

Report of the sub-committee of the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion

Disabilities, Mental Health and Wellness, Recreation and Sport

Committee on Diversity and Inclusion

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Sub-Committee on Disabilities, Mental Health and Wellness, Recreation and Sport

Members:

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Problem Identification

University Student-Athletes and Coaches

- More than 40% of young adults aged 18 to 29 years, experience functional impairment significant enough to warrant the diagnosis of at least one psychiatric disorder during this age span - most commonly, anxiety, substance, or mood disorders (Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005).
- Student-athletes, a visible and diverse sub-population of university students, are at the same, or an even greater risk, of developing mental health problems compared to their non-athlete peers (Brewer & Petrie, 2002; Neal et al., 2013).
- Coaches are also vulnerable to mental health issues, which can have a negative impact on their athletes (McNeill, Durand-Bush, & Lemyre, 2016).

Key Barriers and Challenges

- The culture of elite sport perpetuates and amplifies the stigma surrounding mental illness and poor mental health.
- Student-athletes tend to over-report their well-being (Steiner, Denny, & Stemmler, 2010) and underutilize mental health services (Lopez & Levy, 2013).
- There is a lack of empirical evidence on the mental health of Canadian student-athletes (Van Slingerland, Durand-Bush, & Rathwell, 2017) and coaches (McNeill, Durand-Bush, & Lemyre, 2017).

Gee-Gees Student-Athletes and Coaches

1. A recent focus group study conducted with Gee-Gees athletes revealed that stress, stigma, and an absence of athlete-relevant resources impact their mental health (DesClouds, Van Slingerland, & Durand-Bush, 2017). Following are data supporting these key issues:

1. **Multiple and competing stressors**

“I find our coach always has this big spiel about ‘First it’s family, then it’s school, then it’s [sport]’ but I find her actions don’t necessarily support that.”

2. **Stigma**

“I think it takes a strong character and maybe not everybody who has mental health issues would be comfortable going to their coach.”

3. **Lack of appropriate mental health resources**

“There are resources but I feel like some are more focused on the academic side or more the actual performance in your sport rather than mental health. I feel like all athletes have these barriers about performance but when it’s some deeper issues, it’s just harder to tackle it with those people.”

“Well my past experiences have been lousy because no one is qualified to actually give you the proper tools you

need.”

2. A multiple case study recently conducted with Gee-Gees coaches showed that the varsity sport culture, centered on winning, continues to stigmatize both coaches and athletes’ mental health. It prevents coaches from prioritizing their mental health and from gathering knowledge on the mental health of their athletes and integrating this information into their coaching practice and philosophy (Van Slingerland, Kraft, Culver, & Durand-Bush, 2017). Following are data supporting these concerns:

1. The mental health of coaches matters too

“Whose mental health do we address first – the coaches’ or the athletes’?
How can you ask somebody that’s not balanced to ask his players to be balanced?”

2. Coaches need and want training to increase mental health literacy

“You try to look for the cues. We just had a recent [situation] where there weren’t a lot of cues...so we missed the warning signs. Coaches need to be coached in this area. If you educate the top level [of coaches], there’s a high probability that we’ll have more people with mental illness playing at the university level.”

Recommendations and Opportunities

- Athletes and coaches with mental health challenges and mental illnesses are best served by practitioners specializing in both sport AND clinical psychology (Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016).
- Unfortunately, there is a scarce number of practitioners in Canada who specialize in both domains.

Also, there is no specialized clinical setting and multidisciplinary model/team to promote mental health and treat mental illness within this population.

Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport

- Given the importance of mental health and significant gaps in both theory and practice, Dr. Natalie Durand-Bush and members of her SEWP research lab from the uOttawa School of Human Kinetics are creating a Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport (CCMHS), which presents a tremendous opportunity for uOttawa student-athletes and coaches to receive the first sport-specific mental health support in Canada.
- The project will be carried out by PhD candidate, former Gee-Gees women’s basketball leader and uOttawa Defy the Conventional champion, Krista Van Slingerland, in collaboration with Dr. Durand- Bush and a team of stakeholders. The project will evolve over three phases: (1) Design, (2) Implementation, and (3) Evaluation.
- The **Design Phase** will serve to develop a culturally appropriate, inclusive, collaborative, and comprehensive mental health service delivery model and team (MHSDMT) that is patient-centered, sport-relevant, and lifespan-oriented. Grounded in a Canadian Health Promotion philosophy (WHO, 1986), the Centre will be designed collaboratively by a group of 20 key stakeholders from the realms of mental health, sport, and academia using a Participatory Action Research methodology (Cook, 2012). The MHSDMT will be informed by existing effective Collaborative Care Models that are team driven, population-focused, measurement guided, and evidence-based (American Psychiatric Association, 2016).
- The MHSDMT will be pilot tested during the **Implementation Phase** in partnership with the uOttawa Sports Services High Performance Centre and the Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group (i.e., Redblacks, Fury, and 67’s). These organizations will

provide access to competitive athletes and coaches who will be self-referred or directed to the CCMHS by their attending physician or support team. Following the model designed in the first phase, these individuals will be evaluated and assigned to work with a team of practitioners to address their mental health challenges and needs.

- The overall effectiveness and sustainability of the MHSDM and CCMHS will be assessed in the **Evaluation Phase** based on various outcomes identified in the previous phases and evaluation techniques used in the healthcare field (Alden, Hoa, & Bhawuk, 2004).
- The CCMHS will be the first of its kind in Canada and the second in the world. It will contribute to the advancement of research, practice, and policy to improve varsity and overall sport in Canada. It will also position the University of Ottawa as a leading institution in athlete and coach mental health and wellness on the international stage.
- The University should move ahead with speed to begin detailed planning to support and link the current development work on: (a) the **uOttawa Wellness, Recreation, and Sports strategy** that will encourage and support increased active living for ALL individuals on campus, and (b) the **Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport (CCMHS)**. The rationale for the CCMHS is that university student-athletes and coaches have unique needs, demands, and pressures that they must effectively and timely manage on a daily basis in a variety of competitive high performance contexts, which can make them vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues. Evidence shows that these issues should be addressed by practitioners who understand the competitive sport environment and can interact within this context, as necessary. At the moment, there are few practitioners in Canada, including on university campuses, who are formally trained in both sport sciences and clinical psychology. Furthermore, there are no *multidisciplinary* mental health care models and teams and *specialized* clinics in Canada that provide services to improve mental health and mental illness in competitive student-athletes and coaches. This was the impetus to develop a novel project aimed at designing, implementing, and evaluating a Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport with expert stakeholders from the mental health, sport, and academic fields. This project is in its early phases thus it is timely to champion and link it with the uOttawa Wellness, Recreation, and Sports strategy that is currently under-development.
- Together, these two initiatives fit well with and should be connected to the creation of a broader **Institute for Disabilities Studies** at uOttawa. By moving quickly, senior administrators can help these projects come to fruition and put uOttawa on the map as a pioneering and leading institution in the areas of both disability and mental health and sport. The Canadian Institute for Disabilities Studies and the Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport would be the first of their kind in Canada. They would help to attract needed funds from the private and public sectors, as well as expert researchers and practitioners worldwide.