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Cover Page Footnote

The researcher acknowledges Dr. Nicole Gabana for publishing inspirational research to conduct this study.

Promoting Well-Being Among Intercollegiate Student–Athletes: The Impact of Collegiate Sport Business Practices

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Abstract

The purpose of this experimental study was to identify if the implementation of an educational gratitude workshop could increase intercollegiate student–athletes’ self-reported perceptions of well-being and reduce stress, considering sport administrators must address rising mental health concerns among athletes. Participants of various sport teams were randomly assigned to an experimental or control group to assess differences among self-reported measures of state gratitude, psychological distress, life satisfaction, athlete burnout, and perceived available support in sport. Statistical significance was found in the data analysis, which demonstrated that the workshop was meaningful, and it significantly influenced the experimental group’s perceived available support in sport emotionally. The data suggest that student–athletes perceive there is not enough emotional support available to them in their sport, and workshops could help. Implementing educational workshops could help collegiate sport administrators meet the needs of student–athletes’ well-being as a cost-effective solution.

Keywords: athlete, well-being, sport, business, stress

Background

The mental health of intercollegiate student–athletes increasingly became a national topic of interest primarily due to the high prevalence of stress and mental health concerns among the high-profile population of college student–athletes (American College of Sports Medicine [ACSM], 2021; de Souza et al., 2021; Kaier et al., 2015) and all college students in general (Colarossi, 2021). Student–athletes’ well-being is suffering due in part to the pressure to perform in their sports, and there is a lack of support and resources on campuses to respond to these needs effectively (Colarossi, 2021; de Souza, 2021). Student–athletes experienced more significant mental health and wellness issues than non-student-athletes (Brown et al., 2021). Like non-athletes, student–athletes experienced a high prevalence of depression, but student–athletes further experienced a stigma of mental health, which has resulted in an underreporting of health concerns along with underutilizing of support and resources (Colarossi, 2021; de Souza, 2021). Student–athletes experienced more significant stigmas and pressures than non-athletes (Brown et al., 2021; Kaier et al., 2015).

College athletes experienced many stressors contributing to compromised well-being (Beauchemin, 2014). Academics and athletics could be challenging to balance for student–athletes (Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020). Bird (2018) found the most frequently reported factors and predictors that prevented student–athletes from seeking help and treatment included their perceived benefits, perceived susceptibility, and perceived attitudes factors. Collegiate sport business professionals must meet the needs of student–athletes. Not only are sport experiences beneficial for postcollegiate life skills, but meeting student–athletes’ needs help with recruitment and retention (Berg & Warner, 2019). Yet many collegiate sport administrators face challenges with stretched budgets (Sports Business Journal, 2024), hindering the hiring of full-time sport psychologists, resource challenges, and sport coaches unsure how to address athlete mental health.

Significance of the Study

Although this study was akin to research conducted by Gabana (2017), it takes a novel approach as the first known experimental study to implement an outreach initiative focusing on gratitude among student–athletes. The implications demonstrate how educational workshops could help collegiate sport administrators meet the needs of student–athletes’ well-being. The following research question guided this study: To what extent do preventative, educational workshops reduce self-reported levels of stress and enhance well-being for intercollegiate student–athletes?

Methodology

This study was a randomized controlled trial. After 2 weeks of participant recruitment, participants arrived and completed a consent form. They then were randomly assigned to Room 1 or Room 2 for a one-time, 90-minute workshop. Room 1 was the experimental group room, and Room 2 was the control group room. All participants completed the paper postassessment survey. Paper surveys, instead of electronic surveys accessed through their phone, eliminated the possibility that participants could read text messages or social media feeds to influence their emotions.

Participants

A total of 54 student–athlete participants from various sports teams at a private National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II university participated. Participants varied among in-season and off-season sports during the completion of this intervention, which included fall, winter, and spring sports, including track and field, football, basketball, softball, wrestling, volleyball, baseball, golf, soccer, lacrosse, tennis, and swimming and diving. The majority of participants ranged from 18 to 22 years of age and included self-identified sexes. Most participants were females and were underclassmen freshmen students who represented 8 different sports.

Data Collection

This study used one postassessment survey. No other data collection methods were used. The survey ended with asking the participant to provide demographic information, including questions relating to their age, identified sex, associated sport, year in college, and if they received any athletic scholarship money.

Measures

The survey included questions from the following subscales: state gratitude, psychological distress, life satisfaction, athlete burnout, and perceived available support in sport. State gratitude was measured using The Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC). This self-report assessed how accurately the adjectives “grateful,” “thankful,” and “appreciative” described oneself over the past few days (McCullough et al., 2002). It utilized a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The scale was adapted from Gabana (2017). Psychological distress was measured using the Brief Symptom Inventory-18 (BSI-18). This self-report assessed participants’ level of distress over the past 7 days, which measured depressive, anxiety, and somatization symptoms (Derogatis, 2001).

Life satisfaction was measured using The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). This self-report measure (Diener et al., 1985) assessed participants’ global life satisfaction (beyond sport). Athlete burnout was measured using the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ). This self-report assessed participants’ levels of burnout. It was divided into three dimensions that connected to burnout in athletes: (a) emotional and physical exhaustion, (b) reduced sense of accomplishment, and (c) sport devaluation (Raedeke & Smith, 2001).

Perceived available support in sport was measured using the Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q). This self-report assessed participants’ perceived social support specific to athletics (Freeman et al., 2011). It had four subscales, representing various dimensions of social support that athletes perceived as available to them within the sport context: (a) emotional support, (b) esteem support, (c) informational support, and (d) tangible support. Individual subscales were analyzed specifically instead of a comprehensive overview of the PASS-Q to garner insight about the specific support perceptions. Lastly, meaningfulness was measured by just one self-reported question that assessed participants’

perceived meaningfulness of the workshop. The list of assessments is compiled in Table 1.

Table 1

How Each Research Topic Aligned With an Assessment

Research topic	Assessment
State gratitude	Gratitude Adjective Check List (GAC)
Psychological distress	Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18)
Life satisfaction	Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)
Athlete burnout	Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ)
Perceived social support	Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q)

Procedures

Upon arrival, participants completed a nonsignature paper consent form. Consent forms were coded with a number one or two to designate which group each participant was assigned and to protect privacy through anonymity. Afterwards, all participants completed a survey.

Experimental Group

To ensure consistency and prevent inaccuracies, the experimental group gratitude workshop was facilitated by the researcher. It consisted of three components: (a) didactic, (b) gratitude writing activity, and (c) discussion/debrief. At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to introduce themselves to the other participants sitting at their tables.

The Three Components of the Experimental Workshop. First, the didactic component began with introducing the general concept of gratitude (e.g., What is gratitude?), rhetorical questions about gratitude as a character trait to prompt inquiry and curiosity (e.g., How does gratitude work?), a brief review of gratitude research (e.g., physical and psychological benefits, link to positive psychology, relatedness to student–athletes). Then the researcher shared a personal illustration of how gratitude was used in their own life (a personal testimony).

Second, participants completed a gratitude writing activity for 20–30 minutes. Participants made a list of as many things for which they felt grateful in their lives and then wrote a brief statement about why they felt grateful for each item on their lists. The purpose was to prompt reflection and meaning of those items in their lives.

Last, within their groups at their tables, participants took turns discussing their responses, their gratitude lists, and the rationales behind their appreciation. Then, together as a large group, several volunteers shared their reflections. The researcher debriefed by soliciting participants' thoughts and feelings about the activity. The workshop concluded with the researcher verbally sharing strategies participants could use to continue expressing gratitude daily.

Control Group

The control group participants gathered in a separate space down the hall from the experimental group. Participants watched a 90-minute documentary about the world (which was not related to gratitude nor had any influence on survey responses). The researcher trained a research assistant to facilitate the control group "mock intervention" with clear guidelines about facilitating the intervention. Participants took the survey afterward.

Data Analysis

Assessment data from the survey was analyzed using t-tests. A t-test was used to compare the means of both groups across each survey instrument. The t-test was used to determine if there were significant differences between the two groups. An independent sample t-test was performed because participants in both groups were exposed to different conditions. Two-tailed t-tests were performed for each of the six variable scales independently. The assumptions for all scales were analyzed separately. Cronbach's alpha values were identified for each scale separately. Each scale's Cronbach's alpha value ranged between 0.66–0.95, before adjusting data from a few missing responses with averages.

Results

Participants' demographics were similar in both the control group ($n = 26$) and experimental group ($n = 28$). Most participants were underclassmen freshmen students ($n = 32$), between 18–20 years of age ($n = 49$). Participants represented eight different sports and there were more females ($n = 35$) than males ($n = 19$). The collective results revealed two statistical significance observations: (a) it was meaningful to student-athletes to participate in a gratitude workshop and (b) the workshop influenced student-athletes' perceived available emotional support in sport.

Subscales

State Gratitude Using the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC)

Results showed that participants in both groups had moderate state gratitude levels in the experimental group ($M = 10.82$, $SD = 2.05$) and control group ($M = 11.30$, $SD = 2.54$). It assessed how accurately the adjectives "grateful," "thankful," and "appreciative" described oneself over the past few days, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups' GAC scores ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .441$). Rather, both groups demonstrated a moderate to high score of gratefulness because all mean scores were in the top third of total results. Gabana (2017) stated that a higher total GAC score indicated greater state gratitude.

Psychological Distress Using the Brief Symptom Inventory-18 (BSI-18)

Psychological distress was measured using the BSI-18 scale, which measured participants' level of distress over the past 7 days with three subscales that measured depressive, anxiety, and somatization symptoms. The 18-item, Likert-type scale assessed participants' level of agreeability ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much) with phrases such as “feelings of worthlessness” (depressive), “suddenly scared for no reason” (anxiety), and “nausea or upset stomach” (somatization). Results were calculated by summing the total score of the 18 items, thus representing general distress (Gabana, 2017). The results showed that participants in both groups had “a little bit” or “moderate” levels of psychological distress in the experimental group ($M = 16.67$, $SD = 10.60$) and the control group ($M = 15.30$, $SD = 10.87$). There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups GAC scores ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .641$).

Life Satisfaction Using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

Life satisfaction was measured using the SWLS scale, which measured participants' global life satisfaction. A very high total score (range from 30–35) indicates that one is highly satisfied with their life (Diener, 2006); a high total score (range from 25–29) represents that one likes their life and feels like things are mostly good; an average total score (range from 20–24) signifies that one would like to see improvement in their life; a slightly low total score (ranging from 15–19) represents one is slightly below average in life satisfaction; a low total score (ranging from 10–14) denotes an overall dissatisfaction with life; and a very low total score (ranging from 5–9) represents that one is extremely unhappy with their life (Diener, 2006).

The results showed the experimental group participants had a high global life satisfaction appraisal ($M = 25.10$, $SD = 4.67$) and the control group had an average global life satisfaction appraisal ($M = 24.23$, $SD = 4.36$). A high total score represents that one likes one's life and feels like things are mostly good, and an average total score indicates that one would like to see improvement in their life (Diener, 2006). There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups' SWLS scores ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .48$).

Athlete Burnout Using the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ)

The results showed similarities between experimental group participants ($M = 43.1$, $SD = 13.19$) and control group participants ($M = 41.3$, $SD = 10$). Missing scores were adjusted with question averages from the respective group because there were so few missing scores (one participant skipped one question; another participant skipped two questions). There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups' scores ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .58$).

Perceived Available Support in Sport Using the Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q)

The results showed differences between the experimental group participants ($M = 11.28$, $SD = 3.16$) and control group participants ($M = 9.82$, $SD = 2.77$). There were no statistically significant differences overall between the two groups perceived available support in sport scores with a medium effect size ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .078$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$). The results among the Emotional Support subscale between the experimental group participants ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.93$) and control group participants ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.84$) did reveal statistically significant differences ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .023$, Cohen's $d =$

0.63). Overall mean scores were in the bottom quarter of total results. Additionally, the results showed that participants in both groups rated all subscale supports as “moderately available” within the 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 (“not at all available”) to 4 (“extremely available”), yet all experimental group ratings were higher than all control group ratings for every scale and subscale. Table 2 provides information about the PASS-Q.

Table 2
Perceived Available Support in Sport Scale Statistics by Subscale

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Emotional Support</i>				
<i>Experimental</i>	2.98	0.93	2.00	0.023*
<i>Control</i>	2.41	0.84		
<i>Esteem Support</i>				
<i>Experimental</i>	2.60	0.92	2.00	0.085*
<i>Control</i>	2.19	0.81		
<i>Informational Support</i>				
<i>Experimental</i>	2.86	0.93	2.00	0.379
<i>Control</i>	2.66	0.71		
<i>Tangible Support</i>				
<i>Experimental</i>	2.83	0.71	2.00	0.171
<i>Control</i>	2.55	0.73		

Note. *significant.

Workshop Meaningfulness Scale

This single question asked, “How meaningful was this session for you?” Responses were scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all meaningful) to 4 (very meaningful). In the control group, two participants did not answer this question, and in the experimental group, five participants skipped this question. Therefore, the missing data were adjusted based on averages. The results showed differences between experimental group participants ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.71$) and control group participants ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.74$). There were statistically significant differences between the two groups’ workshop meaningfulness scores with a large effect size ($t(52) = 2.00$, $p = .0006$, Cohen’s $d = 0.999$). Specifically, the data analysis of the Meaningfulness results revealed that the gratitude intervention was meaningful for the experimental group, based on self-reporting. Data showed that 71% of experimental group participants said the workshop was “meaningful” or “very meaningful” compared to 42% of responses in the control group. Data about workshop meaningfulness are provided in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Workshop Meaningfulness Scale Statistics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Experimental</i>	3.07	0.71	2.00	$p < 0.001^*$
<i>Control</i>	2.34	0.74		

Note. *significant.

Table 4
Workshop Meaningfulness Scale Statistics by Question

	Control group (N = 26)		Experimental group (N = 28)	
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent
1 (“Not at all meaningful”)	3	11.5%	0	0%
2 (“Slightly meaningful”)	7	26.9%	6	21.4%
3 (“Meaningful”)	10	38.4%	12	48.8%
4 (“Very meaningful”)	1	3.8%	8	28.5%
Missing	5	19.2%	2	7.1%

Discussion

The data analyses revealed two statistical significance observations: It was meaningful to student–athletes to participate in a gratitude workshop, and the workshop influenced student–athletes’ perceived available emotional support in sport. This study reveals the importance of student–athlete perceptions of available emotional support in sport (e.g., workshops). Although gratitude can enhance one’s ability to notice available resources, thereby increasing the likelihood that one will use those resources, the PASS-Q scale showed a statistical significance in emotional support. Therefore, administrators may not need to focus on the quantity of available support but rather the meaningfulness and perceptions of emotional support, such as improving emotional support through team cohesion. This supports quality over quantity.

Implications for Sport Business Practices

Sport business professionals must examine budget allocations for student–athlete well-being to reflect department priorities, strategic initiatives, and identify potential changes. For example, streamlining resources where sport programs partner together to host programming or uniting with nonsport professionals, like clinical counselors, during the off-season. Furthermore, this cost-effective workshop would meet the NCAA goals to provide more resources for student–athlete well-being. Supporting student–athlete well-being would help recruitment and retention over time, as prioritizing athlete experiences and the value of sport is important. Among U.S. intercollegiate student–athletes, gratitude and

perceived social support have significant positive correlations among each other (Chen, 2013; Chen & Kee, 2008; Gabana et al., 2019).

Limitations

This study relied on the data collected only once after one workshop. Additional time points of data collection could glean greater insight, such as a longitudinal study. Also, only 54 participants voluntarily arrived to participate. Thus, the generalizability of the findings to additional populations is limited.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that offering preventative, educational workshops can be meaningful and influence the perception of available support in sport settings. These data are instrumental for the business practices of collegiate sport professionals to help athletes build the skills necessary to cope with their sport's mental and physical demands.

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