The Effect of University Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic on College Student-Athletes

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As a result of the decision of many universities to de-densify campus to slow the spread of COVID-19, many students across the nation in on-campus housing were asked to return home (Hess, 2020), which resulted in many different logistical difficulties. A study conducted by The Healthy Minds Network (2020) reported that approximately one-third of students’ living situations changed and two-thirds of students reported their financial situation had become more stressful as a result of the pandemic. Returning home resulted in many additional difficulties for students including ample access to technology, such as laptops, reliable internet to complete online work, or a safe and quiet space to study.

On top of the changes outlined by the universities, the NCAA also limited athletes’ participation in sporting-related activities, which resulted in significant changes to the daily lives of student-athletes. The NCAA found that this changed student-athletes' patterns of behavior including sleeping routine (time to bed, and wake-up time), number of hours slept, and changes in physical activity (NCAA, 2020).

Due to the pandemic, college students and student-athletes faced additional stressors including financial, living situation, and mental health, that may provide barriers to their academic success in a time of uncertainty. The impact of the pandemic on student-athletes may be of greater concern as, generally speaking, student-athletes have access to their own resources, and have a built-in support structure when at their universities. This, coupled with the rigid daily schedule of college student-athletes, may mean the changes had a greater impact on this population of students. The purpose of this study was to explore the impacts of these changes on college students’ and student-athletes’ academic success, stress, and life satisfaction.

This exploratory study used a questionnaire to gather data from a sample of college students and student-athletes. Data were collected at the end of the spring 2020 semester from 87 college students in the United States using a survey shared through social media platforms. Results showed that GPA was not effected by living environment, perceived stress, satisfaction with life, gender, or athlete status. Significant changes in students’ satisfaction with life and perceived stress were found. Significant differences in perceived stress after the pandemic and hours spent on activities were noted between students and student-athletes. Qualitative data suggests living situation had a negative impact on student success and mental health and the lack of a sport routine had a negative impact on student-athlete success and mental health. The short-term impacts on academic success as measured by GPA were non-existent, however, impacts on stress and life satisfaction, and the qualitative perception of negative impact on academic success could lead to long-term impacts on student success and mental health. In the ongoing pandemic, universities and athletic departments should implement programs to help students hand uncertainty and remain resilient in the current college academic and sport environment.