA universities falls in line with where the literature shows mental health issues are occurring.

An athletic academic advising setting is professional but also personal. The setting of an athletic academic advisor is professional and personal in what is typically a one-on-one conversation with a student-athlete (Thompson et al., 2012). Student-athletes have a personal level of comfortability with their athletic academic advisor which gives athletic academic advisors exposure to the mental health issues of student athletes (Leach & Wang, 2015).

Sample

The sample of this study was persons who are currently in an athletic academic advising role within the setting. The study included six athletic academic advisors. Geographically, the sample included athletic academic advisors on the in the Midwest. All of the sample participants have earned a master's degree.

A snowball sampling was used in this study to broaden the participant field. The researcher used the knowledge of initial participants to be connected with other athletic academic advisors who were willing to share their experiences with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues. The population of athletic academic advisors in the NCAA is not specifically stated. Throughout the NCAA Division I and Division II, there are 659 participating universities (NCAA, 2019). Each university could have between one and seven athletic academic advisors.

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected based upon convenience for the researcher and who was available through those connections. All participants were contacted through email to arrange a phone interview that was convenient for the participant. Initial participants were asked for contact information of other possible participants. These snowball participants were contacted and pursued in the same fashion as the original participants. Current athletic academic advisors were selected in order to hear recent experiences that properly represent the occurrence of mental health issues among today's student-athletes. Once selected, the participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation statement.

Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative research study, the researcher was a human instrument. Human instrumentation brings bias and difficulty in analyzing the data. The role of the researcher was to ask athletic academic advisors about their specific experiences with serving student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues. The researcher is an athletic academic advisor and has limited experience serving student-athletes with a self-reported mental health issue.

Bias was evident from the researcher's experience of being a student-athlete and witnessing mental health issues within sports. This bias was avoided through withholding the researcher's experiences from the interview process. The researcher was also bias to the importance of Leader-Member Exchange theory in the athletic academic advising field. This bias was avoided by utilizing peer debriefing. The researcher had an outside entity analyze the interviews gathered as to add another perspective along with the researcher's analysis.

Along with peer debriefing, the researcher utilized member checking. Member checking allowed the participants to display the correct information in the study's results. The analysis and transcribing of the data was done by the researcher. However, the analysis of the data was also conducted by an outside source who is neither an athletic academic advisor nor involved with the athletic department of a four-year NCAA affiliated university.

Assumptions

One major assumption within the research design was that participants have experience in serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues. Participants were told to give only honest and truthful experiences of their own. Some of the participants may have bountiful experience but none with student-athletes who experience self-reported mental health issues.

Institutional Review Board Process

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) protects the rights of subjects who are involved in research (Winona State University, n.d.). The researcher completed the Human Subjects Module that is presented by the IRB (Winona State University, n.d.). The next step was to complete the protocol package and receive recommendations from the IRB reviewer. Once the researcher received approval from the IRB, the researcher began to contact the potential participants and conduct research.

Data Collection

This study was conducted by interviewing current athletic academic advisors who are affiliated with NCAA Division I or Division II schools. These interviewees were contacted via email to schedule an interview time that was convenient for the interviewee. A majority of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the geographical distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewees who are within a reasonable distance participated in an in-person interview after confirming that this was acceptable. The interviewees were not named in the study as a way to make them more comfortable with giving personal experiences. The name of the university at which they work was left out of the study because this could give information as to who the interviewees are. Interview recordings were destroyed after the completion of the study.

Data was collected using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide (SOIG) with each participant. The SOIG allowed the researcher to ask questions in the same order to each participant, eliminating research bias or changing the interview process for any one participant. The SOIG allowed the researcher flexibility to ask prompts to get clarification or gain further understanding of the participant's answers. The SOIG is presented here in its full version:

Question 1. What mental health support services are available for students on your campus?

Question 2. Do you have any mental health support training?

Question 3. How often do student-athletes rely on you for personal support regarding mental health?

Question 4. Why do you feel student-athletes reach out to you with personal issues as opposed to other options on campus?

Question 5. What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes with academic questions? Which do you avoid?

Question 6. What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support for mental health issues? Which do you avoid?

Question 7. What benefits, if any, do you see from a particular leadership style, trait, or strategy?

Question 8. How do you protect the privacy of student-athletes when they disclose information about mental health issues? Please explain the differences in your actions based on the severity of the situation.

Question 9. Regarding your leadership style, traits, and strategies, are there any changes that you have made based on past experiences? Please explain those past experiences and your perception of how the student-athlete's mental health issues progressed.

Question 10. Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Triangulation

The data harvested from this study was triangulated with multiple sources. Athletic academic advisors outside of the study were consulted on their opinions of the findings.

The study was also compared to journal articles that report on the presence of mental health issues among college age students. The NCAA has seen a rise in mental health issues among student-athletes, and this study shows how leadership styles, traits, and strategies change when

serving student-athletes with mental health issues. The findings of this study can be compared with how leadership styles, traits, and strategies change among specific mental health issues.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method. This method helped the researcher find common themes among the data and place it into categories that can better the understanding of the information.

On top of these two sources of data analysis, the researcher found a peer in the field of athletic academic advising to analyze the data. This strengthened the common themes and connections that were found since the researcher and peer found similar trends.

Finally, the researcher used the participants for member-checks. The participants are the experts in the field of athletic academic advising and should be given the opportunity to analyze the findings. Before data analysis, the participant names and university names will be removed from the data. The researcher used pseudonyms and a confidentiality state. These were utilized in order keep a safe environment for athletic academic advisors, so they would not have to be concerned with the release of private information shared by their student-athletes.

Summary

Chapter three provided a layout for the study and how the study was conducted. There are also explanations about a background of why this study was chosen by the researcher and why the researcher planned to conduct the study. It was also clarified who the participants were and why they were chosen to be a part of the study. Lastly, the study was solidified by the explanation of bias and elimination of those biases.

Chapter IV

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues. The rationale for the research method was explained in detail in chapter three. A qualitative research design allowed for the researcher to explore the leadership experiences of athletic academic advisors. These experiences were shared without disclosing personal information of the participants or the student-athletes depicted in the experiences. Chapter four reviews the problem statement, research design, interview process, participant demographic, and presents the findings from interviews with current athletic academic advisors at four-year universities which are members of NCAA Division I and Division II.

Review of the Problem Statement

The NCAA has seen a growth in the conversation about the mental health of student-athletes (NCAA, 2017). Mental health awareness for athletes across the Division I, Division II and Division III levels has increased, however, the leadership approaches that can benefit student-athletes have not been analyzed. Athletic academic advisors are in a position of comfortability with student-athletes where conversations can be conducted without the pressures of athletics (Thompson et al, 2012). The research aimed to analyze the leadership practices of athletic academic advisors to provide a baseline of how to address student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues.

Review of the Research Design

The focus of this research was to explore the naturally occurring experiences of athletic academic advisors in relation to leadership styles, traits, and strategies. The leadership styles,

traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors as related to self-reported mental health issues has not been directly researched in the past. A qualitative research design allows for the researcher to examine these leadership experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues.

The interviewing of athletic academic advisors also eliminates the risk of getting information from student-athletes. The stigma surrounding mental health issues makes it difficult for those suffering from mental health issues to initiate the conversation about the topic (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2015). Athletic academic advisors can share their experiences without disclosing personal information of student-athletes involved.

For this study, data was collected through individual telephone interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol was used in order to allow for some deviation from the written questions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Throughout the interview process, appropriate interview protocol was written and followed.

Participant Demographics

The researcher conducted interviews of six athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes at four-year universities which are members of NCAA Division I and Division II athletics. All of the participants are currently employed as athletic academic advisors with at least two years of experience in athletic academic advising. Each participant has earned an undergraduate and master's degree in various concentration areas. At least one participant advises student-athletes in the following sports: men's and women's cross country, football, volleyball, women's soccer, men's and women's basketball, men's and women's tennis, men's and women's track and field, men's and women's golf, softball, and baseball.

Findings

These findings were derived from the interviews with athletic academic advisors who participated in the study. Table 1 summarizes the guided research questions and the correlating themes from the interviews. Table 2 shows how often six important themes emerged and defines those themes.

Table 1:

Research Question	Themes from Interviews	
RQ1: What are athletic academic advisors' experiences with students self-reporting mental health issues?	Not Uncommon	
	Need More Training	
	Accessibility	
RQ 2: How are athletic academic advisors interacting with student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues?	Attentive	Caring
	Build Relationships	
RQ 3: What leadership practices do athletic academic advisors find useful in supporting student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues?	Delegation	
	Listen	
	Situational	

Summary Table of Themes and Research Questions

Table 2:

Theme	Theme Description	% of Participants Discussing Theme
1. Caring	Participants mentioned the benefits of staying true to themselves and sharing compassion.	50
2. Training	Participants displayed an interest in increasing the required training.	50
3. Accessibility	Participants mentioned the importance of being readily available for students-athletes.	50
4. Listening	Participants recommended active listening, especially in difficult conversations.	67
5. Situational	Participants shared experiences of making small shifts in leadership styles based on the situation.	83
6. Delegation	Participants refer student-athletes in need to health care professionals.	100

Descriptions of Themes Formulated from Interview Data

Breakdown of Emergent Themes

The emergent themes from the study were gathered by using the Constant Comparative Method. Notes from the interviews and the interview transcriptions were analyzed to gather the emergent themes. The researcher used the Constant Comparative Method to harvest themes that became most apparent throughout multiple interviews.

Theme 1: Caring

Caring was directly mentioned by a majority of the participants. Student-athletes are often moving into a new area with fewer people around them every day whom they can trust. With this in mind, several participants explained various situations where it was important for them to behave naturally and show student-athletes how much they care about the success and/or well-being of their student-athletes.

Interview Question: Regarding your leadership style, traits, and strategies, are there any changes that you have made based on past experiences?

Participant A: "I also know that just serving them academically is not a part of my job. It encompasses more. Like serving them when they need somebody to talk to. When they call me at nine o'clock at night saying, 'did you listen to this song?' or something like that. I think it's more serving in that way as well."

Interviewer: What benefits, if any, do you see from a leadership style, trait, or strategy when leading student-athletes?

Participant B: "What I said about being authentic. Authentic leadership. [A colleague] said, 'They don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.' I think

that's huge. It's a big benefit being your true self and being genuine with them because I think they'll be more genuine with you, and they'll probably respect you more."

Interview Question: Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Participant C: "The more that students can feel that you care about them as a person and that you're not just saying the right things, but you're actually engaged in this conversation. ... You're following up with them and they can tell that you really care about them."

Theme 2: Training

The second interview question asked if the participant had a formal education in mental health support services. While many of the participants have attended lectures, workshops, and/or professional development seminars, participants still felt that they have not received enough training on the subject.

Interview Question: Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues

Participant B: "I wish we had more training. I would say I think everyone should at least do some kind of mandatory, even if it is a certificate, one-day program. 'What do you do when students come to you?' 'How do you handle students who seem stressed?' 'You see signs of this – what do you do? Steps you take.' those kinds of things. We really are the

front line of that because of the relationships we build with these students. Sometimes I feel like I wish I knew more, or wish I knew the right thing to say or do.”

Interview Question: Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Participant E: “Some [student-athletes] had deaths in the family this semester, and one of them I did not see for a while. How do you approach that? So, we should get more training, like specific training, because they come to us for everything because they are close to us. That’s the nature of our role, but you can make a lot of positive influence or difference, but you can also do it the other way, too. So, I think we should get more training.”

Interview Question: Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Participant F: “Truly, I believe that athletic academic advisors should have some sort of training or experience with mental health first aid and just continuing the topic of mental health because in a way we do serve as a counselor as we are meeting with them multiple times in a given week or in a given month.”

Theme 3: Accessibility

Participants mentioned their accessibility or the need to be accessible in the field of athletic academic advising. This theme was gathered through the participants’ experiences and

how each participant utilizes a variation of an open-door policy to allow student-athletes the freedom to discuss any topic they choose.

Interview Question: Why do you feel student-athletes reach out to you with personal issues as opposed to other options on campus?

Participant A: "I establish a close relationship with them to where I'm distinguishing a difference of being a professional. They know that I'm not their friend, but they also have established a relationship with me to where they can come and talk to me about things that may be a little more embarrassing to talk about with coaches. ... I'm in academics, so they can come and talk to me knowing that none of the information will be sent out unless it is something that is hindering their health. I think that it helps them, and I think that's why they come to me a lot with it."

Interview Question: Why do you feel student-athletes reach out to you with personal issues as opposed to other options on campus?

Participant B: "I know that I have less students than some other people, and some other people are just not as accessible. Not of their own, but because they are being pulled in so many directions by their other students. So, I think my office is usually empty.

Sometimes I'll have students in there but if they want, they come and sit down. I know them, and if they are comfortable with me then they do."

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes with academic questions? Which do you avoid?

Participant C: “Yes. I think the most important things are just being accessible, listening being open to different topics and just making it abundantly clear to the student that I’m here to help [the student-athlete].”

Theme 4: Listening

Listening was one of the most notable themes from the participants with the most experience in athletic academic advising. Several participants explained that it is important to actively listen and react to conversations with student-athletes, especially when in situations where the student-athlete may be signaling at mental health issues.

Interview Question: Why do you feel that student-athletes reach out to you with personal Issues as opposed to other options on campus?

Participant B: “I’ve been here a decent amount of time now and built [relationships with student-athletes], and they feel comfortable. ...Gen Z, they want to be heard, but they have to trust you, and they have to know that you’re actually going to listen and that you have their best interest at heart.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support from mental health issues? And which ones do you try to avoid in those situations?

Participant C: “Yea, I think even more so in cases involving mental health issues, the listening piece is the biggest. I’ll tell them that I don’t have a counseling background. I don’t know that I’m going to be able to say anything incredibly wise and it’s just going to really help you, but the one thing I will do, is I will listen and talk through things with you.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support from mental health issues? And which ones do you try to avoid in those situations?

Participant D: “There is never a one size fits all. Some kids just need to sit here and bitch and whine and have somebody listen to them. Some students it goes a lot deeper than that, and they need to have some professional intervention. So, I hope with my experience that I’m able to recognize those different situations. And so, listening to students and finding out where they are coming from is the key.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support from mental health issues? And which ones do you try to avoid in those situations?

Participant F: “Again, I think that’s more of a situational leadership approach or listening approach in terms of that if a student comes to me with a mental health issue, I typically just say, ‘Can you talk to me about what you’re going through? What’s going on? How is that making you feel?’ Because what I learned from my first aid class is that sometimes they just need somebody that will want to listen to them, and care for them and puts them at the center of attention. So, I tried to make them know that they are cared for by just really listening to whatever they want to tell me.”

Theme 5: Situational

The situational leadership strategy was emphasized by multiple participants. Participants shared experiences of helping student-athletes with academic issues, personal issues, and mental

health issues. In all of these experiences, participants did not share interest in drastically shifting their leadership style but making minor adjustments based on the situation at hand.

Interview Question: Please provide any additional information regarding your thoughts on athletic academic advising with regards to working with student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Participant A: "I urge any academic advisor to make sure that you're catering to the student-athlete. You can have a certain leadership style, as I do, but I tweak it to each student-athlete, so I can be what they need from me."

Interview Question: Regarding your leadership style, traits, and strategies, are there any changes that you have made based on past experiences?

Participant B: "I think being an athletic academic advisor has opened my eyes to 'it's very situational. It depends on the student,' leadership. Your leadership style may need to even adjust based on the student you are dealing with."

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support for mental health issues? Which do you avoid?

Participant D: "The way every individual reacts to something is different. And so, I think having an appreciation that all of our students are individuals, they all have individual responses, they all have individual coping mechanisms, and it's never black and white."

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes with academic questions? Which do you avoid?

Participant E: “Every student is different, so I guess meeting students where they are. You cannot use the same approach for everybody. You get to know them as an individual and do whatever they need because you will break them if you use the wrong style... It’s the same approach [for student-athletes with mental health issues], depending on who they are, and a lot of them will not disclose that they were diagnosed with something.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support for mental health issues? Which do you avoid?

Participant F: “I really think that the situational leadership style, for me, is one of the styles that I tend to lean on the most because it allows for you to adapt to certain situations. Versus if you’re always the autonomous leader where it’s this way or its not this way. It’s a clear cut yes or no. I think that’s hard in these situations because if you don’t fully understand what the student’s going through, I don’t know if you’d be able to provide them with strategies that would help their situation out.”

Theme 6: Delegation

Even though some of the participants had training with regards to supporting student-athletes with mental health, all of the participants stressed the importance of delegation. All of the participants were well aware of mental health support services on campus, and some recited local and national options that are readily available. Delegation came up in all of the interviews around the recognition that athletic academic advisors are not professional mental health service providers.

Interview Question: How do you protect the privacy of student-athletes when they disclose information about their mental health issues?

Participant A: “That security knowing that I’m not going to tell their information, keeping it very professional while also being empathetic to their issues in life. Well that’s really it. Showing them that I’m not going to tell anybody and showing them that I’m empathetic of how they feel. And referring them to the counselor.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support for mental health issues? Which do you avoid?

Participant B: “I’m not an expert, so I’m never going to tell them what they have to do or diagnose them. I think that one of the biggest things is referring them to the experts which is the mental health counselors.”

Interview Question: What leadership styles, traits, and strategies do you use when assisting student-athletes seeking support for mental health issues? Which do you avoid?

Participant C: “A thing to avoid is trying to jump in when you can. You’re not going to be able to solve every problem that’s put in front of you like that. I guess the other thing that I always try to keep in mind too is just making the case as much as I can, and obviously every situation is different, but making the case as much as I can to do referrals to counseling services and offer to help them get setup with somebody over there.”

Interview Question: Regarding your leadership style, traits, and strategies, are there any changes that you have made based on past experiences?

Participant D: “Yes, I had a student who, I was actually on the phone with, and they were, they weren’t, uhm. They weren’t saying they were going to commit suicide. They

were on the phone with me, and they were harming themselves. And so, I told, I was like, “Look. I have to call the University Police Department. I can’t let you continue with this.”

Interview Question: Why do you feel student-athletes reach out to you with personal issues as opposed to other options on campus?

Participant E: “They feel comfortable around [me]. I teach [a class], and every year I would talk about how it’s important that they go to the counseling center. We would always have a speaker or somebody about mental health.”

Interview Question: Regarding your leadership style, traits, and strategies, are there any changes that you have made based on past experiences?

Participant F: “I think that’s the biggest thing that I’ve learned. You do not have to be the answer or provide the answer I also let them know that I don’t have a degree in this area. So, providing them with some suggestions but also letting them know that I don’t know everything that I need to know about depression, or I don’t know everything I need to know about feeling anxiety but here are some resources that I’ve looked at. ‘Have you thought of reaching out to so-and-so,’ or ‘Have you thought about this as a potential option?’”

Summary

Individual interviews were conducted and analyzed for the researcher to gather emerging themes with regards to the leadership styles, traits, and characteristics of athletic academic advisors when serving student-athletes with mental health issues. The six participants were

currently employed by four-year institutions which compete in NCAA Division I or Division II athletics. The participants served student-athletes across 17 NCAA recognized sports. The analysis of the individual interviews resulted in six emerging themes: listening, caring, training, delegation, accessibility, and delegation. Themes were gathered using the Constant Comparative Method to address the most common things across all interviews. Table 1 and Table 2 depict the occurrence of themes in the interviews and their relation to the guided research questions. The Breakdown of Emergent Themes dives deeper into the meaning of the themes and direct quotes from the anonymous interviews.

Chapter V

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues. Athletic academic advisors serve student-athletes on a regular basis and tend to form strong personal relationships with those student-athletes. Experiences shared throughout this study were analyzed to understand how athletic academic advisors change – or do not change – their leadership styles, traits, and strategies when serving student-athletes with mental health issues.

A qualitative research design allowed for the researcher to explore the leadership experiences of athletic academic advisors. These experiences were shared without disclosing personal information of the participants or the student-athletes depicted in the experiences. This study was driven by three research questions:

RQ1: What are athletic academic advisors' experiences with student-athletes self-reporting mental health issues?

RQ2: How are athletic academic advisors interacting with student-athletes who have self-reported mental health issues?

RQ3: What leadership practices do athletic academic advisors find useful in supporting student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues?

Data collection included one-on-one interviews conducted over the phone or in person. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method. Six themes emerged from the analysis: caring, training, accessibility, listening, situational, and delegation.

Conclusions

The researcher drew the following conclusions based on the results from the participant interviews:

1. Student-athletes frequent the help of athletic academic advisors due to strong, naturally occurring, personal relationships built over time.
2. Athletic academic advisors recognize the stigma with mental health issues among student-athletes but combat it in various ways.
3. Athletic academic advisors show fluidity in their leadership styles, traits, and strategies.
4. Athletic academic advisors do not actively change their leadership styles, traits, and strategies due to mental health issues.
5. Athletic academic advisors utilize the proper services when assisting student-athletes with mental health issues.

Discussion

Student-athletes frequent the help of the athletic academic advisors due to strong, naturally occurring, personal relationships built over time. The first conclusion was drawn from this study because the findings of the interviews were similar to the findings in the literature. Each participant was asked why they felt student-athletes came to them in a time of personal need. Participants gave a combination of clues or directly mentioned the personal relationships they have built with student-athletes due to the amount of time spent in one-on-one conversations. Based on the findings of this study, the nature of the athletic academic advising occupation is personal and results in personal conversations. On the other hand, some of the more experienced participants mentioned that athletic academic advisors were an escape from

athletic world. These experiences showed that some student-athletes rely on the need to be away from sports regarding certain topics. This conclusion fell in line with the hypothesis of the researcher based on literature which formed the study.

Athletic academic advisors recognize the stigma with mental health issues but combat it various ways. Half of the participants directly mentioned the importance of accessibility for an athletic academic advisor, but they stressed a common understanding of when to share information. The privacy of personal information is vitally important to student-athletes. The participants in the study all shared experiences of only sharing that information with others if someone involved is in danger. Along with keeping personal information private, the most experienced athletic academic advisors mentioned the use of listening as a tool. Student-athletes may need a person to vent to or a person to help them talk through a situation. Participants shared experiences of actively listening when student-athletes are conversing with them. Finally, the stigma of mental health issues in student-athletes is a growing topic in college athletics and the NCAA. The researcher did not anticipate the recognition of this stigma among athletic academic advisors currently working in the field. Each participant mentioned the difficulties of talking about mental health issues and the importance of being available for those who need it, rather than prying it out of each individual.

Athletic academic advisors showed fluidity in their leadership styles, traits, and strategies. The situational leadership style was directly mentioned by three of the participants. The other three participants shared the ideology that athletic academic advising is not a one-size-fits-all type of occupation. Each student-athlete responds best to one or more leadership styles, traits, or strategies, so athletic academic advisors show fluidity in order to best suit the individual they are helping. Findings in the interview analyses aligned directly with Leader-Member

Exchange Theory, which formed part of the theoretical framework of the study. The researcher hypothesized that this theory would show in the study.

Although they show fluidity, athletic academic advisors do not actively change their leadership styles, traits, and strategies due to mental health issues. All participants showed consistency when describing their leadership styles, traits, and strategies when dealing with academic, personal, and mental health issues. The situational leadership style mentioned above depicts how athletic academic advisors in the study adjust based on individual's needs in that situation. However, participants shared experiences and ideologies of authenticity when dealing with student-athletes who have mental health issues. Each student-athlete responds best to one or more leadership style, trait, or strategy, but athletic academic advisors saw the most benefits in caring, listening, and being themselves in the time of need of a student-athlete. This conclusion conflicts with the researcher's hypothesis. The researcher hypothesized that athletic academic advisors would use different leadership styles, traits, or strategies when mental health issues were present in student-athletes. The study showed that participants lead a person not a mental state.

Finally, athletic academic advisors utilize the proper services when assisting student-athletes with mental health issues. The awareness of mental health issues is growing for athletes and non-athletes alike. Athletic departments, universities, and communities have formed mental health support services for those in need. Participants showed a vast knowledge of professional options for students and student-athletes to utilize on the local and national level. Along with knowledge of professional mental health support services, some of the participants shared that they have received a formal training on supporting mental health support services. The participants who did not have a formal training explained options for training available to them

along with encouragement for future athletic academic advisors to receive training. This conclusion was not anticipated by the researcher. A rise in mental health support training seminars was evident in the literature with the rise in awareness of mental health issues among student-athletes. The researcher failed to estimate the current training and interest in future training for athletic academic advisors.

Leadership Implications

Many of the researcher's hypotheses were touched on during the participant interviews, but only the emergent themes gave enough information to draw conclusions. The conclusions led to three major leadership implications: situational, authentic, and delegation.

Situational leadership was indirectly described by each of the participants who did not directly state their use of situational leadership. Student-athletes are individuals with unique qualities and situations. As an athletic academic advisor, the researcher will implement situational leadership to further understand each student-athlete as an individual. Individualizing student-athletes will help the researcher appropriately lead student-athletes through personal issues, such as mental health.

Secondly, the participants demonstrated the value in being authentic with student-athletes in conversations about academics and mental health issues. As an athletic academic advisor, the researcher will implement authentic leadership to build personal relationships with student-athletes. These personal relationships will give student-athletes the ability to overcome the stigma with mental health issues.

Finally, delegation was prioritized by all of the participants. Each participant stressed that they wanted to help student-athletes, but they are not professionals in mental health support. All of the participants were aware of mental health support services on their campus. Some of the

participants had programs and/or contact information readily available for local and national mental health support services. As an athletic academic advisor, the researcher intends to implement delegation as a leadership style when serving student-athletes with mental health issues. The study showed that delegation can be a useful leadership style.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the experiences of athletic academic advisors serving student-athletes who participate in athletics at the NCAA Division I and Division II levels. Participants were asked to anonymously share experiences and thoughts on serving student-athletes with self-reported mental health issues.

Firstly, this study examined six participants advising student-athletes across 17 sports, but few of the participants overlapped in which sports they led. It is recommended that future research involve more participants and those participants serve the same or overlapping sports as other participants. Researching how athletic academic advisors serve student-athletes of the same sport may show more or less changes in leadership styles, traits, and strategies.

Secondly, this study examined athletic academic advisors who serve male and female student-athletes. It is recommended that future research examines the change of leadership styles, traits, and strategies of athletic academic advisors in comparison to the gender that the advisor is serving. Gender differences in the student-athletes and in the athletic academic advisor may show further change in leadership styles, traits, or strategies.

Lastly, this study asked athletic academic advisors for their experiences and their thoughts on the actions of student-athletes. It is recommended that future research directly involves student-athletes in the study. Student-athletes without mental health issues could provide a baseline of various leadership styles, traits, and strategies that athletic academic

advisors use. Student-athletes with mental health issues could provide the firsthand experiences of how a change – or lack thereof – in leadership styles, traits, or strategies helped or hindered their experience with mental health issues.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of six athletic academic advisors and their experiences leading student-athletes with mental health issues. Emerging themes were pulled from the interviews using the Constant Comparative Method. Conclusions were drawn and discussed in comparison to the research questions and theoretical framework laid out in chapter one. The research found that situational, authentic, and delegation leadership were the most important of the leadership styles, traits, and strategies depicted by the participants. The researcher intends to utilize these leadership implications to further the ability to assist student-athletes with mental health issues in an athletic academic advising setting. The researcher recommends that future research examines more participants, includes the variable of gender, and expands the participants to include student-athletes.

References

- Ambrose, G. A., Martin, H.E., Page Jr., H. R. (2014). Linking advising and e-portfolios for engagement: Design, evolution, assessment, and university-wide implementation. *Peer Review*, 16(1), 1-8.
<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.wsuproxy.mnpals.net/ehost/detail/detail?vid=5&sid=5b468e95-e7c9-41a7-b5fe-8d33d459c0b0%40pdc-v-sssmgr01&bdata=InNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=96063040&db=aph>>
- Beauchemin, J. (2014). College student-athlete wellness: An integrative outreach model. *College Student Journal*, 48(2), 268-280.
<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.wsuproxy.mnpals.net/ehost/detail/detail?vid=15&sid=5b468e95-e7c9-41a7-b5fe-8d33d459c0b0%40pdc-v-sssmgr01&bdata=InNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=97002780&db=aph>>
- Booth, R., Sharma, D., Leader, T. (2016). The age of anxiety? It depends where you look: Changes in STAI trait anxiety, 1970-2010. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 51(2), 193-202. doi: 10.1007/s00127-015-1096-0
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
<http://englishlangkan.com/produk/E%20Book%20Research%20Design%20Cressweell%202014.pdf>
- Doubleday, J. (2013). With an eye toward retention, colleges amp up advising. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 60(14), A6-A6. < <https://www.chronicle.com/>>

- Douce, L. A., Keeling, R. P. (2014). A strategic Primer on College Student Mental Health. *American Council on Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pubs/newsletters/access/2014/10-14/college-mental-health.pdf>.
- Gard, A. N. (2017). High school academics: Increasing the standard. *Physical Educator*, 74(3), 405-419. doi: 10.18666/TPE-2017-V74-I3-7369
- Gill, E. L. (2014). Integrating collegiate sports into social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 50(2), 305-321. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2014.856245
- Giroux, D., Geiss, E. (2019). Evaluating a student-led mental health awareness campaign. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychology Research*, 24(1), 61-66. doi: 10.24839/2325-7342.JN24.1.61
- Harborth, A. (2015). The developing role of student advising: An interview with Charlie Nutt. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 39(1), 18-20.
<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.wsuproxy.mnpals.net/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=5b468e95-e7c9-41a7-b5fe-8d33d459c0b0%40pdc-v-sssmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=112162637&db=aph>>
- Hudson, C. G. (2018). Behavioral mental health: An emerging field of service or an oxymoron?. *Social Work*, 63(1), 27-36. doi: 10.1093/SW/SWX048
- Kaiseler, M., Poolton, J. M., Backhouse, S. H., Stanger, N. (2017). The relationship between mindfulness and life stress in student-athletes: the mediating role of coping effectiveness and decision rumination. *Sport Psychologist*, 31(3), 288-298. doi: 10.1123/tsp.2016-0083
- Leach, R. B., Wang, T. R. (2015). Academic advisee motives for pursuing out-of-class communication with the faculty academic advisor. *Communication Education*, 64(3), 325-343. doi: 10.1080/03634523.2015.1038726

Ledbetter, A. M. (2019). Parent-child privacy boundary conflict patterns during the first year of college: Mediating family communication patterns, predicting psychosocial distress.

Human Communication Research, 45(3), 255-285. doi: 10.1093/hcr/hqy018

Lochmiller, C. R., Lester, J. N. (2017). *An Introduction to Educational Research Connecting Methods to Practice*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

National Council for Behavioral Health. (2015). *Mental Health First Aid USA* (1st ed revised).

National Council for Behavioral Health.

NCAA. (2015, April 13). Definition of "Prospective Student-Athlete". Retrieved from

<http://www.ncaa.org/enforcement/basketball-certification/definition-prospective-student-athlete>.

NCAA. (2019, February 27). Our Three Divisions. Retrieved from

<http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/our-three-divisions>.

NCAA Research. (2017). NCAA Study of Student-Athlete Social Environments (2012-2016).

Retrieved from

http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/2017RES_NCAA_Convention_Social_Environments_present_20170807.pdf.

Northouse, P. G. (2015). *Leadership: theory and practice*. Seventh edition. Los Angeles:

SAGE Publications, Inc.

Rehagen, T. (2019, February 5). Change of Mind. Retrieved from

<http://www.ncaa.org/champion/change-mind?sf195297961=1>.

Ryan, H., Gayles, J. G., & Bell, B. (2018). Student-athletes and mental health experiences. *New*

Directions for Student Services, 2018, 67-79. doi: 10.1002/ss.20271

S.B. (2015). 49er finish. *University Business*, 18(12), 34-34. <<https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.wsuproxy.mnpals.net/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=4eccb163-067b-4425-aa85-ac5aeb6763eb%40sdc-v-sessmgr01>>

Sport Science Institute. (2017, May). Mental Health Best Practices. Retrieved from http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/SSI_MentalHealthBestPractices_Web_20170921.pdf.

Thompson, J., Petronio, S., Braithwaite, D. (2012). An examination of privacy rules for academic advisors and college student-athletes: A communication privacy management perspective. *Communication Studies*, 63(1), 54-76. doi: 10.1080/10510974.2011.616569

Winona State University WSU. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.winona.edu/grants/irb.asp>.

Winzer, R., Lindbald, F., Sorjonen, K., Lindberg, L., (2014). Positive versus negative mental health in emerging adulthood: A national cross-sectional survey. *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 1-19. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-14-1238