

Faculty Senate Athletics Committee (FSAC) Report – 11-22-2021

Co-chairs – Bonnie Ownley and James Williams

Members present: Sarah Lamb, James Chyz, Matt Harris, Jon Hathaway, Kyung Joon Han, Harrison Meadows, Rachelle Scott, Aaron Smith, Sylvia Trendafilova, Joe Scogin

Guest: Kristen Martin, Director of Mental Health and Wellness, UTK.

Kristen Martin met with the committee to discuss the mental health resources available to student athletes, as well as the challenges that athletes face. Kristen joined UTK in 2002 when the men's and women's programs were separate. Initially she worked with women athletes and the men's athletic program worked with an outside provider. Both programs expanded because the NCAA mandated mental health education and prioritized it. In 2012, the men's and women's programs at UTK were combined. Mental health education and services are focused on both life-related issues and athletic performance. The Mental Health and Wellness Office is part of the Sports Medicine group in the Athletics Department. The Office has grown with additional counselors, psychiatrists, performance personnel, and a graduate student.

When Kristen first began at UTK, eating disorders of women athletes were major issues. Currently, anxiety, depression and transition issues are more common. Different levels of care are offered depending on the issues that the student is facing. They can also use outside resources for the most serious issues, such as suicidal behavior.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, new issues arose and intensified. Initially, athletes in spring sports (2020) were shocked that competitions were cancelled – for seniors who participated in spring sports, the initial pandemic spring season would be their last opportunity to compete in intercollegiate sports. But they adjusted to online classes and meetings, and returning students looked forward to meeting with other athletes in fall 2020. Their primary mental health challenges were anxiety and depression. Some felt overwhelmed and depression deepened. When students were sent home due to the pandemic, many student athletes faced complicated family situations. The Mental Health and Wellness providers worked to normalize mental health issues, i.e., it's okay to have mental health problems. Access to services is greater now, and there is much focus on coping skills.

Student athletes learn to recognize their own personal goals versus the goals of others (family, coaches). They learn to recognize their own mistakes and know that social media can play a role in their mental health (through evaluation and judgement). The same level of problems can be manifest differently in men and women. Men tend to turn to drugs while women experience depression. Many student athletes just want space to be heard (a listening ear), and to allow them to be in the space between success and failure.

Students have reported that faculty have become more flexible, or kinder and gentler. Kristen was asked if faculty can contact the Thornton Center and Mental Health and Wellness Office if they are concerned about the mental health of a student athlete, without violating FERPA. Senators were advised that they should reach out to 974-HELP if they were concerned about a student. Kristen said that students are usually appreciative of such actions.