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**IMPROVING COLLEGIATE HEAD COACHES' AWARENESS AND  
KNOWLEDGE FOR MENTAL HEALTH TO BETTER THEIR STUDENT-  
ATHLETES**

by  
Conner Walsh

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education  
at  
Rowan University  
May 4th, 2021

Thesis Chair: Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I cannot begin to express my gratitude for my late cousin, Danny “DoodleJack” Melleby, who passed away on December 13th, 2017. Danny helped me in many ways with my education and collegiate journey, and I am forever indebted to him. You are forever in my heart. I love you; I miss you, and I am forever grateful.

## **Acknowledgments**

As for my family and close friends, I thank you for helping me balance this journey of graduate school, work, and of course, assisting me in enjoying life through this amazing two-year ride.

Thank you coach Mike Dickson for being a second father to me since 2013 when I was a skinny left-handed pitcher over at what is now Rowan College of South Jersey. You have been a role model of mine ever since and I am truly grateful for everything you did to make sure I completed this paper and program. Words cannot express my appreciation for you as a mentor.

I want to thank Dr. Raquel Wright-Mair for being the driving force that motivated me into believing I can complete this research study. You have taught me not only to be passionate about my writing and research, but to be passionate about everything I do in my life. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to have you as an instructor.

I want to thank my co-advisors Dr. Tyrone McCombs and Dr. Drew Tinnin for being instrumental in my journey to graduate. Thank you for being responsible, coherent, and accepting of me throughout my journey in this program.

To the Rowan coaches that chose to participate, thank you so much for your insight and stories in helping me accomplish my research. I admire every one of you for opening up to me and telling your story.

## **Abstract**

Conner Walsh

IMPROVING COLLEGE HEAD COACHES' AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE  
FOR MENTAL HEALTH TO BETTER THEIR STUDENT-ATHLETES  
2020-2021

Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to examine how well-aware and equipped head coaches' are when handling a student-athlete with mental health-related conditions. The primary goals of this study were to interview head coaches' and learn about what resources their college institution provides for them, as well as the steps taken when approached by a student-athlete concerned about their mental health. The research on a head coaches' awareness and knowledge on helping student-athletes is limited, but the research on the number of student-athletes with mental health-related conditions is not. By combining the literature on student-athletes, mental health, and college head coaches, this study can improve the knowledge a college coach can obtain about mental health. The findings from this study showed that head coaches were well-aware of mental health among today's student-athletes, as well as showed that several proactive procedures are taken when a head coach is approached by one of their players. These procedures all involve resources on campus as well as what the athletic department provides. While several head coaches take different steps when handling a student-athlete with mental health-related conditions, they are knowledgeable and compassionate for the struggling student-athlete is the primary goal for them. In conclusion, this study showed that head coaches' are highly capable of playing the role of mentor for their players.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Many college students across America are faced with the difficulties of mental health conditions (Pedrelli et al. 2015). Among those who live with mental health challenges are student-athletes. This subset of students is especially prone to dealing with such struggles on their own as the stigma that accompanies mental health challenges, both within the world of sports and in the wider society, deters them from disclosing their conditions and/or seeking professional help (Wahto, Swift, & Whipple, 2016). Stigma is the main reason why athletes with mental health issues do not seek the help they need (BMJ, 2019). Moreover, student-athletes try to avoid being labeled as someone with mental health illnesses because of the harm it often brings, such as the potential diminishing of their self-esteem (Corrigan, 2004). Student-athletes should not have to hide their mental health conditions. Rather, they should be encouraged to share them and guided toward the appropriate resources (Blanco et al. 2008). Furthermore, head coaches' should have their athletes' best interests at heart. This means that they should be playing a bigger role in breaking the stigma attached to mental illness by normalizing conversations about mental health and helping student-athletes to access the support they need (Bissett, 2020).

Watson and Kissinger (2007) stated that while there are developing mental health concerns, student-athletes are often unwilling to seek out mental health care. The conversation needs to become more focused on support mechanisms available to help students navigate these challenges, in addition to the role collegiate head coaches play in helping to get student-athletes the help they need. More importantly, they must be willing

and open to learning more about mental health conditions among student-athletes. In doing so, they are being mindful of the daily struggles student-athletes are facing. Collegiate student-athletes are a distinctive group of individuals across college campuses who face similar mental health-related dilemmas and challenges just as regular students (Yusko, Buckman, White, & Pandina, 2008). A recent study broke down each college sport and compared mental health-related issues between male and female student-athletes. The data showed 37 percent of women's track and field athletes reported to have clinical depression-like symptoms, ranking highest ahead of women's soccer (31 percent) (Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo, Gross, 2016). Moreover, this study showed that six percent of all student-athletes over the course of three years at an institution had clinical signs of depression (Wolanin et al. 2016). Though six percent may not seem like a high number, what is staggering is 24 percent of the overall population was defined as "clinically relevant," which meant even though they were not diagnosed with depression, it was still alarmingly significant for the research (Wolanin et al. 2016).

Student-athletes have struggles like all the other students at school; however, their struggles are compounded by the constant demands of athletic participation like injuries and physical bodyweight expectations (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Thus, it is not unreasonable to say that student-athletes may face more challenges and stressors in comparison to a common college student. In fact, an undergraduate research journal for human sciences (URJHS) stated that because of practices and game schedules, student-athletes suffer more psychological problems (i.e., anxiety, fear of failure in competition, lack of sleep, use and abuse of alcohol, disordered eating, overtraining, and feelings of

exhaustion) than their peers who do not participate in college athletics (Maurer & Cramer Roh, 2015).

Other factors that were not included in the URJHS study like coping with physical injuries, athletic participation, forming interpersonal relationships, maintaining optimal physical conditioning, keeping up attendance and production in the classroom, managing career, continuing on with self-personal manners, maintaining physical condition, and outside distractions beyond our control add up to become a taxing discomfort among student-athletes (Parham, 1993; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Danish, Petipas, & Hale, 1993).

As student-athletes continue to struggle with mental health illnesses, college and university athletic departments across the country can help lower the stigma and burden by educating their coaching staff and having them provide support to their student-athletes. While all of this is troublesome, college and university athletic departments across the country can help lower the stigma and burden by educating every head coach and having them provide support to student-athletes. These contributions can create an environment where athletes feel a strong sense of affirmation and validation, for athletes to talk to someone, and can ultimately help to minimize the stigma that student-athletes are these superior beings that do not have or need to talk to anyone about mental health-related issues. Student-athletes, just like their non-athlete counterparts, go through interpersonal struggles off the athletic field like breakups with significant others, family issues, or controversies over schoolwork. Putting them on this pedestal where we see them as non-human is simply inhumane.

## **Significance of the Study**

Though there has been media attention directed toward mental health conditions of professional athletes, there lingers a significant problem that many student-athletes are not willing to seek the appropriate treatment needed for their pre-existing conditions (Bird, Chow, Meir, & Freeman, 2018). Former University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) soccer player Mikayla Krientz is an example of a student-athlete who excelled on the field but suffered severe anxiety and depression from it. Another example is Aaron Taylor, a standout All-American football player at Notre Dame. A quick notion to point out is that Aaron played from 1990-1994, and Mikayla was 2014-2018. Two outstanding student-athletes, even with a 28-year gap between them, were plagued by the stigma and refused to reach out to a head coach or school counselor for help. In an open essay, Aaron stated that “due to fear of looking weak or being judged, I hid my condition from those closest to me, including my coaches and teammates” (Brown, 2014, p. 6). For Mikayla, her anxiety overwhelmed her, and even though she went to her head coach about her problem, at first, she sought out no counseling of any kind (Burtka, 2019).

In today's athletic society, a head coach must create an environment where student-athletes feel less ashamed and stigmatized to deal with their mental health illness to make school and athletics better. A student-athlete going to talk to their head coach like they would an advisor, teammate, or sports psychologist, means they cannot handle something on their own or they risk losing playing time. Also, student-athletes could fear that anyone outside of the athletic department clique will not understand their needs, as the idea of seeking help for your mental health illness will compromise your reputation (Brock, 2019). Therefore, it is the responsibility of a coach as well as an athletic

department's job to create an environment that is a haven for these athletes to discuss these struggles and can allow them to have faith and open up. For them, talking to someone can allow athletes a space to process and make sense of what they are feeling, and even boost performance. Student-athletes represent a unique sub-population of a college campus. Often dubbed as celebrities by those outside their bubble, these assumptions are challenges they encounter as they are still only human, and students as well.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the role head coaches' play in supporting student-athletes with mental health illnesses. This study will allow administrators within the athletic departments to develop a better understanding of the role head coaches' play in supporting athletes with mental health conditions and provide recommendations for how to ensure head coaches' are well equipped to support student-athletes with mental health conditions and implement programs and other initiatives for student-athletes managing these conditions. By providing a head coach with the resources and tools to deal with student-athletes managing these conditions, it can bring a better outlook aside from just winning games. A lack of program evaluation on the head coaches' role supporting their student-athletes mental health conditions has been identified as a weakness in the athletic departments on college campuses (Kroshus, Wagner, Wyrick, & Hainline, 2019). Evaluation is critical for ensuring that resources being provided are being fully exercised (McGlashan & Finch, 2010). Head coaches' at Rowan University, a Division III institution, were interviewed to gain an understanding of what resources and tools are currently in place to allow them to assist student-athletes with these conditions.

The goal of the study was to understand how a head coach can become facilitators to help student-athletes struggling with mental health conditions. Furthermore, after learning more about mental health conditions and by becoming a resource, coaches can positively impact their relationships with student-athletes and help boost their self-confidence, performance, and overall wellness.

### **Setting of Study**

The Division III institution is Rowan University, a university located in suburban Glassboro, New Jersey. By intercollegiate varsity programs, Rowan has eight men's teams and ten women's teams. Furthermore, there are seven types of athletic directors, and roughly 400 plus collegiate student-athletes along with 11 national championships (Jiang, 2020). Rowan athletics have become a premise for young high school recruits in the state of New Jersey to look forward to once committing to play there.

### **Research Questions**

The major research questions are:

1. What resources does Rowan's Athletic Department provide head coaches to help student-athletes with mental health conditions?
2. What steps do collegiate head coaches at Rowan take to support student-athletes with existing mental health conditions?

These questions examine the course of action taken when a student-athlete comes forward with a mental health-related condition and seeks help.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One of the biggest limitations is not having every head coach willing to participate. With eighteen head coaches' for each sports team Rowan provides,

difficulties such as disinterests in the topic and wanting to be interviewed is a factor. Furthermore, time constraints can become an issue. Also, due to some toxic masculinity and potential trust issues, another limitation can easily be a head coach giving a stern response to research questions about mental health. A topic this sensitive can set off several red flags. One more additional limitation may involve the tenure of the head coach. The answers provided from a coach with decades of experience can be different from a head coach with less experience; say three years or less. I also have a role within the athletic department and that can present a challenge as being a former athlete with knowledge on mental health illnesses or presenting a leading question that could prompt the respondent to answer in a particular way. This could interfere with the main goal of this study. For example – if I were to ask a coach a follow-up question about their own mental health struggles, I am establishing that they had issues in the past when there is a chance they did not. By sitting down with certain head coaches from different sports, I am not generalizing my study, and my data will only represent the sports from the head coaches' that can participate.

## **Organization**

Chapter I of this paper introduces the topic being studied, research questions acknowledged, while bringing forth background information. Adding on, this first chapter will also outline the purpose of the study, the setting of the study, and highlight why head coaches' are the particular population being focused on. Chapter II is a literature review that assesses articles, books, and other forms of research about mental health among collegiate sports, a head coaches' overview on mental health, and stigmas placed upon student-athletes. Furthermore, this chapter also reviews former and current



athlete's mental health-related conditions, as well as types and causes of mental health conditions. Chapter III provides the methods employed for the study, summarizing what course of action and approaches were used for collecting data, criteria for participant selection, and analysis of data. This was a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews. Chapter IV offers the findings of the research. Data from the interviews answers the research questions on resources and procedures a head coach at Rowan University has or does not possess when dealing with student-athletes with mental health-related illnesses. Finally, Chapter V will summarize the overall study as well as incorporate findings and present suggestions toward future research.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

Chapter II outlines the existing research pertinent to the study. This assessment provides information about recent student and professional athletes' mental health battles, the mental health-related conditions in sports, and the potential of student-athletes being more susceptible than non-student-athletes, as well as some of the types of mental health-related issues that plague them. Moreover, this chapter provides data from a current survey of statistical data gathered among over sixty-thousand college students and their mental health-related struggles, details on the stigma that has been placed on student-athletes; more particularly about how student-athletes feel about seeking mental health services, how they think they will be perceived for doing so, effectiveness, and whether or not they would prefer it on or off-campus. Finally, this chapter concludes with a background on an NCAA college coaches' duty over the last 30 years. In particular, we will examine how things have changed in terms of their job obligations, responsibilities, how they may perceive the discussion of mental health, along with how they feel toward mental health services and being more than just a coach.

#### **Current and Former Professional & Student-Athletes Mental Health Stories**

According to an article that Mikayla self-authored on the American East Conference website called *AE Voices* (2018), she suffered two severe shoulder injuries and did not play until her junior year. Not only that but once cleared to play in December of 2017, the following January, her father had open-heart surgery (Krinetz, 2018). She stated, "this was by far the hardest thing that I have ever had to deal with, mentally and emotionally" (Krinetz, 2018). She was fortunate to have the necessary counseling

resources and support. One of the problems is that not every counseling center on college campuses employs a psychologist with the training, education, and licensed to handle mental health issues affecting student-athletes (Brown, 2014; Carr & Davidson, 2015).

Student-athletes have to manage any type of struggles that coincide with athletic participation, while simultaneously balancing academics and social responsibilities off the field as well (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). A rigorous travel schedule translates into academic disadvantages due to little or no classroom presence. In addition, injuries can increase time demands because of the added commitment of physical therapy and rehabilitation (Kaier et al. 2015). If the state of New Jersey can pass the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act where teachers are obligated to report and counsel a bully in class, then a college coach should be obligated to talk and help a struggling student-athlete with mental health issues. College coaches have the obligation to act if they are aware that a student-athlete might have a mental health issue, and they must listen and be attentive with student-athletes and encourage them to get help if they think they need it (Rahill, 2020). Ultimately, mental health disorders like depression and anxiety do not go away once a student-athlete receives their diploma.

Philadelphia Eagles offensive lineman Brandon Brooks missed a vital week 12 matchup back in 2019 against the Seattle Seahawks due to anxiety. Brooks faced criticism over missing the game because it was not the first time his anxiety disorder sidelined him. During his postgame press conference, he said, “make no mistake, I am NOT ashamed or embarrassed by this nor what I go through daily.” Brooks realized just how real the mental health stigma can be--he is having a real, debilitating mental health issue, but to the outside world it is only seen as a weakness (McManus, 2019).

Olympic gold medalist and swimming icon Michael Phelps has come out and stated in the HBO documentary, *The Weight of Gold* that he thought of himself as “just a swimmer,” and along with roughly 80 percent of Olympic athletes, suffered post-Olympic depression (Rapkin, 2020). It was blatantly deemed that as long as the athletes were performing well, nothing else really mattered (Futterman, 2020). Additionally, in 2018, NBA champion Kevin Love wrote an article in *The Players Tribune* openly admitting to having a panic attack during a November game against the Atlanta Hawks. Love said, “I thought about mental health as someone else’s problem,” and went on to describe how the stigma can be eliminated (Love, 2018). By fans being mindful that athletes, while perhaps superior athletically/physically, are still human and can still struggle mentally.

### **Mental Health in Collegiate Sports**

Student-athletes, regardless of their sport(s), all have their own stressors from handling the workloads of academics and athletics. Student-athletes are more susceptible to mental health issues than their non-student-athletes’ counterparts. Added pressures on the student-athlete are due to stressors of attempting to balance academics and athletics, manage relationships, handle success and failures, and being involved in social activities (Parham, 1993). This is not for just one school year either, as athletic eligibility spans four years. With that being said, Parham (1993) also mentions that attempting to cope with the termination of an athletic career causes additional stress for student-athletes. Given the time demands in any athletic program, obtaining a quality education is virtually impossible for many student-athletes (Figone, 1994). Studying, as serious students know, is difficult under the best of circumstances. A study showed that roughly 10-15 percent of

student-athletes will have to seek some form of counseling due to a psychological issue throughout their college tenure (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). This study also brought up the fact that this was two percent higher than their nonathletic counterparts (Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

After many hours of strenuous practice, films, and team meetings, it is all but impossible. College sport at any level is a high-stress endeavor and imposes tremendous demands, unlike their classmates who are not involved with collegiate sports. Student-athletes in many cases are more likely to not develop intellectually in comparison to the typical non-student-athlete student (Sack, 1987). As this all pertains toward their mental health conditions, as a student-athlete, academics are supposed to come first. Student-athletes must be able to complete homework, tests, exams, and project on time while dealing with the physical activities sports inflicts on their bodies (Hansen, 2020). There also are the side factors with potential physical injuries that are hard to handle daily and having to perform at the highest level they can. Juggling the burden of missing classes due to long bus rides to games adds to the punishing stressors of missing out on group work or a study group for something critical in class.

### ***Pre-Existing Conditions***

Pre-existing conditions like depression and anxiety have been identified as components that increase the risk of a student-athlete having mental health conditions (Iverson et al. 2017) Student-athletes can come onto campus and hide from their coaches' about a pre-existing mental health issue they suffer from. Pre-existing mental health conditions can be caused by a physical injury like a head or leg injury, or social event such as the loss of a parent or loved one. Any athlete with a history of depression before a

head injury like concussions is demonstrated to be more likely to have either depression or anxiety after that concussion compared with those who do not have a pre-existing head injury (Yang, Covassin, & Torner, 2015). Moreover, Vickers (2013) stated in their article that: “there is also reason to believe that ‘hidden’ head injuries from contact sports may leave student-athletes with a predisposition to developing depression or post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 1). Physical injuries and types of disorders are vital to student-athlete success and so should be the managing of their own mental health-related needs (Klenck, 2014). To add on, we can also look back for a pre-existing mental health-related issue to a student-athlete's time in high school.

### *Coaches Awareness*

According to Kroshus et al. (2019), almost half of high school coaches were not confident in their ability to appropriately support a team member who is struggling with anxiety or depression. One quality trait for a coach to have at any level is to care more about his/her players over wins and losses. A good relationship could help in the identification of pre-existing mental health conditions and disclosure (Schary, 2019). In almost every collegiate athletic department, the head coach played that specific sport. Therefore, they should be aware of the difficulties that plague their players when balancing being a student and athlete simultaneously. But can we blame a head coach for their lack of self-awareness within their student-athletes?

There is little research available on the educational backgrounds of college coaches' with department biographies only showing their levels of education and experience. Hence, it is unknown if there is any training or skills that the hired coach has in order to respond to student-athlete mental health concerns. Additionally, a head coach

who is more concerned about mental health issues, and who are supportive of student-athletes seeking professional help, may believe there are more positive outcomes once help is sought after (Kroshus et al., 2019). With there being limited knowledge regarding what college athletic programs look for when they hire a college coach, the interview process is how athletic directors figure out how if this coach would be equipped when discussing a player's mental health condition.

Be that as it may, between all the training, practices, traveling, and recruiting, it is becoming increasingly difficult to have head coaches' attend some type of time-intensive mental health training program (Sebbens, Hassmén, Crisp, & Wensley, 2016). Those who can accept the title of head coach should be able to remember some of their own struggles from being a student-athlete and bring a positive outlook among their players. One of the primary goals for this paper is to make college coaches' aware of mental health-related conditions that surround student-athletes daily. A coach that can direct stress and continue to create a positive environment is qualified to prevent or deal with athletes' stress more effectively (Fox, 2008). These realities highlight the importance of ensuring that coaches and other administrators within athletic departments are aware of the various issues.

### **Types/Causes of Mental Health-Related Issues (Prevalent Issues)**

According to research, one out of every five young adults suffers from some form of a mental health-related issue (Brown, 2014). For student-athletes, roughly one out of four reported that they were mentally exhausted due to the high demands of college athletics (NCAA, 2016). In this part of the literature review, I examine the top three causes of mental health-related issues that devastate student-athletes: depression, anxiety,

and eating disorders. Moreover, we will explore how student-athletes acquire a coping mechanism to help counteract their illness, but how it pertains to substance abuse by wrongfully using drugs and alcohol.

### ***Depression***

Something that a college student experiences during their time at school, depression is one of the most pervasive and unavoidable mental health conditions (American Psychological Association, 2017). Athletes encounter depression as often as the general population (Reardon & Factor, 2010). Fifteen to twenty percent of all student-athletes are going to have some form of depression in their life, not just in sports (Stull, 2014). Furthermore, it is one of the more common forms of conditions a sports psychiatrist will treat (Stull, 2014). Though some research may suggest that the percentages of depression between student-athletes and non-student-athletes are similar (Storch, Storch, Killiany, & Roberti, 2005), what is not implemented is the immensely smaller population of student-athletes in comparison to an entire college institution. When also comparing gender, 48 percent of women are reported to have symptoms of depression; a seventeen percent increase in comparison to men's 31 percent (Brown, 2014). Male and female student-athletes are dealing with everything regular college students go through with coursework and library time for final exams, but then that student-athlete must compete and put their body through a strenuous two-and-a-half-hour practice, followed by an hour workout. Injuries are one of the causes of depression-like symptoms for student-athletes. Those who were injured during a previous athletic season reported significantly higher depression-like symptoms than non-injured athletes (Brewer & Petrie, 1995). More than half of athletes who have been injured throughout their



college career have been subjected to mild to severe symptoms of depression (Leddy, Lambert, & Ogles, 1994). The physical and emotional strain on student-athletes from their specific sport, in addition to ensuring their academic success, can be a considerable amount of pressure (Jiang, 2020).

### ***Anxiety***

Anxiety over academic performance is the most important predictor of perceived stress among NCAA student-athletes across all three divisions. Furthermore, the relationship between academic performance anxiety and stress is influenced by aggressive and abusive coaching behavior, and a non-inclusive team environment (Hwang & Choi, 2016). According to Craske (2009), “anxiety is the future-oriented mindset associated with preparation for potential upcoming negative events and fear becoming an alarm response to present or imminent danger, whether it is real or perceived” (p. 1607). Stock and Levine (2014) went above and beyond to define anxiety as the feeling of worriedness that is strong enough to affect a person's ability to function. For student-athletes, the feeling of nervousness is constant when trying to perform at a high level for an effective outcome to occur (Iverson, 2020). In addition, nervous feelings are frequent when the eyes of an audience, teammates, but more importantly coaching staffs are observing or yelling at you to perform better and to be in the correct position. Student-athletes may notice their anxiety symptoms start to increase in stressful situations such as competitive play (Thompson & Sherman, 2014). Among college students alone, 62 percent of undergraduate students claimed to be overwhelmed with anxiety throughout the 2016-2017 school year (Brown, 2014). Following that previous statement, NCAA research showed that close to 85 percent of athletic trainers, all of whom are certified, say

anxiety affects student-athletes at colleges and universities throughout the country (Goldman, 2014).

### *Eating Disorders*

Student-athletes can go to the extreme as to developing an eating disorder. One issue is when an injured student-athlete decides not to eat because since they are injured, they do not deserve to be eating (Putukian, 2016). Other evidence shows that symptoms of an eating disorder are developed due to the potential of injury and lack of performance on the field or court (Mountjoy et al. 2014). Something as extreme as this is triggered when the athlete is feeling depressed from being injured in the first place. Eating disorders occur in both male and female athletes, but with female athletes (Stull, 2014). Furthermore, these women's sports are ones in which lack of body fat is believed to boost performance (Stull, 2014).

Like anxiety and depression, eating disorders also affect non-athlete college students aside from student-athletes. However, all student-athletes are at more risk of developing an eating disorder in comparison to non-student-athletes due to the need of having to maintain a fit body for their particular sport (Chatterton & Petrie, 2014). Furthermore, in terms of suffering from both an eating disorder and body expectations, female student-athletes are at a higher risk than male student-athletes (Ryan, Gayles, Bell, 2018). Studies show that female student-athletes allow friends and family to impact their idea about their body image (Wells, Chin, Tacke, & Bunn, 2013). Also, this same study conducted mentioned the societal demands of having to be thin, pressures to perform at the highest-level dictates what and when a female student-athlete will eat (Wells, Chin, Tacke, & Bunn, 2013).

Another study stated that 25 percent of their female student-athlete participants disclosed symptoms of an eating disorder (Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2009). Regardless of gender, something as severe as eating disorders should be given immediate and significant attention. Athletic departments need to realize that eating disorders are a serious illness and can lead to other illnesses mentioned like anxiety and depression, as well as anxiety and depression leading to an eating disorder. Therefore, every college head coach needs to care for these individuals and must understand the relationship between their student-athletes and eating disorders (Bonci et al. 2008).

### ***Substance Abuse (Coping Mechanisms)***

To cope with their mental health problems, student-athletes commonly turn to the use of alcohol, marijuana, opiates, Adderall, tobacco, or performance enhancers (Stull, 2014). Drug abuse among student-athletes is normally used to treat symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Sherman et al. 2007), or pain due to injury. From 2009 to 2013, there was a 21 percent increase in student-athletes treated with prescription medication for ADD/ADHD (Fairman, Peckham, & Sclar, 2017). In 2014, an NCAA survey showed that 16 percent of about 21,000 student-athletes admitted to using medication for ADHD, half of which said the medicine was not prescribed (Burnsed, 2014).

This same study showed 44 percent of male student-athletes reported that they binge drink, which by definition is five or more drinks in one sitting (Burnsed, 2014; CDC, 2019). Burnsed (2014) also mentions that men in all sports revealed the usage of performance-enhancing drugs higher than women. One of the main reasons student-athletes are at a high risk of substance abuse is largely due to injuries. Around 29 percent

of student-athletes reported that they felt there is nothing wrong with using painkilling drugs and that they would use painkilling drugs to mask injury to continue to participate in their sport (Tricker, 2000). To compare student-athletes and non-student-athletes, athletes are far more likely to be prescribed some type of pain relief medication. To collate this, additional prescriptions can assist in potential substance abuse (Ryan, Gayles, Bell, 2018). This in terms makes them a vulnerable population to abusing painkillers like Oxycodone.

One of the silent issues surrounding substance abuse is abusing the prescribed drugs even after the injury has fully healed. There is not much recent research to show, but former NFL quarterback Erik Ainge sat out the 2010 season to get healthy from a pain killer addiction he developed after an injury (Sack, 2012). Most people on the outside of sports looking in just create the assumption that this cannot be possible because athletes are superior figures. However, as you can see that is not the case here. It is clear that student-athletes face many factors and even addictions when it comes to playing sports. Some are even willing to go above and beyond abusing painkillers just to play. Therefore, head coaches, training staffs, and athletic administrators need to turn their attention to the data and realize that addictions and chronic pain are not a fair price for student-athletes to pay to win games or hang championship banners in the school gymnasium.

### **Current Survey Analysis on College Students and Athletes**

There is strong data that proves college students suffer from mental health-related illnesses. The American College Health Association, also known as the National College Health Assessment II (ACHA-NCHA-II), released a study in the spring of 2019

consisting of over sixty-seven thousand college students around the United States. The students reported their experiences with mental health illnesses they faced or felt over the last twelve months ranging anywhere from overwhelming anxiety, depression beyond wanting to function, loneliness, strongly considered suicide, and more. The data illustrated that throughout a twelve-month period, 66 percent of students had suffered overwhelming anxiety, 45 percent had difficulties functioning because felt so depressed, 66 percent had feelings of being exceedingly lonely, and 13 percent had suicide ideations. Notably, women had higher percentages in every category, with 72 percent feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and 68 percent feeling very lonely. It is important to note that from this study, coinciding with student-athletes, 26 percent, or 17,672 students, participated in organized college athletics.

### **Stigma Placed on Student-Athletes**

Student-athletes have to learn to handle a plethora of grueling demands that include the positions of academics with athletics (Bird et al. 2018). Though they must learn this difficult balancing act, it does not mean every one of them is capable of doing so. Also, if they can, it does not mean that they do so with a clear conscience. Stigmas rob people with mental illness of rightful opportunities (Corrigan, 2012), and this paper is intended to help coaches' destigmatize that student-athletes are human beings and have mental health-related struggles like anxiety and depression. It was stated by Dean and Rowan (2014) that "athletes experience a wide range of vulnerabilities that often go unaddressed, perhaps because of the perception that since they appear healthy and vibrant, they are free from social problems." Student-athletes are reported to

outstandingly have distinguished levels of stigma than their non-student-athlete counterparts (Kaier et al. 2015).

Student-athletes must deal with the additional demands of performance outcome and injury (Jones & Sheffield, 2007; Gulliver et al. 2015). When you add in all the social normalizes that come with being a college student as well, in addition to what was mentioned, just the stress to meet the standards of what is required of them can become strenuous. Emily Vickers (2013) was quoted saying that “athletes should not feel pressured into masking the problem, and that the ‘gladiator’ stigma should be dropped” (p. 1). This section will go more in-depth with stigma as it pertains to mental health in athletics, how coaches’ perceive mental health issues in athletics, and student-athletes not wanting to seek professional help. Along with that, I will discuss the positive effects of professional counseling, describe how student-athletes should feel no shame in wanting to seek help, and how encouraging a head coach is with wanting student-athletes to seek help.

### ***Mental Health Stigma Among Athletics***

Link and Phelan (2001) define stigma as labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. Student-athletes have this perception about them as being mentally tough sports figures that due to recognition on the field or court, do not have any worries. Since they help win games and bring in revenue for the schools they play at, there is no need to focus on the starting quarterback having panic attacks because he won the school a conference championship. We can ignore the starting first baseman on the softball team's eating disorder because she hit the game-winning home run. When it comes to student-athletes, stigmas have been connected as the main barrier to them

wanting to seek help (Bird et al. 2018; Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018). Imagine suffering from depression, but because you are a student-athlete, you will be considered soft for wanting to talk to a trained professional. You could be someone who suffers from panic attacks and feels that talking to a licensed therapist could help when you are on the basketball court, but you wait for a second because you will be a disgrace to your teammates if you seek help. More importantly, because of the stigma placed upon student-athletes, we do not affiliate them with suffering from mental health illnesses.

### ***Coaches Perception on Mental Health***

Little research has been done on the knowledge a college coach possesses when knowing about mental health-related issues among student-athletes. A college coach is someone who, in a way, is the third parent in your life placed before you to motivate and help you thrive as an athlete. However, it does not necessarily mean that you will like this individual as college coaches are sometimes known for aggressive behaviors followed by negative feedback. The research found that a student-athletes drive to perform and belief in themselves were related to both the number of times and value a coaches' feedback was (Black & Weiss, 1992; Kassing & Infante, 1999). Though competitive play is important, what also should be important for a college coach to do is provide an environment where the student-athletes do not have to feel subjective due to a bad game or practice. The student-athlete and coach relationships are important in destigmatizing and managing mental health-related illnesses. Biggin et. al (2017), wrote that "coaches are critical to setting the organizational climate, and in turn, impacting on the level of stress experienced by their players." Every collegiate head coach plays a significant role in the lives of their athletes and should be taking into account how difficult it is to live up to

winning expectations while balancing schoolwork and social norms. Furthermore, as almost every head coach from all divisions of athletics played the sport they currently coach, they should understand the daily grind physically and mentally student-athletes go through.

### ***Student-Athletes Not Seeking Help***

Based on the Healthy Minds Study (HMS), about ten percent of the student population sought mental health counseling at their school's counseling services (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2019). This same study by Lipson et al (2019) found that rates of a mental health diagnosis or condition increased by 66 percent. Student-athletes are not taking the measures necessary in seeking any form of help toward their mental health-related illness for a variety of reasons. To compare, 30 percent of non-student-athletes make use of mental health service centers (Eisenberg 2014). There have been flashes of promise when Bird et al (2018) study found that of 101 Division I student-athlete participants, 31 percent pursued mental health counseling. It is also important to mention that across the country, colleges do not offer programs, specifically graduate programs, to where the focus of study is in sport and performance psychology (Carr & Davidson, 2015). One of the roadblocks to seeking help involves simply not having the time to do so. Lopez and Levy (2013) believed that the lack of time to seek services was the chief barrier to not seeking treatment. With a rigorous schedule of class, practice, games, travel, etc., by the time they are available, service resources are not available during any “free time” a student-athlete has (Watson, 2006). Watson (2005) also wrote that student-athletes deem to have negative attitudes towards help-seeking saying “student-athletes have been conditioned with such axioms as, ‘no pain, no gain,’ and, ‘there is no I in



team,' throughout their athletic careers” (p. 443). Meaning, they are assuming the role of having a sense of mental toughness that they can handle anything, even though they are making it much worse by keeping it inside.

An additional roadblock for student-athletes lacking in counseling seeking is what is called public stigma. Student-athletes being stigmatized by others is an antagonizing reason for them to choose not to engage in help-seeking help or visit a mental health professional (Lopez & Levy, 2013). Public stigma has been proven to be an intricate role in a student-athletes demeanor toward wanting any form of counseling (Bird et al. 2018). Adding on, student-athletes struggling with mental health conditions are afraid to have a character weakness (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014), or a self-stigma. This study will focus on the role a head coach plays in destigmatizing what their players' perception is about others' judgment on seeking counseling based on being a student-athlete.

### ***Effectiveness of Counseling***

Coaches' should be encouraging athletes to see therapists and seek counseling to effectively deal with the pressures of both school and sports. Although the potential accolades from being a student-athlete can be rewarding, they will experience issues adjusting to school, emotional concerns like academics or team conflicts, and mental distress because of their participation (Watson, 2005). No shame should be brought upon the players who live with mental health-related illnesses and are seeking professional help. Whether or not an institution's athletics department has the luxury of a sports counselor, a solution toward improving a student-athlete's conditions is a working relationship with university mental health facilities (Carr & Davidson, 2015). A university counseling center is a quality beneficiary for student-athletes, which offers

qualified professionals skilled in treating mental health concerns as well as having a diversified background (Goldman, 2014). So, this helps with flattening the curve of public stigma amongst student-athletes. Bader (2014) touched on research that suggested a combination of counseling and managing prescribed medications has shown positive outcomes with the treatment of depression. He also claims that while many do not want to seek treatment, “it is important to try to guide individuals suffering from depression toward effective resources that may be beneficial” (Bader, 2014, p. 34).

Now, while a coach is most likely not trained in mental health services, they can easily be educated on it, even if it is just knowing where the services are located. Though the research is limited on specific presenting concerns for which student-athletes would be interested in seeking counseling (Hilliard, Watson, & Zizzi, 2020), a coach who is constantly motivating his/her players to perform better on the field and the classroom, can impel players to seek counseling as well. Moreover, given the stigma that accompanies mental health issues, every head coach and sports administrators need to be intentional about creating environments in which their student-athletes feel safe enough to disclose their mental health challenges so that appropriate and personalized measures can be taken to address their struggles.

### **College Coaches Overview**

In the last 30 years, the roles of head coaches’ in college athletics have changed when talking about roles and responsibilities. To indicate, we consider the evolution of specific roles and responsibilities a coach presents, responsibilities toward mental health-related illnesses, and how a coach can become a type of mentor or companion for their student-athletes.

### ***General Roles and Responsibilities***

At all Division I, II, and III schools, college coaches' play a great role in the success of their athletic programs, including the recruiting of talented players, as well as their development, which can develop into better team performance in current and future seasons (Inoue, Plehn-Dujowich, Kent, & Swanson, 2013). A critical point of recruitment is resources. Organizational and campus resources such as turf, weight room, dormitories, etc., developed among coaching staff and institutions are the critical sources of sustainable competitive advantage for intercollegiate athletic programs (Smart & Wolfe, 2000). However, mentorship became a part of the job once the 1990s began and the NCAA created the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program in 1994. Goddard (2004) wrote in his study that the program was to have educational outreach. Thus, the student-athletes well-being became an area of notice, and the development of the college student eclipsed the physical prowess and performance of being an athlete (Rahill, 2020). A head coach was expected to attend to matters of interest or concern of the student-athlete that included academics, mental health, and character development (Barr, 2008).

### ***Coaches Role as Mentor in Mental Health Awareness***

Though studies on coaches and mental health awareness is limited, Kroshus et al. (2019) believe that college coaches' play a pivotal role in the "prevention of mental illness by creating a stigma-free team environment, noticing when an athlete is struggling, and encouraging care-seeking from appropriate professional resources" (p. 669). Kroshus et al. (2019) also mention the lack of research with regards to college coaches' and their lack of literacy on mental health conditions among student-athletes. In

order to play a pivotal role in helping prevent mental health-related issues, a college coach must become a mentor for their players. In doing so, they must be aware and mindful of the issues at hand and relate to them on a personal level.

With supportive attitudes toward mental health care seeking, and have sufficient mental health education, head coaches' themselves can become confident for their team (Sorensen et al. 2012). To add on, a head coach needs to be aware of what their institution has present on campus and educate themselves on that. In order to do that, they must perform regular tasks such as mental health presentations at team and staff meetings, social media postings, or biweekly meetings with counselors on campus. Klenck (2014) wrote that increasing awareness, "will enhance the likelihood of self-referrals by student-athletes or referrals from teammates, coaches, or other staff, and improve the timely evaluation of those student-athletes in need" (p. 101). There is a paucity of research on head coaching mentorships when pertaining to their players. Therefore, we need head coaches' to make mental health a centerpiece so that student-athletes can become less susceptible to mental health-related issues that plague them.

### **Future Research**

Most of the research being performed in recent years has focused on student-athletes being mindful of their own mental health-related issues, but it is just as much of a head coaches' job to become aware and help their players. While recruiting, you are telling these young adults' parents or guardians that you will look after them. This "looking after" cannot just apply to on the field purposes. The coach is to look after their players and help with their internal development just like a mother and father would.

A head coach teaches their players how to overcome challenges and reach potential stardom on the field, but there is not enough research out there showing them how to help student-athletes attack and accomplish personal challenges. This study will focus on helping head coaches' become more aware and help their athletes so that they bring positive light and environment aside from on the field performance. In doing so, student-athletes can perform at the level they can without worrying about anything beyond control or off-the-field stigmatizations.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This chapter will provide an overview of the qualitative research conducted throughout this study. With an emphasis on using a narrative research design, this study examined the awareness a head coach at Rowan University possesses about their student-athletes mental health conditions, as well as the procedures used when approached by a student-athlete in need of help. Moreover, being able to have one-on-one interviews allowed for collecting information that illustrated how participants support their players struggling with mental health conditions. Participant experiences described a series of actions taken and allowed for a better understanding of the role of a head coach in how they provide support for bettering student-athletes with pre-existing mental health conditions.

RQs:

1. What resources does Rowan's Athletic Department provide head coaches to help student-athletes with mental health conditions?
2. What steps do collegiate head coaches at Rowan take to support student-athletes with existing mental health conditions?

These questions allowed me to understand what resources were lacking for student-athletes and inform the development of high impact practices to ensure student-athletes get the resources and support they need to be successful.

#### **About Rowan University**

Founded in 1923 in Glassboro, New Jersey, then Glassboro Normal School was the institution in southern New Jersey where local students who wanted to be in the field

of teaching could go and receive a proper education. However, it was only a two-year normal school, which meant that Glassboro Normal School was only for teaching its students about education and becoming a teacher only. It was not until eleven years later where Glassboro Normal School became a four-year program for future educators, and three years after that in 1937, the name was formally changed to The New Jersey State Teachers College at Glassboro. For the next twenty years, this newly named institution gained national recognition as leaders in the field of education while being one of the first few colleges in the country to recognize special education (Rowan, 2019). Then in 1958, after increasing the number of students, courses, and adding proper compounds among the campus, the school's name was once again changed to Glassboro State College to better reflect its mission (Rowan, 2019).

In 1967, the University received global recognition when it hosted both President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin at the Hollybush Summit. Due to its well-planned location between the District of Columbia in Washington and the United Nations in New York City, where Aleskei was scheduled to speak. During the summer of 1992, after a very generous donation of \$100 million dollars from Henry Rowan and his wife Betty, the school changed its name to Rowan College, in honor of one of the largest donations ever given to any public college or university. Because of this gift, the college accepted Mr. Rowan's request of creating a curriculum for a College of Engineering to address the limitations of engineering education. Because of the leadership from the school's fifth president Dr. Herman James, in 1997, Rowan College achieved University status, and was able to change the name from Rowan College, to what it is now called Rowan University (Rowan, 2019).

Fast forward to the early 2000s, and Rowan University has grown tremendously. Due to strong school presidents such as Dr. Donald Farish, numerous construction projects included the University townhouses, Science Hall, Education Hall, and the Samuel H. Jones Innovation Center, which became the first building of the South Jersey Technology Park at Rowan University (Rowan, 2019). In 2012, Rowan appointed Dr. Ali Houshmand as their seventh president of the University. Since then, Rowan continues to grow, as newer infrastructures were created: The Colleges of Business, Communication & Creative Arts, Education, Engineering, Humanities & Social Sciences, Performing Arts, and Science & Mathematics. A year later, Rowan University began inching toward the field of Medicine and Health Sciences. Rowan's growth continued when it began partnerships throughout South Jersey when in the same year, the school partnered with Gloucester County College (now Rowan College of South Jersey) which allowed students to receive bachelor's degrees at the community college, or transfer to the University after graduation. In 2015, Burlington County College (now Rowan College at Burlington County) joined in on the partnership with Rowan University as well, allowing the same form of student success.

In 2020, Rowan is home to roughly 19,000 plus students, across four campuses, and all ranging from undergraduates, graduates, doctorates, and professional medical studies. Among educational opportunities, Rowan's 14 colleges and schools offer eighty-five bachelor's, forty-six master's degrees, six doctoral degrees, and two professional degrees. Rowan is also home to almost ninety-four thousand alumni in all fifty states and even thirty-eight countries. To close, The Chronicle of Higher Education ranked Rowan



University as the country's 4th fastest-growing research university among public doctoral institutions.

### ***Rowan Athletics***

Rowan University has eighteen total intercollegiate sports teams, ten women's and eight men. Of the men's teams you have baseball, basketball, indoor track & field, outdoor track & field, cross country, football, soccer, and swimming & diving. The women's teams include basketball, indoor track & field, outdoor track & field, cross country, field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming & diving, and volleyball. Rowan athletics have been a part of the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC) since it was formed in 1957 when all ten NCAA Division III public institutions in the state of New Jersey collectively partnered to compete in intercollegiate competition (New Jersey Athletic Conference, 2009). Since 1957, Rowan has remained steadily supreme among NJAC opponents, leading the way with 195 conference championships. Along with that, since its creation in 2015, Rowan has won the NJAC cup three of the first four years, with only The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) winning it during the 2017-2018 academic year (New Jersey Athletic Conference, 2019). Additionally, aside from conference titles, Rowan has won eleven national championships, with the first one coming in 1978 from the baseball program, and the most recent being from the 2002 women's field hockey team. The student-athletes at Rowan University are properly trained and equipped to compete against any level of Division III competition presented to them per year. The mission bestowed upon them is based on the core values of excellence, community, integrity, teamwork, and education (Rowan Athletics, 2007). They are dedicated to the constant pursuit of excellence and have a spirit of unity and

inclusion with the athletic community. They hold themselves to the highest standards of integrity while respecting teammates and developing a culture of support for self-improvement and academic excellence (Rowan Athletics, 2019).

### **Research Method**

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design to engage and examine the head coaches' understandings on mental health-related conditions amongst their student-athletes. By using the approach of a narrative research method, we can ask descriptive questions that give us an in-depth understanding and provide insight into this specific issue (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). The study provided insight at the experiences of head coaches' handling mental health conditions with their players. By conducting the research around resources Rowan provides as an institution, and the procedures a coach takes when handling a student-athletes mental health condition, I was able to get answers for my research questions. This approach was used to gather detailed information to help understand a problem, and answer the questions about the experience the head coach has gone through when managing a student-athletes' mental health.

### ***Procedures***

18 varsity head coaches' at Rowan University were contacted to be a part of this study. First, I contacted Rowan athletic administration to speak with them about the study, if it were alright to reach out to every head coach, and inform them on how the research would be conducted. Once I got the approval from the senior athletic leader, I sent an email out to every Rowan head coach and informed them about the study. All

potential participants were advised that this study was voluntary, and that their names would not be used in this paper.

### ***Population***

This study's population consisted of head coaches' of collegiate sports at Rowan University. To meet the criteria, participants had to be a head coach at this institution. A head coach bring with them numerous years of experience and are often positioned to take the necessary steps to intervene when handling mental health crises with student-athletes.

### ***Sample***

Participants in this study had to be coaches' at Rowan University. Of the final sample size for this study, eight head coaches' and two assistant coaches' participated in this study. Every coach also had to be employed within the last year at Rowan so that they were involved in seminars and meetings within the department that talked about mental health.

### ***Data Collection***

Over the months of February through March, and through the generosity of every coach taking time out of their days to meet, I conducted 10 interviews that included myself and the participant. A few interviews took place in person, while the majority were from a phone call or zoom call from a computer. This occurred if a head coach did not feel comfortable conducting the interview in person, or their schedule was too occupied. Each interview was 20 minutes, with the longest one being 40 minutes.. When time was of the essence for them, follow-up emails, a zoom meeting, or a phone call were made to finish out the entirety of the interview. Along with the two primary research

questions, there were several follow-up questions that the participants answered for me to learn more about their awareness and knowledge on mental health. The information gathered throughout every interview was electronically saved on a flash drive which was then disposed of after this study concluded and all the research was recorded properly.

### ***Analysis of Data***

After recording the interviews and transcribing the audio, I reread through the transcripts multiple times, and took notes so that I could formulate themes that were presented by each participant. By using this type of analysis, I was able to learn about specific situations, and learn different perspectives of a particular issue that might have occurred over their coaching tenure, such as a player coming to them seeking help with a mental health-related illness. A head coach being interviewed using a narrative approach allowed me to understand their experiences and involvement in responding to the needs of student-athletes with mental health conditions. The overall messages the stories conveyed illustrated vulnerability from the interviews and showed how much passion they had behind mental health awareness.

### ***Before Conducting the Study***

Before proceeding with this research study, I first submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application form, which was submitted on November 13, 2020, and approved on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020. I assured my participants of the opportunity that is extended to them in being a part of this study. The IRB application required an adult consent and guidance audio tape form (see Appendices B and C). These documents discussed the reasoning for participating in this study, consent approval, and other relative information deemed necessary for the study. While there were no immediate

causes for distress to participants, questions about mental health conditions may be uncomfortable and in some cases triggering. However, participants in the study were made aware of all potential risks before signing consent forms.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

The focus of this research was to uncover the institutional resources provided to the athletic departments to ensure the well-being of student-athletes. The study also examined the role(s) head/assistant coaches' play in supporting student-athletes with mental health-related conditions. While the research in this area is developing, there are limitations on research being conducted on a coaches' knowledge on their player mental health struggles. By using a narrative inquiry, the data found offered a way to understand how a head coaches' knowledge of support systems contributed to how they supported student-athletes. Chapter IV will include quotes and themes based on the narrative data.

### **Profile of the Sample**

Participants in the study were able to be a part of a participant-led narrative inquiry, which allowed them to focus solely on their story based on the research questions asked. By having the participants share their story, we can develop a realistic approach toward their mindfulness on providing mental health support for their student-athletes. Though none of them are licensed professionals, this study was still able to provide insight on how they handle such a delicate situation, and their experiences as the individual begins to approach.

### **Analyzing the Data Provided**

Before any interviews were conducted, the list of research questions was first approved by my co-investigator and Rowan's IRB. Moreover, audio and adult consent forms were signed by each coach to participate and collect data. Interviews ranged from 18-35 minutes. After each interview was completed, recordings were transcribed onto a

word document to read over the interviews. After re-reading each participant's responses many times, themes were identified.

### *Pseudonyms Used*

Bullet pointed below are pseudonyms of the 10 coaches who participated in this research study.

- Coach Adler
- Coach Danielle
- Coach Diana
- Coach Jeffery
- Coach Joshua
- Coach Marcus
- Coach Monica
- Coach Paul
- Coach Phoebe
- Coach Stephen

### **“Division III Resources Are Limited For Athletics.”**

It is no secret that athletes who attend Division III schools do not receive full (or any other) athletic scholarships as schools within this bracket provide only academic scholarships to their students. In other words, a Division III institution’s overall funding does not revolve heavily around sports. As such, students who participate in Division III intercollegiate sports at Rowan University are there primarily because of their academic abilities rather than their athletic capabilities. Thus, it can be argued that 87% of all D-III

student-athletes become college graduates during their tenure—the highest percentage of any NCAA Division (National College Student-Athlete, 2020).

It does not come as a surprise that all 10 participants stressed that functioning within a Division III university meant that limited funds would be allocated to athletic programs which, in turn, meant that only a small portion of funds would be allocated to mental health resources for student-athletes. This became evident in Coach Phoebe’s interview when they said, “Division III resources are limited for athletics. Like most Division III institutions, athletes do not have a sports psychologist on staff.” Coach Jeffery even strengthened this argument by mentioning something similar during their interview, stating that they would love to have a licensed professional for student-athletes. Their hope for a full-time sports psychologist and counselor within the athletics department shun through their words:

There are very few even Division I programs that have a full-time performance psychologist. If we were to have a full-time performance psychologist and a full-time counseling psychologist, we would be on par with the institutions like the University of Michigan or the University of Texas.

To reiterate, Coach Jeffery believes without a doubt that with the aforementioned (additional) resources, the athletics programs at Rowan University would parallel other top tier athletic programs in the U.S. As of now, non-athletic college students and student-athletes are treated fairly when it comes to utilizing Rowan’s resources for mental health support. Put differently, Rowan does not give different levels of care to students who are athletes versus those who are not; all students, athletes or not, have access to the same facilities and resources available on campus. What Phoebe and Jeffery are saying is



that the athletic programs would benefit from having their own mental health support systems, ensuring trained staff are always available and easily accessible to student-athletes who require such care.

***“Resources Are Great, But They Can Always Be Better.”***

During the interviews, the data showed mixed reviews on the number of resources Rowan provides for student-athletes. Some coaches believe Rowan does have enough resources to support student-athletes with pre-existing mental health conditions. While others believe Rowan has limited options of where to send those who are having mental health difficulties. Coach Monica stressed the quality of these resources is crucial. Monica believes Rowan has the necessary resources for all students on campus but can always make room for improvement:

Resources are great, but they can always be better. I think we are equipped well enough to go about certain things, but at the same time, I don't think we have enough resources. And I don't think there will ever be enough resources if we don't make it a priority. I think Rowan is doing a great job right now, compared to all the other state schools, as where the coaches' have the training, the coaches' have good guidelines to follow.

When talking with coach Joshua about resources on campus, this coach believes that more support toward student-athletes can be beneficial. Moreover, they find it difficult to fluctuate student-athletes as a priority toward mental health support when resources are for every Rowan student:

In terms of the resources available, it is kind of the same thing with anything with athletics. I think we're making a push to do a little bit more on that mental health

side. My perspective has always been that we are a part of the university too.

Maybe we can have our own means of services.

Coach Joshua was once affiliated with a bigger university in terms of funding, enrollment, and athletics. They remembered firsthand how fortunate a bigger school is in comparison to a smaller university like Rowan:

At a higher level, there is more money, there is a sports psychologist and another one in the athletic department itself. I knew our sports psychologist well. We do not have that, and if we continue to not have this position, we won't be moving in that direction. I could use more support. That is my perspective. I'm pretty good at those things, talking about mental health, so that I could use more support on other things. But I still think it comes back to just kind of, taking advantage of what is available. Then, you get to do things your own way and see how it goes.

Coach Paul brought up the yearly workshops that Rowan athletics provide their department and coaching staffs. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, coach Paul almost failed to mention these workshops and since there were the possibilities of a year with no sports, there was no need to have a mental health workshop. Paul described in little detail about the workshops saying:

We do a workshop it's using for the whole athletic department with different training and stuff that we have to do. We discuss Title IX and all that stuff, then sometimes you just have some speakers to enlighten us a little bit on signs and symptoms. And that's something that they do for the whole department. It is some informative stuff.

For the most part, the rest of the coaches think Rowan has the resources to support student-athletes. Coach Stephen voiced their opinion saying:

I think Rowan has the resources, but I think a deeper level of question is, how much does the coach involved care to go get players that help? I would think that at most places, that the resources are there, at some level, I think we're very, very fortunate.

Coaches' have also resorted to not only utilizing the resources that Rowan provides on campus but what they do as a team individually. For starters, Coach Marcus said that he understands that, as a coach, they are not licensed or trained in providing psychological expertise, but prior knowledge and experience as a former player can be creditable to still help. Coach Marcus offered:

We talk to them about things that they can do in-game to help relieve some of the stressors or the performance. It's not our background, but we played the game.

We've gone through some of the things that the players are going through from a mental side on the field. It's something that is addressed constantly at practice.

Coach Monica mentioned that they have a "halftime" break in the middle of practice so that players can rest, hydrate, and talk about anything even non-related to their sport. In detail, coach Monica described it as:

We have this thing called "halftime" to simulate what a halftime in a game is like.

So, we'll take a 10-minute break after the hour, and in that 10 minutes, most of the time we just talk, talk about how the day is bad, how everyone's doing happy, is there anything that anybody would like to share, etc. Just getting it off their chest, you know, normalizing this and talking about your feelings.

Coach Diana takes it upon themselves to do what they can in providing necessary resources to help their players. This coach brings in volunteer speakers to have that conversation about how it is okay to not be okay.

I brought in, with permission from the department, a sports psychologist years before our psychologist started here. They came in and talked about performance and handling the mental side of athletics. It was awesome! We're always trying to work on opening the door for communication.

Furthermore, coach Danielle has what they called "dump your day" before every practice to help relieve the stressors of what bothered them that day. Danielle implied:

We have like a team dump where before practice, every practice, the players are coming to practice, and they're telling us why they had a bad day or what's on their mind. They open up so they can get rid of it before they practice. You dump your day; we dump our day. We just dump it, get rid of it, fresh start.

It is not always on the coach to take initiative, but players will even step in and as the leader. While discussing the topic of individual methods of mental health support, coach Pat brought up what captains sometimes do during their practice times.

We rely on captains to speak up about these issues because they see things, we don't off the field, and it can carry over to practice or game. So, during practice they may come up to me and say, "coach, can we all have 5-10 minutes extras for water? I noticed a few players slacking and I want to talk with them." I always say yes because I know it's going to help the team long-term. They'll remember that talk.

From what the participants are implying is that Rowan, though a Division III institution, does have enough resources for their student-athletes. For coach Monica and Joshua, they argue that there can always be more provided. With that said, Rowan's athletic department sees the progression of mental health support as a necessity. This necessity is not only for student-athletes but for athletic staff as well. By providing workshops for these coaches, Rowan is taking the extra step toward educating them on mental health occurrences that are affecting young student-athletes.

Adding on, Rowan coaches' have made it a part of their coaching philosophy to use their own experiences as former student-athletes to help their players. Coach Marcus said that they understand that, as a coach, they are not licensed or trained in providing psychological expertise. Still, mixing prior experience as a former student-athlete and a support system in place can be reliable for their student-athletes. Coach Marcus offered:

We talk to them about things that they can do in-game to help relieve some of the stressors or the performance. It's not our background, but we played the game.

We've gone through some of the things that the players are going through from a mental side on the field.

It is something that every coach seems to do and looks forward to doing. Adding to this, coach Marcus and Danielle openly admitted that they have a lot going on mentally. Coach Danielle mentioned they "have things going on at home and I'm open to share with them [players]. I'm willing to tell them I'm having a tough day." Coach Marcus brought up how being a parent "doesn't always start and end with smiles. I'm human too." What this shows is the human side of coaches because some players may look at them as somebody who has it all figured out. When they go through work stress,

relationship stress, and maybe even some depression-like thoughts. However, as a collective group, Rowan coaches' have made the care of their players a top priority, especially with how mental health has been within college athletics nationwide.

***“The Wellness Center Has Put More of an Emphasis on Counselors.”***

Every coach that was interviewed discussed the importance of the Wellness Center on Rowan's campus. While following up on what Rowan's Wellness Center supplies, the website mentions that they provide both Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS), Alcohol and Other Drugs Services (AOD), and Healthy Campus Initiatives (HCI). There are more services within the Wellness Center, but they are more integrated toward medical services such as a physical injury. Though student-athletes have access to treatment from the Rowan athletic staff, that is not mental health support. Out of all participants interviewed, coach Phoebe was resourceful when it comes to promoting how great the Wellness Center is and what they provide:

The relationship we have with the Wellness Center on this campus is phenomenal. Also, The Wellness Center has put more of an emphasis on counselors. We can call, we have cell phones, we have personal cell phones, and that is huge. The Wellness Center and Rowan athletics have an outstanding relationship. And, then when the pandemic came, there's this program called “Let's Talk. They have different areas of discussion. Students could drop-in to talk to a therapist at the Wellness Center.

In more detail, Rowan's Let's Talk is an on-site and virtual program that provides a one-on-one consultation with counselors from the Wellness Center Monday thru Friday. On the Wellness Center's website, it states that:

Although *Let's Talk* counselors are Wellness Center professionals, it is not a substitute for psychotherapy or formal counseling and does not constitute mental health treatment. If appropriate, *Let's Talk* counselors can help students determine if formal counseling is something to consider and will assist the student with scheduling an appointment with Counseling and Psychological Services.

*Let's Talk* is just one example of a program on campus that Rowan provides for mental health services. Coach Adler stated:

We work with the Wellness Center to have one open spot for our athletes. So, we had one on Fridays. It was like from 11 to 1 or something like that. But they would all have to come sign up and then come back at that time and that was it. I think they're like half hour slots.

Coach Jeffery also commented on other programs Rowan provides as a resource for student-athletes called the Cares team and Mindful Mondays. When reiterating on the cares team, coach Jeffery said:

The Cares program has a representative from every department on campus. Anyone can recommend a student that they care about and may have a concern about them. Anyone on campus can file a report with some detail. The care group, which again, has every department on campus, meets every Tuesday and they go over those recommendations and come up with a plan for each student.

When Coach Diana discussed her first point of view about the cares team, this is what they stated:

So, there's this team called the "Cares team," which is just like a simple phone call. And now you don't feel like as a coach, you're carrying that entire burden to

help this child get through this dark period of whatever they're going through. We can call and a counselor will set something up for them. It's great!

Though coach Diana is familiar with the Cares program, when discussing the relationship between student-athletes and Rowan's Wellness Center, they do believe it is difficult to find time as a student-athlete to seek counseling considering practice/game schedules.

However, coach Diana is seeing progression toward accommodations:

It doesn't go well with our timelines of practice because we know athletes usually are not free from one to six [in the afternoon], and that's usually when the student health center has hours available for counseling. But, with the new motive of mental health, it is student-centered. So, the Wellness Center is doing a great job of being an advocate for student-athletes too, and making time for them.

Adding to this, coach Phoebe brought up the fact that even Rowan's athletic training staff is accustomed to working with the Wellness Center. Meaning, they do more than just submit information about sports physicals and insurance policies with injured student-athletes. The athletic training staff provides the Wellness Center with discretionary details on student-athletes who have approached them about maybe having a mental health-related condition:

Now, they are not therapists, but they have a phenomenal relationship with the Wellness Center because of [athletic] physicals and everything else. So, I think all the coaches' know that they need to keep reaching further to help their athletes when talking to training staff officials.

What was gathered from this information is that student-athletes can approach the athletic training staff with a mental health dilemma they are having, and the staff member will



help them with contacting the Wellness Center to schedule an appointment. This takes the burden from the student-athlete having to do this themselves, but it also creates a sense of hesitation of wanting to follow through with future appointments. Coach Danielle opened up about a hesitant student-athlete they had years ago, and how resourceful the Wellness Center was for this player when a tragic event occurred in their life:

I had a player whose father died, and my team was really struggling because it was during the season. So, I went through the student Wellness Center, and they're great over there. They sent somebody over to do like a group session with my players but that was at my asking because I knew that that's what my players needed.

The relationship between athletics and the Wellness Center is a strong one, and coach Joshua believes that “it has undergone quite a shift in what is available, and also in making what is available known.” Coach Jeffery suggested how the Wellness Center should have someone on call for student-athletes, as there is no professional that only oversees athletics. “Where we want to go is and where the Wellness Center wants to go, and that is to have a licensed counseling psychologist that works full-time in athletics.” Views about Rowan’s Wellness Center have been positive for the most part throughout the interviews. With quotes that range from one person saying, “they are the mental health experts,” to coach Monica saying, “I don't think the collaboration between the Wellness Center and Rowan athletics is good enough.” Though coach Monica was quoted earlier about “never having enough resources,” there is a beneficial outlook here. Coach Monica just wants to keep seeing mental health comes first:

The first step is just acknowledging mental health on college campuses, and the fact that we are, and the fact that we have mental health and mental health advocates, and panelists, you know, goes to show that we are trying to expand that coverage.

Having a Wellness Center alone is a tremendous resource for all students on campus. On student-athletes, it is a resource that comes with a healthy relationship between both departments. This relationship is critical toward their potential pre-existing mental health, and it is certainly reluctant to be a student-athlete on campus and know where to go in case of an emergency, or just to talk with someone.

***“We Have a Triage-Type Service With Them on Board.”***

According to Oxford’s online dictionary, the term “triage” is defined in medical terms as “the assignment of degrees of urgency to wounds or illnesses to decide the order of treatment” (Oxford, 2021). In March of 2020 right before Rowan shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the athletic department hired a sports mental health psychologist. With a resume that spans over two decades as a sports psychologist, this hiring puts Rowan, a Division III university, in the driver seat for mental health production. Coach Jeffery mentioned earlier about having a licensed performance psychologist on campus puts athletics up there with the ranks of premiere Division I institutions, but this person is not licensed. Coach Jeffery stated in detail:

We have a triage-type service with them on board. They are not licensed right now, as a counseling psychologist, but this person is trained there, but are just not licensed right now. They have really emphasized performance psychology for the last 20 years. This person is very in tune with needs in the latest treatments,

protocols, and therapies. They have access to our student-athletes, and student-athletes know to go to them, and then they make a determination on whether or not they can help the student-athlete. This person determines if it is more of a personal matter, more of a performance matter, an acute situation, or is it really a mental health issue. If it is a mental health issue, they immediately contact the Wellness Center and arrange an appointment.

Since she started in March of 2020, even during a pandemic, this mental health psychologist went to work right away. Coach Danielle said their arrival on campus has already brought structure. Danielle said that this mental health psychologist because of the pandemic, the athletic staff has not been able to see what they can do yet, but they were hired for a reason. They went on to say:

This person was hired to help us deal with mental health issues and that the athletic department itself had a person to go to. I'm assuming that's for both sports' psychology reasons, and for mental health reasons. So, I would say that we haven't really given it a chance to see what this person can do yet because of the pandemic, but I think we're moving in the right direction with this hiring.

Coach Phoebe raved about the hiring of a mental health psychologist saying, "we are just so lucky to have one even for the performance part of it. Also, Coach Monica believes that with this hiring, Rowan is putting "every student-athlete's welfare and mental health as their biggest priority." Our mental health psychologist has become a valuable resource for head coaches' within the department because they have someone even, they can approach and ask for advice and guidance. Not only that but someone relatable. When you can focus your studies on mental health support, it produces a comfort level for head

coaches' and student-athletes to ask sensitive questions and to have a difficult conversation. Coach Diana discussed how Rowan coaches' would use each other as resources to help with breaking down mental health on their teams, but adding a sports mental health psychologist, Diana said that "there are techniques involved now. They add an extra layer of protection for our student-athletes and department as a whole."

Carr and Davidson (2015) expressed in their literature that few student counseling centers employ a psychologist who has the training or education to appoint student-athletes and their pre-existing mental health conditions. Adding on, they said that colleges and institutions employ a nutritionist in their athletic department before employing even a part-time licensed psychologist (Carr & Davidson, 2015). With this hiring, Rowan athletics has set up its program for future student success. From doing this, a safe space is established to help lower or even eliminate the stigma that society has placed on student-athletes for talking about their feelings with someone. What the athletic department has done is allow Rowan's administration to see that having more psychologists on campus can expand the term "safe space" into a "safe campus". By doing that, the student-athletes are not the only ones who benefit, but they are getting a first-hand experience. The future can only be brighter under the right guidance with a mental health and sports psychologist.

***"They Know That My Assistant is Approachable to Talk To."***

While mental health is nothing new to student-athletes, what is new are athletic departments being more vocal about it. Rowans recognizes the stigma that is placed on student-athletes and the sense of not wanting to inform their head coach. Another resource that was brought to attention is that assistant coaches' are another safe option for

a student-athlete. Coach Jeffrey is pleased with how Rowan assistants are when handling student-athletes and mental health. They stated, “I see much more compassion. And I think it's because they [Rowan assistant coaches] are more sensitive to mental health issues.” Like the workshops we learned about from coach Paul, it was discussed that assistant coaches’ are also required to attend these seminars. From some of the workshops they attended, Coach Paul’s first initial action of a student-athlete approaching them is calling the head coach. They said, “as soon as a player approaches an assistant coach, the head coach is notified immediately.”

Coach Phoebe discussed hiring someone qualified but diverse. They stated, “I try to always get somebody different than me, so that the players have other people that they may feel comfortable with. So, a player would go to an assistant coach because they made them feel more comfortable.” Coach Danielle felt the same when addressing an assistant coach with similar interest as the players. They believe, “having a full-time assistant, they maybe get to relate to them [student-athletes] a little bit differently and that would certainly be helpful in that mix.” Coach Marcus enjoys having assistants because they are readily there for players when they need someone to talk to. Adding, “assistants tend to have more availability, or the accessibility of them to address things, even if it's occasional just talking to players about this stuff [mental health].”

Coach Monica reverted to their playing days and how willing they were to discuss anything, like their mental health, with an assistant coach. Coach Monica stated:

Even when I was playing, I would go to the younger assistant [coach] because I felt like they were more relatable, they wouldn't rat on me, and it would not affect

my playing time. In the end, it would not affect how the Rowan coaching staff viewed me because I knew that they would understand.

Coach Adler did the same and mentioned how they would approach assistant coaches' as a former student-athlete. Moreover, when discussing the role of head coach, they felt confident that their own staff would do the same. Adler said, "I always saw guidance from assistants. I really believe the assistant is willing to take them to the Wellness Center just as much as I am.". When talking about having multiple assistant coaches' at practice, Coach Joshua is big on them having a welcoming presence saying:

I had one of our assistants there almost every day last year, they know that my assistant is approachable to talk to. I have assistant coaches' that are part time that always check in to see how players are feeling mentally and socially.

Coach Diana is animated about the safety of their players. They believe once you are on the team, a family is formed with players and coaches. While trying to not overstep on boundaries, they do make calling a recommended action for a player to do if they are struggling with their mental health. It does not matter if it is the head coach or assistant.

Coach Diana mentioned:

They know they can call me; within the boundaries, like, please don't call me personally. Unless it's an emergency, then obviously call me personally. But you know they'll just call me when they need to, or our assistant coach because they trust them too. Their health is far more important than X's and O's.

Coach Stephen believes the role of an assistant is equally important as the head coach. Furthermore, they expressed how pleasant it can be for a student-athlete to speak with an assistant before approaching the head coach. They stated, "I would say in general, yes,

the assistant coaches' role is important. Maybe the role differs in another program, but I can see it being more comfortable going to them over the head coach for this reason.”

Head and assistant coaches' at Rowan are putting mental health as a top importance among student-athletes. By doing this, they are creating more resourceful options for student-athletes. The athletic administration is realizing the new norm of college students being able to speak about their mental health conditions, and having an assistant coach who is young and familiar with the topic, can make it a lot better for student-athletes to express themselves and receive support.

**“Step One is to Immediately Be Empathetic and Supportive.”**

While there still may be a large volume of student-athletes staying quiet, Rowan coaches' have assured themselves that they accept any additional roles and responsibilities when it comes to student-athletes mental health safety. Still, Rowan coaches' stated that when a player approaches them with a personal mental health problem, they do not have a particular set of instructions to follow. There isn't a wrong step-by-step procedure when a student-athlete comes up to a coach seeking mental health counseling. A few of them contact the parents, while the majority are calling the Wellness Center or Rowan's sports mental health psychologist. Whether it is one or the other, there is no wrong answer because they are taking the situation seriously. However, what was a constant response among every coach was that being there for them was one of the first things they must do. Coach Jeffery informed me that “Before I even make a phone call, I know step one is to immediately be empathetic and supportive.” This is important because players can come up to them with thoughts of suicide, and you cannot

brush away this person. They believe in creating a safe space for the athlete first and foremost.

Like coach Jeffery mentioned, a phone call is what comes next. Several quotes coming from multiple coaches' when asked: "What steps do you take to support student-athletes with their mental health conditions?" Coach Marcus was quoted earlier that they are willing to call 911 if a player approaches them if the player wants them to. As for coach Danielle, after showing empathy and support, "I'm immediately calling the Wellness Center and I'm not leaving a student-athlete alone until I know they're safe." When asked this question, coach Adler's first move is to call administration, and "call without publicly displaying it to everyone." Coach Joshua, Phoebe, Paul, and Stephen said they are contacting the mental health psychologist to see what the next move is. Coach Phoebe, who said that collectively as an athletic administration, "we are all quick to pick up the phone and answer each other. So, my first call is going to be to the sports mental health psychologist and explain to them what's happening." Then, you have coach Monica and Diana who both believe getting in touch with the parents first is important. They both believe the parents can have a lot of information on the student-athlete, but it depends on how well the communication is with their child.

What is unique about the various places and people being called is that it all comes full circle. Meaning, every coach, regardless of who they are calling first, is not done after that first phone call. The Wellness Center, administration, the mental health psychologist, and the parents are all going to be informed about what is happening with this student-athlete mental health-related illness.



***“What’s More Important: your Mind or your Teeth?”***

Coach Jeffery brought up an interesting point when comparing going to your dentist's office, versus going to a mental health professional. This coach was told of this scenario many years ago, and was quoted by stating:

People go to the dentist usually once a year. Yet, they never go to a mental health professional. The option of a mental health and a wellness check is just like how you would go to the dentist to see how your teeth are. Why not go to a mental health professional to check on your thoughts, your emotions, and your feelings? What's more important: your mind or your teeth? It's not even close. Yet, people neglect their minds more than they do their teeth.

While discussing student-athletes today, coach Paul believes that they differ from student-athletes 15 to 20 years ago, and one of the biggest differences is being able to talk about their mental health openly. While discussing resources with coach Paul, they mentioned how 20 years ago when they were playing, mental health was “probably not even in the dictionary, encyclopedia, or really any documentation.” The tide is rightfully turning on mental health in a positive manner. Coaches’ at Rowan were able to point out that there is a stigma tied to mental health and student-athletes, and outline that this often plays a huge role in how student-athletes approach mental health and wellness. A stigma that was merely a myth 20 years ago. Coach Stephen proclaimed that mental health was not conversed about until recent years:

I think mental health wasn't something that we addressed 10 years ago that much, but I think that the athletes are changing, and society is changing, where it's not such a stigma, to have a mental health issue. And you're not a freak because it's

okay to have a mental health issue, and we [Rowan] are going to help you through that. Whereas 10 years ago, people didn't talk about it. They just brushed it under the rug.

On a positive note, coaches' at Rowan believe their players are holding themselves accountable in utilizing the mental health services provided. Coach Diana mentioned a coach identifying a student-athlete struggling and describing to them what is available is one thing, but only if they "are willing to want to use the resources. That's the other part." This coach proceeded to say that student-athletes have been taught, through the athletic department, and can "now identify self-issues before they become a major issue." Coach Adler had similar feelings toward student-athletes having to be accountable and willing to seek counseling and was sympathetic toward the challenge it brings.

Adler voiced:

It's always been a big deal or a scary thing to ask for help. And I think it's getting better now as mental health is more talked about. All over the place and beyond collegiate sports. But I think, yeah, it's definitely a progress. So, I would say there is definitely an ease of wanting to ask for help when you need it.

Referring to the last section, it is about student safety. With coach Jeffery's scenario on what is more important: your mind or your teeth, the theme here is allowing student-athletes to schedule counseling appointments just like they would with a dentist's office. They are implying that they should not have to go once a year to a mental health counselor and that it is alright to go more than one time.

Most interviewed expressed positive emotions about players being brave about coming to them for help. Coach Marcus was quite animated about players not having to

worry about playing time or other stigmas if they wanted to talk about their mental health-related illness. Coach Marcus stated, “I think anytime players come to the head coach, they need to feel comfortable. And I think it's hard sometimes for players, I think they don't realize that.” Coach Marcus even expressed their own willingness to go above and beyond to help their student-athletes:

And if it's me walking them over to the Wellness Center, then it's me walking over to the Wellness Center. If it's me having a 911 call, then it's me calling 911. Ultimately, I want to make sure that my players are safe. That's the biggest thing to me is I don't want them to be a risk or risk to themselves, or a risk to somebody else.

Coach Diana was equally as positive in supporting their players through guiding them and seeking counseling saying: “we can walk them over, it's a little bit more private, there's a separate room. So, there's more intimacy there. It feels more secure than it used to. So that's great.” Coach Stephen is also more than willing to walk one of their players over if they are presented with these measures. To them as a coach, it is about how much care you present to players as they should be looked at like their children. Coach Stephen insists that it falls on how much the coaches' care to determine if the resources available are being utilized properly. With the statement reading:

I think the deeper level is, how much do you care? Is it just like “Hey buddy, did you go over today? Okay, good. Get back out there.” If it's that, then the resources aren't really going to do too much. Or is it like “Hey, why don't you go walk over there? Let me know if you need me. I will go with you.”

Additionally, like coach Marcus and Diana, Coach Stephen remembers years prior, walking one of their players over to the Wellness Center:

I've walked players over and said, "we're going to go, I want you to do this. I care about you. I love you guys." I embrace it like let's go get help! Let's go do it! It goes back to the coach as a person, how much they care about the athletes that they're working at as people above just as athletes? Yeah, absolutely. I've walked players over and said, "we're going to go, I want you to do this. I care about you. I love you guys." I embrace it like let's go get help! Like, let's go do it! So, I think that that question that you're asking, I would still fall back to the coach as a person, how much they care about the athletes that they're working at as people above just as athletes? Yeah, absolutely.

While speaking with coach Adler, they brought up the common notion that the Wellness Center is not closed just because they are at practice. They do not want their players having to hold in the fact they need help while practicing with them saying:

If they need to talk to somebody, I don't care if it's middle practice, I'll leave an assistant to coach so I can walk a player over, or have an assistant walk with somebody over. It's not a matter of like, being judged for missing practice. Like their physical and mental health is the main priority.

A coach having the thought in mind of keeping their players safe is nothing new at Rowan. Both Phoebe and Diana expressed that it is a part of the recruitment. Coach Diana said "it's part of our recruiting process. It's an open door. You tell me, and whatever you tell me stays between these four walls." Coach Phoebe discussed a manual

that the athletic department has that mental health is mentioned to recruits while on campus. Stating:

We have guidelines manual for mental health. It's in the manual to express the help and resources we provide for them as student-athletes. Remember, they are students first. When the athletic department made the manual, they also had the Wellness Center look it over and check it out.

With this basis being around player safety, Rowan coaches' are willing to do what is necessary to help their student-athletes. Protocols are to put the student-athletes health first. They are mindful of how student-athletes today are afraid to seek counseling or other means of help. Based on what has been quoted in this section, the athletic department has done a remarkable job hiring coaches' that truly care about a player's mental health. They recognize that athletic ability is not everything. Additionally, coaches' at Rowan understand that there is a stigma of not wanting to seek help placed on student-athletes, and they are doing what is necessary to comfort their players.

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

Chapter five will provide a recap of the study and propose a new discussion on a head coaches' knowledge and awareness in helping student-athletes with their mental health. This chapter will also review the research questions that were answered through the series of interviews. Moreover, this chapter will conclude with recommendations for further research, as well as discussions for improving the mental health awareness and knowledge of a head coach.

#### **Study Summary**

This study examined how well equipped a head coach at Rowan University is when handling a student-athlete with a mental health-related condition. It also illustrated the steps and procedures these coaches' follow when faced with such an important situation. This study was aimed to see if head coaches' were equipped to deal with student-athletes with mental health conditions. Furthermore, this study also adds to the literature on the topic of collegiate student-athletes' mental health and how a coach can support these athletes. The findings can help to guide other institutions on how a well-structured course of action can benefit a student-athlete's livelihood. Also, the findings can magnify specific guidelines to follow on utilizing resources on campus and within athletic departments.

The final sample size for this study was 10 total coaches', eight of them head coaches', and two being assistants. From February through March, 10 interviews were conducted with coaches' affiliated with Rowan University. Each interview was about 20 minutes long, and audio recorded to ensure quotes and facts were not missed. By audio

recording, I was also able to use a narrative research model in having the coaches' become storytellers with the research questions they were asked. This method was used to understand the experiences they have previously had when dealing with a student-athlete's mental health difficulties.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

### ***What Resources Does Rowan's Athletic Department Provide Head Coaches' to Help Student-Athletes With Mental Health Conditions?***

Rowan coaches' report that they take advantage of many resources available to them across campus. While some dispute that more is needed to progress, all do agree that Rowan is still resourceful. Moreover, it is not just what the athletic department provides for them. The athletic department encourages them to utilize resources on campus like the Wellness Center, and the Cares program. With the Wellness Center being a focal point in every response from each coach, it is encouraging to hear that there is a relationship between the center and the athletic department.

The resources within the athletic department are just as useful to equipping coaches' with resources to support student-athletes. With a mental health psychologist, training staff, assistants, and mental health workshops, Rowan athletics continues to improve and learn about supporting student-athletes with mental health conditions. These improvements benefit the student-athletes at Rowan and can help them balance the difficulties of school workload and athletic participation. Though a mental health counselor was hired in 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, they are continuing to make a positive contribution. Assistant coaches' are also taking advantage of being educated as they were spoken highly about head coaches'. Head coaches' at Rowan

surround themselves with quality assistants to help get the best outcomes for student-athletes.

***What Steps do Collegiate Head Coaches' at Rowan Take to Support Student-Athletes With Existing Mental Health Conditions?***

This research question found head coaches' giving several responses from calling the student-athletes parents, the Wellness Center, or a mental health counselor. Getting on the phone to call the Wellness was a step for coaches' as well, but just in a different order. However, what stayed obvious was that being there for the player was the first step. Each coach believes that coming to them is a big move for a young student-athlete to do, especially with the stigmas placed on them. That is why showing empathy and an understanding of the situation is critical for the player. This shows the compassionate side of someone they look up to and put their trust in. It also shows them a sensitive side of someone they may be afraid of as a coach may come off as aggressive. The most important part about this finding was that each coach that participated said they are helping the student-athlete for as long as it takes to get them healthy. It is bigger than the sport they play, and it is about their long-term health.

**Conclusion**

Over the past five years, mental health is being talked about more than ever with athletes from all levels. Professional athletes are among those who have shared their own stories about mental health struggles. With athletes like Kevin Love and Michael Phelps, who openly express their experiences with battling mental health conditions, a head coach was quick to point out how great it is that role models like them make it easier for student-athletes at Rowan to come forward. Having athletic role models such as Kevin



and Michael can show a younger generation that you can talk about your mental health. What this study did was further the conversation that it is okay to not be okay. From an outside view, student-athletes have a lot going on balancing school and athletics and we are uncertain about what might be occurring on the inside.

Having head coaches' that are supportive and encourage players to speak up illustrates that the stigma placed on student-athletes can be minimized. The participants in this study truly believe that. The goal for this study was for the head coaches' to learn how mental health-related illnesses impact their players, and how equipped and knowledgeable they are with procedures to follow. Coaches who participated from Rowan University are aware of mental health affecting today's student-athletes and acknowledge that they can be just as helpful as a counselor. Rowan equips them with useful resources to get the best possible outcome for their student-athletes.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings this study presented, the following are recommendations for further research:

1. Expand the sample size of the research to gain the full knowledge and awareness of head and assistant coaches'.
2. Future studies go more in-depth with the athletic departments of an institution(s) so that more can be explained about mental health and student-athletes.
3. Future research should involve interviews from the head of the mental health facilities an institution provides to discuss with them a student-athletes mental health.

4. Future studies should be conducted where student-athletes are asked how aware a coach is about their mental health and if they are affiliating mediations and discussions about this sensitive topic.

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## Appendix A

### Institutional Board Review Approval

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**IRB #:** PRO-2020-134

**Title:** Improving Collegiate Head Coaches Awareness and Knowledge of Mental Health Conditions to Better Support Student-Athletes

**Creation Date:** 10-30-2020

**End Date:** 12-17-2021

**Status:** **Approved**

**Principal Investigator:** Raquel Wright-Mair

**Review Board:** Glassboro/CMSRU

**Sponsor:**

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#### Study History

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<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Expedited	<b>Decision</b> <b>Approved</b>
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#### Key Study Contacts

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<b>Member</b> Raquel Wright-Mair	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> wrightmair@rowan.edu
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<b>Member</b> Conner Walsh	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> walshc2@students.rowan.edu
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## Appendix B

### Adult Consent Form

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Improving Collegiate Head Coaches Awareness and Knowledge for Mental Health to Better Their Student-Athletes

**Principal Investigator:** Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D.

**Co-Investigator:** Conner Walsh



You are being asked to take part in a research study. This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide key information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study.

Please carefully read the key information provided in questions 1-10 below. The purpose behind those questions are to provide clear key information about the purpose of the study, study specific information about what will happen in the course of the study, what are the anticipated risks and benefits, and what alternatives are available to you if you do not wish to participate in this research study.

The study team will explain the study to you and they will answer any questions you might have before volunteering to take part in this study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may take this consent form with you to ask a family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

The Principal Investigator, Raquel Wright-Mair, or another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent.

**1. Why is the purpose of the study?**

This study is being conducted in order to complete the thesis requirement for the Master's program of Higher Education: Administration. As of now, little research has been focused on how head coaches facilitate in order to help student-athletes with pre-existing mental health-related conditions. This thesis paper will look into improving a head coaches' knowledge of pre-existing mental health conditions that affect their student-athletes, and how they can improve their awareness of a student early on.

**2. Who may participate in this study? And who may not?**

Participants only include head coaches at Rowan University. For this study to be conducted properly, no assistants, graduate assistants, interns, or players are authorized to be a part of the interviewing process of this study.

**3. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**

Head coaches are being asked to take part in this study because they are the leaders of their team, they know their players well, they were once student-athletes, and can provide the best insight about their team.

**4. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

Participants in this study will be asked to be a part of an interview, answering questions about mental health conditions within student-athletes and protocols within the athletic department.

**5. How long will the study take and how many subjects will participate?**

The study will take up 30 minutes of a participant's time. At least 10 head coaches (5 men's teams, 5 women's teams) will be needed to participate for this study to be conducted properly.

**6. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

A risk factor involved in this study can be the topic of mental health. A story discussion such as a side interview question about a former player that a head coach helped in managing their mental health-related questions, concerns, or conditions. Follow-up questions can bring on a bit of stress trying to remember vividly about a player, or even have them think about their own battles with mental health. It will be made clear that I have no intentions on asking them about their playing careers and if

mental health was a factor in it. The research questions themselves will not bring any stress, anxiety, or other mental health issues that will affect them.

**7. Are there any benefits if you choose to take part in this research study?**

The benefits of choosing to take part in this research study is becoming more aware of the mental health conditions that affect student-athletes today. Also, being a part of this study can allow for more self-research to be done to learn about what Rowan University can provide for your student-athletes, and how you can be someone to talk to for your players.

**8. What are your alternatives if you don't want to take part in this study?**

Your alternative is not to take part in this study.

**9. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Conner Walsh.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**12. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

There is no cost to take part in this study.

**13. Where will this study be conducted?**

Esbjornson Gymnasium



300 North Campus Drive, Glassboro, NJ 08028

**14. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you after the study or your follow-up is completed, you will be contacted.

**15. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential. be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. If published, your names, and other forms of personal information will not be used. All documentation that is confidential will only be viewed and kept by investigators. If needed, names will be doctored by using pseudonyms.

**16. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

**17. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the study doctor:

Conner Walsh

Educational Services & Leadership, College of Education

856-513-5335

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance

(856)-256-4078 Glassboro/CMSRU

**18. What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

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**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**FOR NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING SUBJECTS:** Translation of the consent document (either verbal or written) must have prior approval by the IRB. Contact your local IRB office for assistance.

## Appendix C

### Audio Consent Form



#### ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Conner Walsh. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape the interview as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for

- Analysis by the research
- Possible use as a teaching tool to those who are not members of the research staff (i.e. for educational purposes)
- Transcriptions for the researcher

The recording(s) will include the voices of both the researcher and the participant. The audio will not be able to identify who the participant is.

The recording(s) will be stored on a secure, well-protected computer file and flash drive to bring in case of uploading. However, the file will be deleted, and the flash drive will be destroyed once the study is finished.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

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#### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email

#### Head Coaches Knowledge and Awareness of Mental-Health

Dear Head Coach:

You are invited to participate in a research study that examines a head coaches' awareness and knowledge toward mental health, and how it pertains to their student-athletes; all while working at a NCAA Division III institution in New Jersey. I am currently enrolled in the M.A. in Higher Education: Administration program and am in the process of writing my thesis to fulfill graduation requirements. This study is entitled *Improving Collegiate Head Coaches Awareness and Knowledge of Mental Health Conditions to Better Support Student-Athletes*. The purpose of this study is to provide the information found to athletic departments so that they become mindful of the severity of mental health that may affect their players. More importantly, this study will offer up two primary research questions in order to allow for the administrators within the athletic departments to develop a better understanding of what their coaching staffs know, and potentially implement mental health functions and programs for their student-athletes.

I will attempt to conduct research used to ensure how well-aware head coaches are with mental health-related conditions among their players, and how they properly handle such important difficulties. This study will require only one face-to-face interview lasting 20-45 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary, along with all personal information to be kept confidential. Criteria to participate in the survey will consist of head coaches above 30 years of age and includes all gender and ethnic backgrounds in the specific class. They must be head coaches for Rowan University or an assistant coach.

There may be some discomforts associated with this study as talking about mental health can be a delicate subject. However, the research questions are based on procedures head coaches follow and resources Rowan provides with regards to handling mental health, so no other information other than those two will be recorded for this study. The interview process will be conducted on campus at a location to the participant's choosing. There may be no direct benefit to you, however, by participating in this study, you will help increase the small amount of literature found with this topic. All data will be destroyed after the study is completed. If you are interested in being a part of this research study, or have any questions, please email Conner Walsh at [walshc2@students.rowan.edu](mailto:walshc2@students.rowan.edu) stating your interest! This study has been approved by Rowan University IRB# Pro-2020-134.