

The Role of the FAR in Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Health and Wellness

This document was developed as a result of the third Division II FAR Advanced Leadership Institute in 2015 and is consistent with one of the Guiding Principles in the Model FAR Document (2011), which states that *FARs should also serve as advocates for the student-athletes' well-being and a quality experience in an environment of tolerance, respect, and inclusion.*

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Introduction:

Vision.

The faculty athletics representative is uniquely positioned to help develop a caring and supportive campus environment that fosters student-athlete mental health and wellness. This document includes best practices that will contribute to a proactive and informed campus that, in turn, provides a safe and supporting environment for all student-athletes. To meet these goals, this document includes suggestions for collaboration among the FAR, faculty, academic support services, the athletics department, and campus mental health professionals to encourage open discussion to promote lifelong habits for mental health and wellness.

Why now?

This document is the continuation of work completed at previous FAR Advanced Leadership Institutes. In 2011, the Model Faculty Athletics Representative Document was designed as a resource for FARs to better clarify their role. The first of three guiding principles in the document is aimed at “ensuring a quality student-athlete experience and student-athlete well-being.” In the document, it is noted that FARs should:

...Offer themselves as independent sources of support and advice to student-athletes.

and

...Inform student-athletes of campus support services, including academic tutoring, advising and career development, counseling and health care, disability, and financial aid.

In 2013, the Model Faculty Athletics Representative Document Addendum *Defining the Role of the FAR in the Strategic Communications Relating to Intercollegiate Athletics* directed FARs to “serve as advocates for the student-athletes’ well-being and a quality experience in an environment of tolerance, respect, and inclusion.”

Although implied, mental health care was not specifically addressed in either the Model Faculty Athletics Representative Document or its 2013 addendum. However, Dr. Brian Hainline, chief medical officer for the NCAA, has identified mental health/wellness as the top health and safety concern for student-athletes across the country, regardless of division. In addition, during a presentation at the 2015 FAR Advanced Leadership Institute, Dr. Kenneth Chew, member of the NCAA Mental Health Task Force, reported that, according to the American College Health Association/National College Health Assessment 2014 survey, 32.6 percent of students have “felt so depressed it was difficult to function,” and 86.4 percent of students reported “feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do.” Dr. Chew further stated that “athletes experience as much or more psychological stress as non-athletes, (but) use professional services less often.” Faculty can play an important part in helping students access the support and resources they need, as noted in this excerpt from a 2015 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education:

Students in the grip of mental distress often show signs of it in their academic work and classroom behavior. Faculty members, especially those who interact frequently with them, are well placed to pick up on warning signs. But professors often need help figuring out how to respond. “What [the faculty] tell us is, ‘Students come to us and tell [faculty] things, but we’re not quite sure what to do next’, says David R. Reetz, director of counseling services at Aurora University” (Howard, 2015).

The FAR can help faculty learn how to respond more effectively to mental health issues by raising awareness of this health problem and the extent to which it exists on campus.

The complexity and ubiquity of the mental health and wellness problem for student-athletes is captured by the 2014 NCAA publication titled, “Mind, Body and Sport: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness.” This document describes a variety of mental health concerns through personal stories and essays from athletes, former athletes, coaches, athletic trainers, and mental health professionals. Additionally, this publication provides strategies to help student-athletes and other stakeholders respond to mental health and wellness concerns on our campuses.

“Mind, Body and Sport” became the foundation of the 2016 document titled: “Inter-Association Consensus Document: Best Practices for Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness (“Best Practices”). This groundbreaking document, which is endorsed by 24 of the leading mental health, sports medicine and higher education organizations in the country, offers the first-ever consensus document designed to provide an athletics or a sports medicine department – regardless of size and resources – with recommendations for supporting and promoting student-athlete mental health. “Best Practices” specifically emphasizes the central role of FARs in helping to identify student-athletes who may benefit from accessing resources related to mental health, normalizing care seeking and fostering a health-promoting environment that supports mental well-being and resilience. Specifically, “Best Practices” states that FARs should be provided with educational information that addresses:

- Programming to support first responders.
- Signs and symptoms of mental health disorders.
- The importance of creating, and how to create, a positive team culture that promotes personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy and positive relations with others, and the importance of formal and informal interactions with student-athletes in supporting these positive processes.
- Information about sexual assault, interpersonal violence and hazing.
- The role coaches can play in encouraging and supporting team members who are facing mental health challenges to seek appropriate care from a licensed qualified practitioner.

- Information about the importance of sleep in both well-being and performance, including the sleep environment, sleep duration and sleep timing.

“Best Practices” is an invaluable resource for all FARs, and it includes a checklist that can be used as a resource when evaluating institutional mental health plans.

Why the FAR?

Mental health issues are a concern for multiple departments on campuses; however, FARs are uniquely positioned to help shepherd this process within an athletics environment as they function as a bridge between the academic and athletics sectors on campus. These recommendations are made with the understanding that the application of best practices will depend on the capabilities of the institution.

As described in “Mind, Body and Sport,” FARs are identified as integral to the process of assisting the various stakeholders in creating a needs assessment (Checklist No.1, pg.112). As a preface to this checklist, it is noted that:

Athletics departments and sport medicine departments can play a critical role: establishing prevention programming and reducing stigma around care-seeking, setting a plan to encourage effective early detection, and communicating to all stakeholders about how to manage emergency and nonemergency mental health issues.

We believe that FARs need to work in conjunction with athletics departments and other relevant departments on campus in developing these plans and establishing this programming. FARs and their fellow faculty colleagues see student-athletes on a regular basis in the classroom, during advising and office hours, etc. and may notice changes in academic performance, attendance, mood or attitude, or other forms of behavior. In addition, FARs should help create awareness among faculty, student-athletes, and the rest of the campus community.

It has been noted that “as with physical injuries, mental health problems may, by their severity, affect athletics performance and limit or even preclude training and competition until successfully managed and treated” (Managing Student-Athletes Mental Health Issues, 2007). Mental health problems can also impact academic performance; thus, it is imperative for FARs and faculty at large to be engaged in mental health awareness programs and in creating an environment that encourages discussion and support.

Awareness Creation (educating the campus community):

The FAR is in a unique position to interact with diverse stakeholders across campus and, thus, can successfully coordinate and share information and serve as an advocate on behalf of student-athletes. The FAR should take a primary role in helping to educate the campus community on

mental health and wellness issues, providing access to best practices, and coordinating the creation of a more informed campus community. Toward this goal, the FAR could:

- * Communicate relevant information to constituent groups.
- * Coordinate professional development on specific areas of concern.
- * Work with important constituent groups (e.g., faculty, coaches, Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, training staff) on campus to create greater awareness of student-athlete mental health issues.
- * Educate and empower the SAAC to take the initiative in identifying student-athletes who may benefit from wellness resources.
- * Promote the creation of a safe, inclusive, and receptive culture that would allow student-athletes with mental health issues to be more comfortable in openly discussing their situation.

The Faculty Assembly or Faculty Senate.

The importance of mental health to academic success is well documented, but the differences for student-athletes and their specific injuries and concerns can be misunderstood. The FAR should:

- * Partner with the existing mental health professionals to provide practical information for early recognition of possible mental health issues.
- * Communicate up-to-date information to faculty with respect to the educational and emotional needs of student-athletes in and out of the classroom, particularly with respect to mental health and sport injuries.

Counseling/Athletic Training/Medical Services.

The FAR should be informed about the coordination and integration of the activities and resources related to medical care of student-athletes:

- * Discuss and/or encourage the creation of a uniform protocol for responding, treating, and supporting student-athletes and their specific concerns.
- * Assist mental health professionals in educating the broader campus community about the mental health issues of student-athletes and their management.

Student-Athletes and the SAAC.

The FAR should work with the campus SAAC to:

- * Provide information and resources and facilitate the dissemination of information to athletes and teams.
- * Encourage and help SAAC take a more active role in empowering student-athletes to care for themselves and their peers.
- * Create an environment where student-athletes in distress are more likely to seek assistance.

Special attention should be given to informing and educating freshman student-athletes about the new situations they may experience as college athletes, on ways to manage their personal health, and on available support systems.

Coaches/Athletics Department.

The FAR should:

- * Help coordinate information transfer to coaches and staff within the athletics department, ideally through arranging service training by medical and medical health experts on campus.
- * Help raise awareness among coaches concerning misunderstood mental health problems faced by student-athletes.
- * Assess the existing culture of the teams and the athletics department as a whole to be proactive in developing and maintaining a positive athletics environment.
- * Work to promote an enhanced culture of inclusion, safety, and positive sportsmanship.

Resources:

The FAR is expected to serve as an advocate for student-athletes, particularly with regard to student-athlete welfare. However, it is not incumbent upon the FAR to serve as a counselor or psychology professional as a standard part of their daily duties, nor is it expected that FARs will have training or expertise when it comes to the continuum between mental illness and mental health.

FARs should take part in training on campuses relative to recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues. They are not expected to be a clinician or a counselor, but should have some education in learning how to recognize signs of mental distress. Some institutions offer QPR (Question Persuade Refer) for suicide prevention training to students (and it is required of Resident Assistants). Other campuses (or even larger communities) offer programs like Mental Health First Aid, where the goal is to teach "lay people" some of the basics about mental health. The programs are typically pretty brief (1.5-2 hours) and can really be effective in helping others become comfortable in discussing these concerns.

FARs can effectively assist student-athletes by serving as a conduit to the current and potential resources on their campus. FARs can also help influence the culture on campus by recognizing stakeholders who may need more education and training around the mental health services that are available to the student-athletes they serve. The following list, in no particular order, would represent potential resources to the FAR:

Athletics Department Resources

- Athletic Training Staff.
- Sports Medicine Staff/Team Physician.
- Sport Psychology Staff (when available).
- Athletics Coaches.

- Strength and Conditioning Personnel.
- Athletics Administration.

FAR questions for this stakeholder group:

- * Do the individuals within these departments understand the pressures that student-athletes face?
- * Have they received training or education around the topic of mental health or the mental health-related challenges that student-athletes face?
- * Are pre-participation exams comprehensive? Do PPEs include screenings related to mental health, concussion, use of psychiatric medications, prior counseling?

Campus-wide Resources

- Student Counseling Staff/Addiction Groups (NA/AA).
- Student Health Services.
- Sexual Assault Response Team.
- Title IX Coordinator.
- Faculty/Faculty Senate.
- Residential Life/Chaplain.
- Academic Advisors.
- University Life Skills Team.
- Risk Management/Human Resource.
 - Provide Clarification on HIPAA and FERPA from an Institutional Perspective.
- Campus Police/Campus Security.
- Emergency Response Teams.
- Peer Resources/Learning Coaches.

- What is a Peer Learning Coach? According to Brodie McKenzie, student-athlete at Simon Fraser University:

A Peer Learning Coach is a junior or senior student-athlete on each team who acts as a mentor for their fellow teammates. The Learning Coach's main role is to provide guidance to the freshmen, and present them with academic resources to increase their chances of succeeding academically during their transition into college or university. They oversee their freshmen's study habits and ensure that they are staying on top of their schoolwork.

Because freshmen student-athletes may be more likely to take advice from their teammates, the Learning Coach can also take on a counselor-like role and consult with underclass athletes during periods of crisis. It may be more comfortable for a student-athlete to be open about their mental health issues with members of their team, as opposed to their coaches or other athletics faculty. The learning coach can work closely

with their respective coaches and athletics departments, informing them if their teammates are in crisis.

FAR questions for this stakeholder group:

- * Do the individuals within these departments understand the pressures that face student-athletes?
- * Have they received training or education around the topic of mental health or the mental health-related challenges that student-athletes face?
- * Do the professionals in these departments have the appropriate qualifications, as well as the appropriate licensure and training to work with mental health issues?
- * Do they have training and experience in working with student-athletes across a variety of sports? Is there a diversity of qualifications within the staff (i.e., training to work effectively with males, females, student-athletes from diverse backgrounds, LGBTQ)?
- * Are the service providers available/accessible? Are you familiar with the location and hours of operation? Are the services consistent with the schedules of the student-athletes on campus? Are they appropriately staffed? Is there a wait time?
- * How are referrals to these resources best coordinated? Is there a cost for these services or a limit to the number of sessions that are available to student-athletes?
- * Is there a plan or back-up when these services are not immediately available? Is there a plan for proceeding during times of emergency?
- * What challenges do HIPAA and FERPA present for communication with these groups?

Community Resources.

- 911
- Emergency Departments of Hospitals

FAR questions for this stakeholder group:

- * Is there a Mental Health Emergency Action Plan in place?

National/Online Resources.

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (U.S.A. and Canada): 1-800-273-8255
- Supportforsport.org includes a series of role playing vignettes, along with suggestions on how to initiate potentially difficult conversations related to mental health issues.
- “It’s On Us” - NCAA campaign to fight sexual assault: www.ncaa.org/themes/its-us
- “It Gets Better” - Project to inspire hope for young people facing harassment: www.itgetsbetter.org
- “Heads Up” Center for Disease Control and Prevention - Helps you recognize, respond to, and minimize the risk of concussion or other serious brain injury. www.cdc.gov/HeadsUp//index.html
- Students of Concern Committee (SOCC; University of California, Berkley)

- *Winning at the College Level: Thriving as a First-Year Student-Athlete* by Tyrance and NiiLampti (2014). Hero House Publishing.

Educational Resources for Mental Health Screenings.

- <https://mentalhealthscreening.org/>
- Inter-Association Consensus Document: Best Practices for Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness

NCAA Publications / Resources.

- Inter-Association Consensus Document: Best Practices for Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness
- Mind, Body and Sport
<http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/MindBodySport.pdf>
- Mental Health: Managing Student-Athletes' Mental Health Issues
https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/2007_managing_mental_health_0.pdf
- Addressing Sexual Assault and Interpersonal Violence
<https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/Sexual-Violence-Prevention.pdf>
- Champions of Respect: Inclusion of LGBTQ Student-Athletes and Staff in NCAA Programs
<http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CRLGBTQ.pdf>
- Sport Science Institute
www.ncaa.org/health-and-safety/sport-science-institute

Individual Resources.

- Family/Parents National Alliance on Mental Illness – www.nami.org
- Friends on Campus National Alliance on Mental Illness – www.nami.org
- SAMHSA -- <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
- Jed Foundation -- <http://www.ulifeline.org/>

Action for creating a safe, supportive, and informed community.

The following steps will help to create a caring and supportive campus environment that fosters the mental health and wellness of student athletes.

1. Conduct an inventory of the existing resources on campus related to mental health of student athletes. The *Mental Health Checklists* in *Mind, Body and Sport* are an excellent resource. The checklists are: Prevention and Preparation, Managing Nonemergency Mental Health Issues, Managing Emergency Mental Health Issues, After Managing a Health Issue. This document is available at
<http://www.ncaapublications.com/p-4375-mind-body-and-sport-understanding-and-supporting-student-athlete-mental-wellness.aspx>

2. Assess existing structures for support on campus; speak with key administrators who provide support services and invite your AD, SAAC president, lead athletic trainer, and director of your counseling center to lunch. The level of current services for students with mental health issues can be learned and discussed, and the paths taken by student-athletes to initiate these services can be determined. It will be the rare campus where roadblocks to service are absent. Importantly, this group can plan and implement improvements.
3. Take advantage of the electronic and social media that students commonly use for information gathering and communication. Create and/or expand the FAR webpage or presence on the athletics department website. Provide links to useful resources on and off campus.
4. Encourage your SAAC chapter to use social media platforms to share links to relevant stories about student-athletes' mental health and wellness, and available services and resources.
5. Analyze data collected during exit interviews. Results are valuable for assessing student-athlete experiences and their estimations of how safe and supportive the campus environment has been. A sample exit interview can be found at:
http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/I_WinonaState_SA-ExitInterview.pdf

Conclusion:

Ultimately, FARs are ideally positioned to be advocates for student-athletes. Given that the FAR's role involves the assurance of student-athlete well-being, the recognition of mental health distress and problems associated with mental illness are inherently involved in this function. Within their role, FARs can serve student-athletes most effectively by being an influential member on their campus, rather than a mental health professional. In this capacity, FARs are responsible for being available to the student-athlete, knowing the resources on their respective campuses, helping others become aware of the stresses and demands that regularly challenge student-athletes and networking with the appropriate stakeholders on campus who can most effectively address the mental health challenges that student-athletes face.

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<https://uhs.berkeley.edu/students/pdf/CPS/AssistingtheEmotionallyDistressedStudent.pdf>.

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