Introduction

I have been an NCAA Division 1 student-athlete since June 2016 and have attended two widely different institutions in 4 years. I have been exposed to an incredibly diverse population of student-athletes after spending my first two years of college at the University of Nevada-Reno and then transferring to the University of Portland. I was surprised when I got to the University of Portland, as my teammates appeared extremely happy. At my previous school, most student-athletes seemed to have such high levels of anxiety that their grades, social life, friendships, relationships with teammates, or their own self-care would suffer because they didn’t feel as if they were supported in at least one of those categories. It appeared as if the biggest lack they felt was support from their teammates. Although there are numerous differences between the two institutions, demographics, included sports, funding, student body size, class size, etc.; I wanted to gather information to measure the amount of support that the student-athletes at the University of Portland feel and identify factors that contribute to their levels of sport satisfaction.

Method

A link that led to a Qualtrics survey was sent to the entire body of student-athletes through TeamWorks, a mobile/web application used by the entire athletics department for communication. Additionally, through various media outlets, the same survey was sent to select student-athletes to be sent to their team’s private group chats. Participants (N=38) answered questions about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke, T. D., & Smith, A. L. (2001)), and questions about their relationship with their coaches and various staff members, their teammates, and their personal beliefs and habits.

Results

82% of participants tend to value the support they feel from their teammates, as 89% of participants reported “Always” or “Almost Always” feeling supported by their teammates.

The overall average of scores for the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire was 2.65. The lower the score, the better, as it shows a lower level of burnout in for a given individual. Athletes scored highest, or worst, in “Physical and emotional exhaustion,” at 2.96, which was hypothesized to be the highest score, as the physical and emotional demands of balancing the school, social, personal, and athletic life of a student-athlete is extremely demanding.

The next highest score was in “Reduced sense of accomplishment,” at 2.55, and then the lowest (or best), with “Sense of devaluation,” at 2.43. Although 74% of respondents reported feeling supported by their coaches, 37% reported not being comfortable talking to their coaches about issues going on in their personal lives.

Student-athletes feel supported by their academic staff, as 92% of respondents reported feeling comfortable in approaching their athletics academic advisors about any academic issue and expecting/receiving help right away.

Discussion/Conclusion

Unique social and academic challenges that student-athletes face places them at an increased risk for developmental and psychological problems that could result in their experiencing several stressors during their athletic careers (Martens, Dams-O’Connor, & Beck, 2006). In uncertain times such as these, with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis forcing our university to close and our seasons/off-seasons cancelled, and our future generally unknown, it is imperative that we understand where our student-athletes are at mentally, as well as understanding where/who we should recommend them to turn to for support. Identifying these unique issues can lead to targeted interventions to cultivate emotional well-being for student-athletes at UP. The calculated averages from the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire were lower than I hypothesized they would be. Events such as the “We Are Portland Awards” or “1,000-Points/Assists/Kills Clubs” or other milestones for respective sports, among other athletic department events that recognize student-athletes for their achievements can potentially increase an overall sense of accomplishment which might influence feelings of belonging and pride for the institution. Normalizing mental-health on campus, especially for most student-athletes, who feel the stigma surrounding mental health versus having to “push through” anxiety or depression. Increased athletics-specific sports psychologists on campus can help to alleviate emotional stress and exhaustion and normalize seeking help for mental illness.