

Optimizing Student-Athlete Engagement Beyond the Field of Play

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Optimizing Student Athlete Engagement Beyond the Field of Play

_____The purpose of this thesis is to better understand student-athlete engagement at the NCAA Division I level in an effort to translate similar practices and initiatives to the Division II level. The driving focus of this research is creating a well-rounded and mentally healthy student-athlete. It's no secret that the vast majority of student-athletes' playing careers will end with the conclusion of their time in the NCAA. Only 2% of collegiate student-athletes end up playing their sport professionally, which means that the other 98% will be thrust into the real world upon the completion of their playing careers. I began this research wanting to know if collegiate athletic departments are doing everything that they can to make sure athletes are well-rounded individuals who are set up for success when their playing careers are over. Not only was I driven by an interest in that 98%, I am greatly interested in the ever-growing mental health conversation that continues to surround athletics as a whole.

Student-athlete engagement is a part of all collegiate athletic departments, yet there are different viewpoints and practices. The main direction of this thesis was inspired by a study from the University of Georgia and titled "It's Not Just Physical". This presentation mainly discusses the role of college athletic trainers in supporting student-athlete mental health. From this, I realized the importance of all the individuals that work with student athletes on a daily basis, and what their network looks like. Upon completion of a literature review on the background and overall inner workings of student-athlete development, I outlined the areas of focus to be student-athlete physical health, student-athlete overall development, and student-athlete academic support.

Areas of Focus

_____When establishing these areas of focus, it is important to understand that not all Division I athletic departments operate in exactly the same way. Some Division I schools boast massive student-athlete specific buildings in which all services relating to the student-athlete are housed, while other schools have a smaller enrollment and fewer resources. Along with these differences, the way in which student-athlete support works together varies by institution as well. Some colleges have one umbrella that encompasses all aspects of student-athlete development, while others have multiple departments that work as single entities that communicate with one another when necessary.

Student-athlete physical health is important to the individual's success on and off their field of play. From an administrative standpoint, the student-athlete's physical health encompasses everything from athletic training staff to advanced support for injured student-athletes. I wanted to put a focus on what communication between athletic trainers and other athletic support staff looks like, given that the science and practice behind athletic training is beyond my realm of qualification. My research has led me to conclude that the communication between all staff working with student-athletes is vital.

Student-athlete Development encompasses all aspects of the student-athlete experience. Though the names of the student-athlete development service programs vary in many athletic departments across the country, the practices housed in this area are typically similar across the board. Student-athlete development deals with everything from physical health, academics,

mental health, sport performance/psychology, community outreach initiatives, and even career and professional development.

Perhaps the most self-explanatory area of focus for this research is Student-athlete Academic Support. This area of student-athlete engagement focuses directly on the academic experience and success of student athletes. Much of the administrative work in this area of focus deals with the coordination of class checkers and tutors, along with monitoring the academic progress and eligibility of student athletes. All three of these areas of Student-athlete Engagement rely heavily on the others to provide the best overall experience for collegiate student athletes.

Literature Review

The recognized need for student athlete support services dates back to January 1991, when NCAA Division I implemented a proposal that would mandate tutoring and counseling services for any and all Division I student athletes. The proposal suggested “that an institution that recruits student-athletes should give them an opportunity to receive full educational experience, not solely an athletics one” (Meyer, 2005). This proposal came several years after major changes to the academic requirements for student-athletes in an initiative called Proposition 48 that was introduced in 1986. Proposition 48 deals with the GPA and testing requirements for incoming freshman student-athletes and despite controversy, it achieved its goal of increasing graduation rates. This initiative along with the Academic Performance Program (recognizes high academic achievement within athletics), and the 40/60/80 (mandates that

student-athletes make progress toward a degree in their time in college) helped pave the way for overall student-athlete support services.

After the formation of student-athlete academic support, the NCAA introduced initiatives focused on other aspects of student-athlete life. The NCAA Life Skills initiative is an effort between the NCAA national office and all of its member institutions that is “committed to the total development of student-athletes, preparing them with “life skills” that are useful throughout the college experience and after graduation” (NCAA, 2020). The original NCAA Student-Athlete Development initiative began in 1994 as a way to support a well-rounded student athlete with attention to everything from academic success to career development and overall well-being (Wisdom, 2006). Since the creation of this initiative, the NCAA has released best practices for implementing the idea that the Life Skills Initiative suggests. This program is what drives the development of student athlete support services in institutions all across the NCAA.

Both academic reform in the NCAA and the formation of services for all aspects of the student-athlete experience have quickly become crucial elements of college sports. The development of these resources is ongoing to ensure the highest possible quality of experience for student-athletes.

Research Methods

_____After reviewing the literature, to better understand the background and formation of these practices, I was able to form the direction that my research and interviews would take. In order to complete this research, I developed three guiding research questions to help me seek the qualitative information I needed. For my research I interviewed three professionals that

currently work in Division I institutions with jobs directly related to either student-athlete development or academic support. A strength of this research was my ability to speak directly with these professionals and obtain institution specific details on an in depth level. With that said, a limitation of this research is that this is a relatively small pool of interviewees.

Nonetheless, these interviews have allowed me to collect enough information to gain a better understanding of the practices of student-athlete development and also formulate a proposal for a similar practice at the Division II level. While much of the literature I studied helped me gather quantifiable details about the history and current state of collegiate student-athlete development, qualitative details would allow me to better understand details on a more personal level. My research questions are as follows:

1. What is being done and how is it being implemented?
 - a. I acknowledge that each athletic department operates differently, but understand that all of them are working to achieve similar goals. Essentially, this question aimed to look at what specific practices are in place at different institutions. Beyond that, I wanted to know more about what communication looked like between different departments of the student-athlete experience.
2. How can we improve?
 - a. This question acknowledges that there is always room for improvement in every athletic department when it comes to support for the student-athlete. By discussing this question with my interviewees, I wanted to know what ways their institutions could improve upon their current practice. I quickly found that each interviewee indeed felt that there are ways their programs could improve.

3. How can these programs be translated to the Division II level?
 - a. My final research question, though much more for myself than for the interviewees, was important to keep in mind throughout conducting my interviews. NCAA Division II institutions are generally behind Division I schools in terms of their nonathletic resources available for student athletes. Though there are several limitations at the Division II level, there are still ways for some of the initiatives discussed with my interviewees to be translated to a lower level. The details of the Division II limitations will be discussed later on, but are still important to note prior to diving into the findings from my interviews.

I conducted and recorded three interviews via phone conversation, then I transcribed each interview; those transcriptions can be found in Appendix A. Each interviewee was asked a few identical questions, but the follow up questions varied in each interview. I interviewed Nicolle Skoein (Academic Counselor at Marquette University), Ryan King (Assistant Athletic Director and Director of Academic and Career Development at the University of Kansas), and Adam Kiel (Director of Student Athlete Development at the University of Missouri). Each of these individuals were able to provide unique perspectives in different aspects of the Division I student-athlete development experience.

Results/Findings

Interview #1, Nicolle Skoein, Marquette University

_____ In her third year as an Academic Counselor at Marquette University, Skoein was able to speak in depth about, not only, the academic initiatives for student-athletes at Marquette, but

some overall development initiatives as well. Marquette University, while a Division I institution, is smaller than both the University of Kansas and the University of Missouri. With that said, Skoein was a great resource for a look into some of the efforts in place for student athletes.

Skoein highlighted two initiatives that Marquette University prides themselves on when it comes to the support of student-athletes. The first being the “Magis Mentor Program”, an academic success initiative. Skoein explained that members of her staff were noticing a trend of academically high achieving incoming freshman student athletes exhibiting a major drop in GPA during the fall semester. The conclusion was that because a lot of attention from Academic Advisors is placed towards high-risk incoming student-athletes, those who were originally high achieving were slipping through the cracks. With the Magis Mentor program, incoming high achieving student-athletes are paired with an upperclassmen who is also academically high achieving, based on academic major. Skoein explained the program by saying,

So we came up with this Magis mentor program and for us, magis is latin for “more” so we just use magis for a lot of initiatives on our end. We just want more out of our student athletes so we chose that magis word. For the Magis Mentor program we usually take about anywhere from 15-20 incoming freshman and they’re our highest achieving so we look at ACT scores, GPA, high school, all that stuff and we pull about 15-20 incoming freshman and then we pair those incoming freshman with high achieving juniors and seniors who are student athletes and we pair them up per major. (N. Skoein, personal communication, March 5, 2020)

The upperclassmen then serves as a mentor/accountability partner for the underclassmen throughout the school year in an effort to maintain high achieving academic status.

When asked about mental health initiatives available for student athletes at Marquette, Skoein highlighted the “SHAPE” mental health group. SHAPE (Student Health Allies and Peer

Educators) is a group of student-athletes created for the purpose of providing one another with mental health resources while working to end the stigma around mental health in athletics. The idea is that student-athletes may be more inclined to have mental health conversations with peers rather than an authority figure.

The main weakness in Marquette's practices that Skoein discussed is the amount of time it took to establish a mental health initiative for student-athletes. Skoein expressed that her colleague who oversees this group had to wait several years to get this relatively new program started (N. Skoein, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Marquette University is not alone in this struggle, given that the conversation around mental health in college athletics is one that is relatively new within the last decade or so.

Interview #2, Ryan King, University of Kansas

Ryan King serves as the Assistant Athletic Director and Director of Academic and Career Development at the University of Kansas (KU). As his job title would allude, Ryan deals with a little bit of both the academic side of student-athlete services as well as the development side. There were two initiatives that King highlighted and those are "KU Leads" and "Jayhawkademics". King described "Jayhawkademics" as "basically a bridge program for our student-athletes so that the transition from high school to college is a little more seamless" while "KU Leads" is the student-athlete development department that coordinates athlete specific career fairs and other professional development (R. King, personal communication, April 1, 2020). King explained that the University of Kansas, like most schools, also have school-wide freshman orientation type activities to help incoming students with the transition to college life.

With that said, King's staff places an additional importance on helping student athletes transition throughout the additional challenges they face.

The main weakness that King spoke on when it comes to the KU athletic department is a separation between student-athlete development and student-athlete academic services. While noting that overall Kansas has a very good program, King said "I would say that's one of the improvements we've got to do here at Kansas is be more collaborative with our student-athlete development" (R. King, personal communication, April 1, 2020). King further explained this statement by saying that other institutions he has worked at held more collaboration between development and academics, recognizing that programs differ greatly from school to school.

Interview #3, Adam Kiel, University of Missouri

Kiel, Assistant Athletic Director for Student-athlete Development spoke in great depth about the sport psychology and mental performance aspects of the University of Missouri (Mizzou) student-athlete experience. He also highlighted the way that all of the student-athlete support staff collaborates with one another in Mizzou athletics. Kiel explained that the process by which student-athletes navigate through the services available to them is incredibly accessible saying that appointments with mental health professionals within the athletic department can be scheduled incredibly easily. When asked how students can take advantage of these services, Kiel said, "If you want to seek out that help, all you have to do is just ask" (A. Kiel, personal communication, April 10, 2020). Kiel also explained that not only does their athletic department have full time sport psychologists offering counseling to student athletes, but they also have mental performance staff that often collaborates with sports psychology, but deals more with

athlete performance. Kiel stated that "...when the student athletes want to meet with the sports mental performance people, it starts off with behavior like 'I'm off my game right now, what are some things I can do?'" (A. Kiel, personal communication, April 10, 2020).

While Kiel spoke very highly of the aforementioned resources available for student athletes, he explained that there are still areas that can improve. Kiel noted that there is a lot of difficulty involved in catering to such a large population of student athletes. Kiel's department holds meetings a few times a year with every student-athlete at Mizzou. On the topic of improvement Kiel mentioned these meetings saying "And at the end of the day it feels like we're more like checking boxes than we are, like diving down deep in. You get a hundred people in the room, they all want 100 different things" (A. Kiel, personal communication, April 10, 2020). Kiel brings up an important point that no matter the initiatives that are in place, it can be difficult to cater to every single student-athlete.

Trends Across All Interviews

_____ While the topic of communication with athletic trainers ended up being rather brief in all three of these interviews, the responses from all interviewees were rather similar. In each interview, the answer to the question of "What does your communication look like with athletic trainers look like?" took a very similar tone. Each interviewee explained that while there is not necessarily a set protocol for communication between student-athlete support staff and athletic training staff, there is a general understanding that everyone needs to remain on the same page. Especially when it comes to students of concern- whether that be with injuries, academic concerns, or mental health concerns, there is generally an understanding that all staff that work with said athletes need to be included in any relevant communication and information.

It is clear that the logistics of each individual athletic department are very different, but another trend that remains the same across all interviews and athletic departments is that at the core of operation is the focus on the student-athlete. A common misconception about college athletic departments is that the job of a coach is to get student-athletes to an institution while the job of academic advisors and student development directors is simply to keep these student athletes eligible (Meyer, 2005). Each of my interviews detailed ways in which their responsibility reaches far beyond simply keeping student athletes eligible. With prompting, these three interviewees did a fantastic job of highlighting the many different aspects of student athlete development which just further enhances the notion that there is far more to student-athlete development than simply eligibility. Despite some public opinion that Academic/Athletic advisors go to classes, take exams or write papers; they actually provide student-athletes with “successful student behavioral strategies to succeed in the classroom” (Meyer, 2005).

Although each individual I spoke with is currently working at a Division I institution with a wide variety of resources, the next trend that I noticed was that there is always room for improvement. Though each of these programs boast resources unlike many athletes in lower divisions would ever see, there was no proclamation of a totally perfect student athlete support center with no need for improvement. Each professional also noted areas of improvement pertaining to different aspects of their program. This goes to show that each student-athlete support program will vary in strength and weakness from another; just as no program is the same in exactly how they operate, no program is the same in their strengths and weaknesses. With that said, Division II institutions are currently far behind in the development of student athlete support services and the next portion of this paper will briefly address why.

What This Means for Division II

_____ Many scholars have suggested that while the general operations of a Division II athletic department are similar to the general operations of a Division I athletic department, Division II schools still face different challenges. The 2018-2019 Membership report from the NCAA showed that the average Division I school housed around 525 student-athletes while the average Division II school housed about 400 student-athletes. With that said, participants in a 2012 study on the challenges within a Division II athletic department still held the belief that their University did not have an adequate number of staff in the athletic department devoted to the non-athlete matters concerning student-athletes (Nite, 2012).

This leads us to the conclusion that the main drawback at the Division II level is simply resources. I decided to research schools in the Great Lakes Valley Conference (GLVC) and what kind of resources are available. In the GLVC, only eight of the sixteen member institutions hold one or more individuals in the athletic department who's job title directly relates to student-athlete support/services/academic advising, etc. One of these schools, Bellarmine University, had more than a few professionals that fit this criteria, but they are transitioning to Division I at the start of summer 2020. This means that half of the schools in the GLVC are without a member of the athletic department who's title directly relates to the non-athletic endeavors of the student athlete.

The 2012 study I mentioned also explains that "an increased commercialism in intercollegiate sport has placed a greater emphasis on winning, which often precludes the academic development of student-athletes" (Nite, 2012). This is essentially suggesting that when

there are additional resources, they often are geared towards improvements to the quality of athletics rather than academics. There seems to be an unspoken pressure for Division II institutions to keep up with the arms race of college athletes despite the difference in enrollment and competition level. This unspoken arms race contributes to a shortage of student-athlete development resources because as the 2012 study alludes, extra resources are geared toward what gets more publicity in college athletics; resources and facilities, not mental health and career development, etc. for student-athletes.

Conclusion

So, with all of this in mind, the question becomes, “What can we do?”. As a four-year student-athlete at McKendree University, I’ve witnessed some of these disparities first hand and fully understand and respect the need for growing support for student athletes on and off the court. While a broad understanding of Division I student-athlete development was essential for this research, so was a recognition of the limitations at the Division II level. Upon analyzing the trends and results from this research, I recognize that changes will be difficult due to spending difficulties that would be related to hiring student-athlete support staff at Division II institutions. Taking this into account, I shifted my focus to realistic ways to implement change at the Division II level, specifically McKendree University.

I was particularly inspired by the SHAPE mental health initiative at Marquette University and felt that this could be a cost effective, yet efficient, way to implement change at a school like McKendree. As the conversation around mental health in athletics continues to grow, the benefits of providing more resources for combating such issues are beyond measure. I truly believe that a peer mentor group of student-athletes focused on mental health and support would

be of great value to McKendree's athletic community. Given that McKendree is home to such a large population of student-athletes, yet a relatively small athletic department staff, a peer support group is an inexpensive and effective way to add value and support to the student-athlete experience at McKendree. I have proposed this idea to McKendree sport psychology professor, Tami Eggleston, and she, along with a couple of psychology students, plan to move forward with such an initiative in the fall of 2020.

The main takeaways from this research would be that while the need for growth in student-athlete support at the Division II level is strong, the desire for growth in this area reigns across the board. In an age where the commercialization of college sports continues to grow, I cannot envision a time when a need for support of student-athletes becomes obsolete. My hope is that support for all NCAA student-athletes can grow in the years to come to create an overall better experience for student-athletes of all divisions.

APPENDIX A**Nicolle Skoein, Marquette University, March 5 2020**

Shayli: First off, if you could just tell me a little bit about your position, what brought you into the field, what goes on in your field of work and how that all goes down.

Nicolle: Yeah, so, currently I am an Academic Counselor at Marquette University, so pretty much what I do now is make sure student-athletes stay eligible per NCAA rules. That's probably what I would say about 75% of my job. What I mean by that is progress towards a degree, GPA, all those rules that student athletes probably don't know about but we are tracking on a day-to-day basis. We do anything from sending out progress reports to professors and looking over midterm grades to making sure that they are going to classes, monitoring study halls, setting them up with tutors; pretty much anything from an Academic perspective to make sure they are academically successful. And now again, academic success is very different from student-to-student. For some students, if they're not getting that 3.9 or 4.0 they're not successful just because they're very high achieving, versus some students who have a 2.1 or 2.2 GPA and are trying to keep track of all their accomplishments. Really just working to make sure they understand that everyone is different. It kind of just depends on the person to determine the type of plan you put together. At Marquette University we've done a great job of making tutoring very positive, so tutoring at Marquette is not seen as 'Oh, you're in trouble you need a tutor' it's seen as, some of our pre-med student athletes who are wanting to go to med school have tutoring because they want to keep that A or they want to go from an A- to an A. So again we do have student athletes who are at-risk who need the tutors, who need help with theology because we're a Catholic Jesuit institution and they've never taken a faith related class before. So, there's those types of things as well but it's such a huge spectrum of that need. Other things that I kind of do right now is we meet with recruits, so we meet with incoming sports. So, I oversee women's basketball, women's soccer and men's golf. When they bring a recruit to campus I meet with them, so I talk to them, their parents, their families, about kind of what's going on, the resources they'll receive, all that type of stuff. At Marquette University, which is a smaller institution, we only have about ten thousand undergrads, so for us our campus is like six blocks. It's so easy to get everywhere, we're like half a block from the quad. For us it's really easy for student athletes

to come and go from the academic area to get the help they need to come see us. We're not like a big school where you need to literally drive or find some sort of transportation to get there, it's really easy to kind of come and go from. So that's kind of like the academic piece, I'm sure a lot of- have you had some types of these resources?

Shayli: Yeah, we have similar resources but we're even smaller than Marquette, like much smaller so it's just interesting to see how that's different at a bigger institution as well. So, I was looking at the Marquette website and I was looking at your academic support staff. Could you tell me a little bit about the mentor program that it says here was kicked off last year? Is it Magis mentor program?

Nicolle: Yes so it's funny the Magis mentor program actually had a meeting this morning, I obviously was not there, but so we created- actually that website is probably not updated, but we created the Magis Mentor Program. This is our fourth year, or wrapping up our fourth year. We created it because we wanted to help our high achieving student athletes coming in as freshman to remain high achieving. What we mean by that is about four or five years ago we kept seeing high achieving student athletes who had like 26/27 on their ACTs, and high GPAs, coming into Marquette and having the fall of their freshman year and dropping to a 2.2 or 2.5 GPA. We're just like 'what is going on? Where is the correlation? We don't understand' Because I think sometimes it's the job of an academic advisor working with the student athlete's your attention is unfortunately kind of on those at-risk students to make sure that they stay eligible, and sometimes some of those high achieving student athletes that you see coming in, it's not that you don't care about them, you're just not necessarily as focused on them to make sure that they're doing well academically. So we came up with this Magis mentor program and for us, magis is latin for "more" so we just use magis for like a lot of initiatives on our end. We just want more out of our student athletes so we chose that magis word. For the Magis Mentor program we usually take about anywhere from 15-20 incoming freshman and they're our highest achieving so we look at ACT scores, GPA, high school, all that stuff and we pull about 15-20 incoming freshman and then we pair those incoming freshman with high achieving juniors and seniors who are student athletes and we pair them up per major so if an incoming freshman has a 27 on their ACT and they're declared high achieving to be a part of the Magis Mentor program and they're in the business school, they want to go into marketing as a major, we find a high achieving upperclassmen who is majoring in marketing in the business school and we pair them up. The reason that we do that is that will then allow the mentor to kind of have an accountability and it gives the mentee the opportunity to have a resource. It gives the mentee the opportunity to ask questions like what classes should I take, who are the better professors, what are the good study spots on campus, all that type of stuff. Kind of how we put together the program is that we train all of our mentors, and we help these 15-20 mentees by training the mentors. So, we give them counseling tips, we give them to-dos, we give them important things they need to be doing. We

meet anywhere from every 6-8 weeks so we meet six times throughout the whole academic year, so we are meeting but the majority of the time it's really on the mentor that we're training to make sure that they're checking in on their mentee, they're making sure their mentee is getting what they need, answering questions and being a great resource.

Shayli: As an Academic Counselor, I'm sure that your relationship with students athletes probably goes beyond the scope of academics, as far as relationships with them. What do mental health resources look like at Marquette? Do you have mental health resources available for student athletes? Are they athlete specific or are they campus wide?

Nicolle: At Marquette University we have a counseling center just like any other campus usually. So we do have those resources and we do collaborate with the counseling center very well so they always come over and assist with certain things when we need it which is awesome. Within the athletic department we do have a mental health group, it's called SHAPE. One of my colleagues there, she oversees it and she is all about mental health, like literally lives and breathes it, loves it so much and it's something that we've probably had going now for two or three years though she's wanted to get something like this started for probably the last 10-15 years, so she's been very patient. The SHAPE mental health group pretty much what they are, is it's a group of individuals that work with my colleague, that are trained by the counseling center to kind of be peer mentors. I think sometimes from a mental health perspective its "I don't wanna talk to a coach, I don't wanna talk to a trainer, I don't even really wanna talk to my academic counselor because I don't want it to be blown out of proportion" so we have literally a wall in our academic center that has pictures of our SHAPE mentors who are people they know they can go talk to. They can be like "hey, this is how I'm feeling, this is what's going on, what should I plan to do?". That's kind of like the overall idea of it, and they also just do a lot of initiatives. They do a lot with understanding- one of our track student athletes had the great idea of wanting to help student athletes who had surgery so they're on crutches, and they're just like "okay so they're on crutches, they have to go back to their dorm room, they're probably not from a mental health perspective in the best state right now because they're not playing, they're not being able to be involved with their team and now they can't even get into their bed because at Marquette, all of the beds are lofted because the rooms are so small, so now they're on crutches and they can't even get into their own bed. So they started this initiative where the head athletic trainer will get in touch with the group who oversees this initiative and then they go and work with the dorms to de-loft that student athletes bed so that they can get in it when they get back to their room from their surgery. So again, something that's so small and something that a lot of people don't really think about just has really strong impacts and just to make sure these student athletes are getting what they need.

Shayli: That makes sense, especially when its students helping students that makes a big impact.

Nicolle: Exactly and I think that's why my colleague, she didn't really do a whole lot because she wanted it to be student athlete driven. She didn't want to be the one that was creating this program so I think about three years ago she had some really great initiatives by some upperclassmen and they kind of started it and now that kind of just continues to snowball which is awesome.

Shayli: That is, and that kind of leads me to my next question, you touched a little bit on athletic trainers- as I've done my research on different Division I institutions and their student athlete development centers, it seems like there are a lot of places that are starting to set up a line of communication between athletic trainers and student athlete support staff. What does that look like at Marquette?

Nicolle: I think every athletic trainer is a little different. So I worked at Mizzou before Marquette and I really don't know if there was even a specific protocol in place- like a "from an academic perspective or from an athletic training perspective this is your expectation". But I would say that everywhere that I have worked, I think it's the philosophy that you need to be communicating with all staff members who are involved with that particular student athlete. So if you're talking about women's soccer that's not only the coaches and myself but it's also the strength coach, it's also the athletic trainer, making sure that, hey, if they just had a concussion, everyone needs to know that information because it's going to be a ripple effect. At Marquette I would like to say that there's not like a written protocol anywhere I guess but I think when there's certain things that do occur, pretty much an email is sent out from a staff member perspective and it's kind of sent to all those people. For me it's really nice because the majority of my people are in my same building which is awesome so like it's easy for me to go- I'm on the second floor so it's easy for me to go to the main floor or the basement to go talk to who I need to, to kind of let them know because I'm also a big believer that, hey, if someone has a huge upcoming exam and they're going to have to miss a little bit of practice because of this exam time, that's information that I need to be sharing with the coaches as well as the athletic trainers and the strength staff so they kind of know what's going on. So, like I said, I wouldn't say that there's something written in stone that is a specific protocol, but we do have the philosophy that us and staff members and coaches are there to kind of surround these student athletes and make sure they're successful not only academically but also athletically and socially, so it's really our job to make sure that we have that communication amongst us.

Shayli: So you said you worked at Mizzou before, have you always kind of been interested in student athlete support or did that just kind of fall into place for you? Basically just, how did you get into the position that you're in?

Nicolle: That's a great question! So, long story short, when I was playing with Katie (Broadway)* at Illinois State I did my undergrad in Exercise Science because I thought I wanted to be a personal trainer, then I found out what they did and I didn't wanna do that anymore. And then I tore my ACL my freshman year so I was actually able to play with *Katie an extra year because I played for five, and when I played for five I got my masters in sport management because I thought I wanted to be an athletic director but then I kind of realized the schedules of athletic directors and I didn't really want to do that either and then after five years at Illinois State with two degrees, I came back home to Wisconsin and lived with my parents for about eight months for this one academic year kind of tried to figure out life, did a couple part time jobs. I really started to fall in love with this academic services a little bit. At that point I worked at UW-Milwaukee as a part time assistant so I was kind of commuting, kind of feeling that out a little bit. At that point I really started falling in love with teaching so I was like okay, let's go get my PhD because I'd like to teach college. My coaching staff at Illinois State was at Mizzou so they kind of connected me up with a couple people. I went down there, I ended up getting my second masters in counseling and psychology because for a little bit there I thought I'd be a licensed psychologist because I thought that'd be fun, maybe make a lot of money and all that type of stuff. And then I was like, I don't want to do that. And so after that I then got my PhD in counseling/psychology with an emphasis in sport psychology and I really did that because I wanted to be able to be an adjunct professor and teach a little bit in college which I do now at Marquette in the business school which is really fun. During that time at Mizzou I got my foot in the door to get my schooling paid for, I was a GA or a graduate assistant for the "Total Person Program" or it's now the "Mizzou Made" program where it's literally the academic services for student athletes so throughout that process I was there for a total of two years as a GA and then I got two years as a full timer and I kind of just like fell in love with it. I always knew I was interested in it because I started at UW-Milwaukee but I didn't really know how much I enjoyed it and then now I've kind of just stuck with it, so it's been kind of a bit of a whirlwind but we made it through.

Ryan King, University of Kansas, April 1, 2020

Shayli: My first question is, if you could just tell me a little bit about your position, how you got there, what that position kind of looks like.

Ryan: Absolutely, so I am the Director of Academic and Career Counseling (at Kansas University) so that means I oversee all the Academic Counselors here at Kansas. What that kind of entails, well- side story, I also oversee football academics so that takes up a majority of my time. Kind of what that looks like from a day to day operation specifically with football, we'll start there, is right now, it's different but I'll kind of tell you what it all might look like. Usually, at the beginning of the semester, we sit down with the student athletes and we put together a tutoring schedule. So, our guys that are first year freshmen or transfer student athletes or individuals that we deem at-risk, they will have a set tutoring schedule and that schedule will be recurring throughout the semester. So at the beginning of the semester we get that set-up, so normally my day to day operations with them is making sure they're getting to their tutoring sessions. At the same time we also have about 10-11 class checkers that go out and check our student athletes and make sure they're going to class so I'm communicating with them if somebody's missing from class so kind of back and forth with them. And then obviously keeping the coaches in the loop, so if a student athlete is missing a tutoring session or missing class, I can communicate that with our coaches. The other thing I do with football, is they get a daily report of attendance so at noon I compile a report throughout the morning and send that off to the coaches so that they may handle that discipline any way that they need to. In the afternoon, it's really meant to check grades, check any reports. So any time they have a tutoring session I get a tutor report that kind of talks about what they did in their session and any concerns that they may have. And then also, many of our high risk student athletes have an academic calendar so that kind of lays out what they have coming up for the week so I go in and check that to see what's coming up and kind of parallel with their grade reports. So, from a football standpoint it's a lot of checking on our student athletes, communicating with coaches, communicating with our

class checkers and tutors, to make sure that we're all on the same page. From the director side of things, I've got to make sure the other sports are doing what they need to do. So, that's checking in with counselors if there's an issue with a tennis student athlete or a volleyball student athlete or a baseball student athlete. I kind of follow up with the counselor to make sure things are getting taken care of and the coaches are getting the information they need to, and then also handling the budget situation- which is a situation right now., but normally is something that we pay attention to almost on a weekly basis. That's kind of a lot but there's more to it, but I don't wanna bore you with details. I hope that kind of gave you an idea.

Shayli: Definitely. Could you tell me a little bit of kind of how you came into this position and kind of what that path looked like for you?

Ryan: Well, it was an accident, it really was. I went to Kansas State and I really wanted to be a teacher. I love educating, I love teaching, I love doing those things and that's kind of where my passion is. But during my time at K-State, I worked for their athletic department basically from when I was a freshman, on, and I was lucky, at the high school I went to we were very technologically advanced. So I was editing highlights for other high schools in the area and K-State saw that and was like "hey, would you like to come do that for our football team and our athletic department?". So I was working on videos and doing those things and really worked my way through athletics, running the video boards for football games and basketball games and really enjoyed doing that and really loved the college athletic experience but I also loved being a teacher and that education part. When I was getting ready to go get a GA position which I didn't know existed by the time I graduated, one of my bosses/supervisors at K-State said "hey why don't you work in our academic field, you've already got the athletic background, you've already got a teaching degree, you kind of have what somebody would be looking for for our GA position" so unbeknownst to me I applied for it and got it and got the opportunity to work with their football program at K-State and kind of the rest is history. I, honestly, if you would have asked me a year before getting that GA position, I would have said I have no idea what Academics is. This is my fifth year in athletics and I've never heard of the academic department. Yeah, it's interesting.

Shayli: That's cool to hear though. If you could tell me a little bit about your overall student athlete support services at KU. I know a lot of institutions have different initiatives or programs that they have in place for overall student athlete support, so if you could kind of speak on that, that would be great.

Ryan: From a personnel standpoint we probably have 15-20 staff members and that kind of includes some GA's too, that's not just all full time. We're kind of broken up into three things, so we've got a learning services department, with a director there; this is all housed within

academics, director of learning services. So, her job is she oversees all the tutoring but she also oversees any student athletes that have academic exceptionalities, so student athletes that may have or may need some accommodations on campus. So she kind of handles that and works with our student athletes and again she oversees our tutoring program. We have about 100 tutors, I'd kind of guess. 100 tutors employed by our athletic department and then we have what we call learning assistants. Those learning assistants work with usually our freshman, our high risk student athletes to kind of map out their week and so we've got about probably 15-20 learning assistants on our staff there. They're broke up into academics obviously we've got all different sports and they serve there. One of the things that we do every summer is what I call "Jayhawk-ademics"- that's what I call it but I call it different things wherever I've been. But it's basically a bridge program for our student athletes so that the transition from high school to college is a little more seamless. So we do that every summer, once a week for the whole summer but it's really pointed at making sure our student athletes succeed and it's really about them. We're talking about things that relate to being a student athlete instead of the general summer bridge program you get on campus. We also have a KU Leads department, that's our student athlete development and they really help out with career fairs, internships, things of that nature are a big part of what they do. So, there's a lot of programming that we do, from the student athlete development side just because that's the career and professional development piece of our academic department.

Shayli: So as far as other aspects of the student athlete support, what kind of mental health resources do you have available for student athletes and is that something that is athlete specific or campus wide? If you don't have a ton of knowledge on that, that's totally fine I know that might be outside of your job, but I thought I would ask as that's just kind of been a huge conversation lately.

Ryan: I think you were spot on there on that. That profession and that need for our student athletes has increased immensely I would say over the last five to seven years. During my time at Mizzou, and that's where I crossed paths with Nicolle obviously, they had a great sports psychology program there and that was probably one of the most comprehensive programs I've seen in the athletic departments I've been in. I think Kansas- we're getting there. We just hired a student athlete wellness coordinator-is kind of what it's called, within the last year. She is kind of our go to person for anybody that needs mental health services. What she has seen- and not a surprise- what she has seen is an increase in her need of working with student athletes. I think that is such a crucial piece but it's also new in the world of college athletics- relatively new in the last decade or so. It's something that Kansas has made an issue and has made a point to do but it's new here in Kansas within the last year.

Shayli: So, a little bit more about the career development- what does it kind of look like when a student athlete wants to take advantage of those opportunities, like other opportunities in career development outside of their regularly scheduled academic tutoring and that kind of stuff?

Ryan: Absolutely, so when we- you know obviously when we meet with student athletes we work on advising and enrolling them, we kind of help them navigate their career path here at Kansas, whether that's figuring out what you like to do, what majors interest you, what interests you in general, and start picking classes with them. We obviously do that, but we have somebody within student athlete development that is the career development liaison and we're lucky here in football that we have one of our GA's with football in academics also is kind of a career development liaison so we're lucky that we have kind of a two headed monster with football. The individual that works in student athlete development- he is kind of the liaison for all student athletes when it comes to career paths and development. So, what we do is we kind of steer our student athletes to him- he has connections with some businesses regionally and nationally to kind of work with maybe securing internships or maybe- he goes over resumes and cover letters, interviews, mock interviews with student athletes, to make sure that they're prepared for that next step in life. He also is in charge of our career fair and we have a career fair just for student athletes. There's obviously a general career fair for all students here at Kansas but we have a specific one for our student athletes as well. It's nice, I wish- and I'm sure you've seen this, but I wish more student athletes would take advantage of that stuff. That is such a huge thing, like, that's- those are things that give you a leg up on competition and it's sitting right in front of you, and it's absolutely free.

Shayli: Yes, and especially at the Division I level, because someone like me at the Division II level, I have had more opportunities just because my school is smaller to kind of make those connections. I know that and I'm sure at the Division I level it can be even more difficult to do that. So, another question about your programs, as I've kind of done a little bit of research on student athlete development programs, it looks like a lot of offices are kind of starting to set up a line of communication between athletic training staff and athletic support staff. What does that kind of look like within KU's department?

Ryan: As far as athletics communicating with athletic trainers?

Shayli: Yeah, is that like something that goes on a lot or what does that kind of look like? I've seen a lot of places are starting to put more of an emphasis on that.

Ryan: Yeah, for us right now, we made the transition and I think we were one of the first schools to do this, we made the transition from all our athletic trainers and sport medicine staff now reports to our health systems and not to our athletic department and coaches. That's kind of a

new thing and I think it was a good move by our AD to do that. As far as communication with training staff, ours is pretty basic-theirs is more from a medical side of things. However, I will say that with this student athlete wellness coordinator I've seen more of me reaching out to the training staff in an area of concern that I see with a student athlete from a mental wellness aspect and that training staff goes to our student athlete wellness coordinator. I loop in our training staff anytime we have a student athlete that has communicated some mental health struggles and I think that that's a new wrinkle for me in the last probably year or so. And our training staff has done a really good job of if they see something as well they loop in us along with our student athlete wellness coordinator so that's kind of been a new protocol but I enjoy it, I think it's good for all of us to be on the same page.

Shayli: What would you say in your opinion is the best part of KU's student athlete overall development program?

Ryan: Well, I think to me, it's that we have the resources that some schools maybe don't have that. I think that's one of the best things is we've got the staff, we've got the resources, we've got the drive, the enthusiasm, high energy-I'm big into that, I love to see that here at Kansas; they've done a really good job of that. The programming; we could always take it up a step further but I think the foundational piece of what we have is really really good and we've got an AD that understands the importance of not only academics but a student athlete development welfare world which is very important and he understands that. So we're lucky to have the administration also support initiatives from our student athlete development staff.

Shayli: I think that's important because a lot of places understand the athletic part and the academic part but the reality is that there's so much more that's intertwined with all of that, that's important to just overall development.

Ryan: And I've seen- this is my fifth school and they're all different, like how student athlete development and academics works and I've seen it differently. At Arkansas they were very involved in our day to day life. They were in our meetings, they were in our conference calls, they were in all that stuff. I would say the same thing with Missouri, but here at Kansas it's like once a month they come in and we collaborate. I would say that's one of the improvements we've got to do here at Kansas is be more collaborative with our student athlete development-they're almost their own shop away from us which is kind of where like a lot of these other schools it's student athlete support services all in one umbrella. Here it's kind of separate-there's student athlete support services which is what I oversee with the academic side, and there's KU leads, which is our student athlete development. So it's kind of a little different here but it's a very good program.

Adam Kiel, University of Missouri, April 10, 2020

Shayli: I'll go ahead and get started. My first question, can you just tell me a little bit about your position? Kind of what brought you to where you are now? What does a typical day look like for you? Kind of that sort of thing?

Adam: Yeah. So currently I am the Assistant Athletic Director for Student Athlete Development. I got to this position-I was a student in college. I played football at Northern Illinois University and got involved with SAAC and community service which kind of led to a GA position and life skills at the time. And then over the last seven, six, seven years of just working my way up the student athlete development realm to the position I have now. The program that we have here at Mizzou is labeled- we operate under the title Mizzou Made, and Mizzou Made- it's a big umbrella term. So there's a lot of things underneath that. But the biggest things is academic enhancement, personal development and career development. Those are the three broad strokes underneath Mizzou Made so on a day to day? My staff and I, we focus on helping student athletes basically with anything outside of sport and outside of academics. My staff focuses really on the personal and professional development of the student athletes on the personal development side. That's community service, helping them kind of stay organized. We work on their transferable skills and their time management skills and some of that obviously overlaps with the academic piece and then on the professional side we do anything from resumes, cover letters to help them apply for research assistantships, travel or study abroad, internships, job opportunities, mock interview skills. We go through the whole grad school process, so we help them research schools. We help them get their grad school applications together, their personal statements, help them collect their personal statement or their letters of recommendation. And then that's on the day to day basis. Also within our program, we host Mizzou Made events. So five times a year, we get one hour in front of every single student athlete. So the way our program is set up is we group student athletes by year in school. Not just freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior. As you know, the red shirts, the gray shirts, the white shirts, the academic red shirts, the medicals, it gets really confusing when you have maybe a fifth year senior or a red shirt junior. Well, are they a junior or are they a senior? Right. So we go by year in school. So first, second, third and fourth, we host five different- we host three events in the fall, two events in the spring. The events in the fall, it's two events per class and one guest speaker for all student athletes. So that guest speaker event is usually focused on healthy relationships in that realm, whether that's kind of bystander intervention. It could be Title IX related, sexual assault awareness or just anything under the healthy relationships title. The other two events are focused on the student athlete's development at their time in their career. So freshmen will have a meeting about the athletic department values. So we operate under Jim Sterk, our athletic director. His big thing is 'win it right'. Right is an acronym. So we have a whole freshman-we have a whole first year session around the R-I-G-H-T and then sophomores are more about conflict management, leadership because they're starting to step into those leadership roles in their team. Third years, third and fourth years, it really focuses more on career development aspect of it. So we kind of turn the corner from that personal development to the career development and then from there we host so anywhere from twenty to twenty six different events a year. And then my group, my department also oversees our leadership groups. So SAAC being the most common one. And then from there, we actually have four groups in total here at Mizzou. So we have a

first generation group. We have a diversity inclusion group. And then we have a fourth group called the Tiger Leadership Institute, which is a one year program designed to enhance leadership skills. So in five minutes, that's a snapshot of my past and what we do here.

Shayli: Yeah, no, that was fantastic. Actually, you kind of already answered my next question about what resources you have available for student athletes. So that's awesome. Another question that I have for you, just as this becomes a bigger conversation at the national level and the collegiate level. What kind of mental health resources do you guys have available for student athletes and kind of what does that look like for a student athlete in need of those services?

Adam: That's a really great question. So prior to COVID-19, in-house, we have two full time staff psychologists that are there and they meet with student athletes constantly. And on top of that, we have two additional staff members that are on the mental performance side. So mental performance and staff psychologists are just a little bit different, but they do work closely together. So the two staff psychologists that we have are phenomenal people, but they bring in additional help to cover the meetings that they have because so many student athletes are utilizing the resources that we have in front of them. So I can't quite remember your full question here. So we have those two in-house. And then, at the current situation, those two steps, like houses are still meeting with students virtually via Zoom and they have a more secure Zoom profile so that it does ensure the confidentiality of those sessions.

Shayli: Maybe, could we talk a little bit more about like say a student athlete does decide like they want to utilize those services. Is that something that's pre-set up for them or is that something that they have to, you know, kind of seek out as the need arises for that?

Adam: Yeah. So, yeah, there's a couple of steps there. So the student athletes have access to it any time they need it. Now, obviously, our staff psychologists are busy people, so it's not if they want a session right away depending on the severity of the situation, they will drop everything and help that student athlete. But if a student athlete- so in our facility, this is an example that our staff psychologist used when he met with our first year student athletes. He said, 'I'm walking down the dining hall to get coffee. If you see me, this is how complicated it is. You say, hey, doc, I want to set up a time to meet with you'. He says, 'Great, when do you want to meet, give me a date time. Awesome. I'll see you there'. It's that informal to set up a meeting so it doesn't take referrals. It doesn't take your coach or academic coordinator, no, like nothing. If you want to seek out that help, all you have to do is just ask. The academic coordinators, if someone asks, they take them directly to the psychologist or schedule a meeting. If a student athlete utilizes these services, we only know if they utilize the service if the student tells us so, that meeting alone is confidential. No one, the psychologists do not report back to coaches. They don't report back to the academic staff or the student athlete development staff. We don't know unless the student athletes tell us. That's one important function there. On the flip side, we have our mental performance staff. The number one difference between the mental performance staff and our psychologists are is the fact that it's not confidential, that the two mental performance coaches that we have, unless the student athlete says, 'hey, don't tell, my coach' if the coach asks, they can kind of talk about what the student athlete- they're not going to be specific and they're not going to say, 'oh, they said this, this and that about you.' What they will say is, 'Hey, if a student

athlete is really, really trying to focus on being in the moment. So when they're at practice and they seem distracted, remind them of safety in the moment, like use it as a positive as a positive encounter with that student athlete versus jumping all over that student athlete, and punishing them. They want to use it to help people. They don't want to use it, too, to like berate and yell at them essentially.

Shayli: So the mental performance as opposed to like the sports psychologist is more of like an on the court or on the field type of deal, whereas the sports psychologist is more like outside of that realm?

Adam: Yeah, exactly. So the mental performance coaches, obviously it's all related, off the field, off the playing surface, on the playing surface, so it's all tied together. But when the student athletes want to meet with the sports mental performance people, it's. It starts off with behavior like 'I'm off my game right now, what are some things I can do?', most of the time that can lead to the mental performance staff referring them to the psychologist. Right. Like 'hey, there's some other things in here. I'm prepared to handle those, but I'm letting you know confidentiality wise your best option might be to go meet with the psychologist'.

Shayli: Ok, that makes a lot of sense. So as I've kind of researched some different programs at the Division I level and just seen kind of initiatives for overall student athlete development. I've seen that some places are starting to incorporate a little bit more communication with athletic training staff. And I imagine with the mental performance aspect, that might be something that goes on at Mizzou. But what kind of does that look like for your staff? And you know, just that communication line between you guys and athletic training.

Adam: Between Student-Athlete Development and Athletic Training?

Shayli: Yeah.

Adam: That's a great question. You know, fortunately for me, my supervisor is also the supervisor for athletic training. So we work very closely as far as communicating things. Most of the time, we don't have to. Most of what I do, I don't really need any information to go to the athletic trainers or I need information from the athletic trainers. If we recognize a student athlete kind of doesn't seem right, maybe mentally and physically. We'll check in with that student athlete first. And then if we recognize anything, we have the ability to either walk them to the psychologist office or walk them to athletic training.

Adam: And then I should also tell you so we have what we call I-H-T, Integrated Healthcare Team, and that is our staff psychologists, mental performance and our athletic training. They have meetings maybe once a month or so just to talk about any important information that needs to be shared amongst the group. It's just a way to kind of bring everybody together in one room just to make sure that there's no gaps in the services that are offered to the student athletes.

Shayli: Ok, Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. My last question for you, just kind of wrapping things up. If there were one specific area of improvement that you would say would benefit your

overall office or just one thing that you think you would like to improve a little bit in your student athlete development department, what would that be?

Adam: Oh, that's a good question. It's a really good question. We've thought long and hard about it. I think our program is really good. The difficulty that we face is time demands. So of all the programming that we offer, we try to be as good as we can when we have that one hour with the student athletes. So it's as if it's going to be a one hour meeting about mental health, mental performance, which we had this year. It was really, it went really well. You've got a hundred something student athletes in the room. And at the end of the day it feels like we're more like checking boxes than we are, like diving down deep in. You get a hundred people in the room, they all want 100 different things. They want to talk about this topic a little bit more. They don't want to talk about this topic, but, you know, they want to spend more time really on the game day preparation piece of the performance. They don't want to talk about what does a session look like with a staff psychologist. Right. So you have people wanting different things. So I think the biggest improvement I would love to see is for us to get more time with the student athletes and make Mizzou Made potentially into a four credit course option for student athletes. On the flip side, if we can't get more time with the student athletes, I think the biggest area of improvement for most student athlete development programs is the career development aspect of it, because student athletes are- you're getting coaching athletically, you're getting your help academically. But what about when they leave college? Are they prepared? So it's that career piece. Do they know how to do a resume, write a cover letter? Do they have those interview skills and then. OK, great, we hit those tangible pieces. How do you find jobs? But like when they get up to the real world, are they truly prepared to be professional in the workplace? So now you're talking about professional etiquette. You're talking about how do they know the job offered is a quality offer. The benefits package, the health insurance, all those things that I think that's going to be the turning point for a lot of programs here in the next couple of years is what are they doing career wise to prepare their student athletes while they're in college? And then what are we doing to those that have graduated, maybe remain in contact with them for one year once they have graduated. How can they continue to help get them to that, that first job so that they can learn and become independent and successful professionals?

Shayli: Well, thank you very much for all of your answers. You provided a lot of great information. Those are all the questions that I have for you.

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