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High School Student Athletes: If Stress Is The Lock Is Communication The Key?

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Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project was meant to analyze the possible issues high school student-athletes may face academically as well as mentally while in school. This issue is important to note because there is an increase in students participating in sports and the offered school support should reflect the growing population. An argument that was found was the possible overlook of the mental well-being of the student-athletes if they are academically succeeding or are accomplished athletes. The primary stakeholder's perspectives chosen were current high school student-athletes because they are able to provide insight into the current issues that student-athletes face. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the data: 1) Providing student-athletes with tutors, study programs, and other resources for academic support. 2) Seasonal mental health and time management training for teachers. 3) The creation of an online platform where teachers and coaches can keep track of the student's grades, homework, tests, and schedules. Three action options have suggested the creation of an online platform for the streamlining of communication between teachers, coaches, and students. is argued to be the most effective way to achieve the goals of supporting high school student-athletes.

Setting the Stage

Growing up I have always had a love for sports, I appreciate the drive, as well as dedication that has to accompany each athlete to succeed. I played numerous sports throughout my k-12 academic career and had to become quite good at juggling the responsibilities that go hand in hand with being a student athlete. While I maintained a good GPA while managing my practice schedule, it still was a struggle to not fall behind, or allow for stress to become unbearable. That opened the conversation amongst my peers concerning the lack of support with this balancing act that affects so many student athletes. What was a common factor was that there at the time not really anything in place for us to be able to discuss with our school, and how they could help us through that struggle. The mental stress that accompanies being a student athlete is just as important as the outcomes in athletics as well as education.

In my high school it was apparent that there was a lack of support and understanding between the athletics department and teachers. There was zero leniency for any missed or late assignments for many of the teachers no matter the excuse. The answer always was; when you participate in sports you are signing up for the extra burden that goes along with that choice. This caused many students including myself to stay up extremely late to complete assignments and brought on extra stress of not finding enough time to satisfy both requirements. In my junior year my waterpolo team had an extremely great season which in turn caused us to have to travel a lot more to compete. Junior year is widely known as a very stressful year for many high school

students because that is the time that we begin to really take a look at college and our options after high school. That was an added stress that was constantly on my mind as well as performing well in my sport, and that stress was overlooked just because I was passing my classes and scoring. That in turn caused the adults

in my life to think that I am doing great in all aspects of my life when that was simply not true. That is a conversation that was never had and should have been.

This in turn caused even more stress to take place because seeing the mounting assignments with the receding energy is a tough thing to take on at a young age. There were also no conversations on how to seek help to work with teachers and coaches so that they were both satisfied with my performance. This left a large divide between sports and education. Many of my peers failed and had to retake vital courses because they were spread too thin. That inspired me to look back now on how we could have been assisted. That is what brought me to find possible solutions to counteract the issues my peers and myself have faced. The mental stress could be assisted by teachers and coaches and a real conversation needs to be had between them to bring forth better well rounded individuals.

Literature Synthesis

To gain a deeper look into the possible difficulties that high school student athletes face, one has to look beyond the grades they may have, or the accolades their sport may have given them. There currently is very little research following the mental health of student athletes, and how they muddle through the possible burn out they may face, or the stress and anxiety that could accompany being a student athlete. The research displays that student athletes have a greater competency in motor skills as well as social skills (Golja & Robic 2014). Because student

athletes outwardly display or mask that they can effectively function in social and academic settings; the student athletes are not questioned into what possibly could be happening internally (Drew & Mathew 2019). Burn out rate is incredibly high in student athletes this can be attributed to the fact that there could be a lack of support from teachers along with coaches. This issue is called to attention because there are studies that express when there is a great foundation between coaches and athletes they perform better in their academics (Nelson, 2023). Because this issue is very unexplored the analysis and solutions are not in effect currently but undoubtedly allude to the issue in how there is a lack of support within the hush school athletics.

Another critical issue that there is currently no research on that I could find is the support that student athletes receive from their teachers. This is due to the fact that there are little to no policies, or accommodations that students receive from the school when they miss vital portions of their education, because of their participation in athletics. The few reasons that students may require this more support is because they miss school due to games and tournaments. They also have to balance their time. Student athletes must juggle their after school work, which can vary in the amount of time needed for each assignment, after they have already dedicated a large amount of time to after school practice. There are also important extra factors that may be in place as well; like if they participate in multiple sports throughout the year, have a job, do outside activities on top of the sport they place. That juggle is argued that it is vastly the reason for the large amount of stress that students face while in sports (Ruser, 2018).

This is an issue that has to be addressed because so many students participate in sports or other activities. That opened the door to seek the resources that could possibly help students who may be struggling with the balance (Stark, 2007) . The physical and mental damage that takes place within students due to the increase in stress and anxiety can be life long. The body reacts

with digestive issues, high blood pressure, and headaches when anxiety as well as stress is increased (American N.D.). That is a physical toll that could be affecting the student athletes due to the lack of support they receive from teachers and coaches. There is also the mental aspect that could be affected alongside the physical one. The student athletes could be feeling depressed, anxious, or have trouble sleeping due to the unwanted stress from the lack of support they receive (Kroshus, 2019). These are real issues that are not being seen because they are internal. And as long as they are showing up and doing what they are supposed to, then there is no deeper look into what they might be going through.

Due to there being a lack of research into these issues I have thought of multiple solutions to this issue that can be placed into the school to relieve the burden that could possibly be on their shoulders. One possible solution is that there is a cross reference between the teacher's schedule and their sport schedule. That allows for a clear line of communication to be established. One example of how this would be beneficial is if a student had a big test coming up in a class the coach is notified, and possibly adjusts how long practice is, or incorporates a study hour into practice. The vice versa effect could be that the teacher is made aware of when the student will be absent due to a game, and the teacher in turn can adjust the workload accordingly or in another case they can choose to not make a test on the same day the student may be absent. Another way that the student can be better supported, is that there is a mandatory hour that has to be incorporated into each practice, so that there is a monitored time that is being dedicated to academics. There is also the need for teachers to come to the realization that homework is very hard to incorporate into a schedule and that there is not a check and balance between how much can be assigned per night.

Through the academic findings there is a lack of emphasis that is being placed on the mental well being in student athletes. That needs to change; because there needs to be just as much care in how the student outwardly performs and how they mentally feel. A love for extracurricular activities shouldn't come at a cost. The adults that can help the children in their life with pursuing their passion along with maintaining a healthy mind should. The adults know first hand how difficult it is to balance a schedule and to expect a child to do it without support when they do not yet have the life experience to juggle everything. There now has to be policies or assistance for students to teach and assist them with the skills necessary to balance the many activities they may be participating in.

Method

High School student athletes are in constant motion from the demands of as many as six or seven high school classes to their commitment to practicing and competing for their sports teams. Students are constantly dealing with the struggles of balancing school work while keeping their physical involvement steady. How can high schools better support their student athletes so they are able to perform better in their studies while still maintaining a strong commitment to their sports?

Context

Salad Bowl High for interviews but possibility of additional schools on survey.

Salad Bowl High's Demographics 2022: Hispanic/Latino 74.4%, 17.0% White, 2.9% Two or more races, 2.1% Asian, 1.4% Filipino, 1.0% African American, 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native.

Participants and Participant Selection

We sought out high school student athletes in various sports and conducted interviews as well as surveys pertaining to their experiences.

The student athletes that participated were all on the school swim team or club swim. (Some played other sports)

On average the participants were high school seniors.

Researcher

Question 1.

Dani: I began playing sports at the age of 5 and continued to do so until I graduated high school at 18. During this time period I juggled school alongside sports. Many times there were commitment conflicts that occurred and I received little to no help to rectify this.

Question 2.

Dani: The cliché is that hindsight is 20/20 and looking back on my student athletic years this still stands. I appreciate the responsibility that was instilled due to these two responsibilities, but some of the stress could and should have been alleviated by the teachers as well as coaches in my life at that time

Question 3.

Dani: Because each individual is so complex there is no one solution that will fit all. But, there should be a system in place that they can vent these frustrations and a basis for where they can seek help.

Participants

15 student athletes participated in this study. The group participants were invited to participate because of their relevant experience or expertise.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe your experiences being a student athlete? What do you see as the benefits of being a student athlete? What about the challenges? What are you most concerned about when it comes to your athletics and school?
2. What is currently being done by your high school to address the challenges that accompany being a student athlete, by whom, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
3. What do you think should be done by your high school to better support student athletes?
4. What do you think are some challenges or barriers to your high school being able to better support student athletes ?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about your current experiences being a student athlete and/or improving the experiences of high school student athletes?

Survey

1. What school do you attend?*

2. What grade are you in? *

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

3. What is your GPA? (Overall)*

2.0 - 2.5

2.6- 3.0

3.1 - 3.6

3.7 - 4.0

4. What high school sport/s do you participate in?*

5. Which sports do you participate in travel and/or club teams?*

6. How many hours do you dedicate to your school work weekly? Ex: Homework*

1-3 Hours

3-5 Hours

5-10 Hours

10+ Hours

7. How many total hours do you dedicate to your sport weekly? Include both high school/ club commitments Ex: Practice, games tournaments *

1-3 Hours

3-5 Hours

5-10 Hours

10- 15 Hours

15+ Hours

8. How do your teachers help support your Athletics?*

- Are they flexible with your schedule?
- Do they communicate with your coaches?
- Do they provide academic support?
- Do they encourage time management
- Do they celebrate your athletic achievements

9. How do your coaches help support your Academics? *

- Do they encourage good study habits?
- Do they communicate with teachers?
- Do they monitor academic progress?
- Do they provide academic resources?
- Do they set academic goals for you?
- Other:

10. As a high school athlete, how would you rate the impact of the following: *

Significant Positive Impact

Positive Impact

Neutral

Somewhat Negative

Negative

Time Management-

Stress-

Academics-

Time for Social Interactions, friendships, and/or socializing-

Physical Health-

Mental Health-

Time Management-

Stress-

Academics-

Time for Social Interactions, friendships, and/or socializing-

Physical Health-

Mental Health-

Procedure¹

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done in small groups or individually. For the participants that it was not possible to interview in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place where the practices were held. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, which allowed for follow-up questions to be asked. All interviews/surveys were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, High School student athletes were interviewed to see what they think could be done to better support high school student athletes so they are able to perform

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better in their studies, while still maintaining a strong commitment to their sports. This is important because students are constantly dealing with the struggles of balancing school work while keeping their athletic involvement steady. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Time Required ; Reach ; and Effectiveness. The time required to incorporate these actions will be done by the staff and coaches and will vary depending on the action itself. The reach describes how many people will be affected by this change. Effectiveness addresses how well these actions can be performed in schools. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

Actions	Time Required	Reach	Effectiveness
Providing academic/ athletic support	Medium	Low	High
Seasonal mental health and time management training	High	High	Low
Online Communication platform for easy communication between teachers and coaches	High/ Low	High	High

Providing academic/ athletic support

Our schools can have support in place which includes tutoring, study halls, and other resources that would help athletes balance their academics and sport commitments. Through our interviews we asked how many hours weekly do you spend on school work per week. We found that (13.4%) spend 1-3 hours; (35.7%) spend 3-5 hours; (14.3%) spend 5-10; (35.7%) spend 10+ hours. On the other side we asked the same students how many hours they spend dedicated to their sports per week. We found (7.1%) Spend 1-3 hours; (0%) spend 3-5 hours; (42.9%) spend 5-10 hours; (42.9%) spend 10-15 hours; (14.3%) spend 15+ hours. Athletes spend most time practicing and training for their sports, along with traveling, and competing in games. Athletes reported a struggle with maintaining a healthy schedule between academic demands and sports programs, furthermore when deciding what to prioritize (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Much of what academic support requires is a teacher or coach to provide such support. We asked the student athletes questions regarding how do your teachers support your athletics. We found (78.6%) say teachers are flexible with their schedules regarding games and tournaments, (50%) provide additional academic support, and (78.6%) provide help with time management. From the findings we can see that the amount of time teachers spend communicating with their coaches is very little. We flipped the question asking the student athletes on how their coaches support their academics: (42.9%) stated their coaches encourage good study habits, (57.1%) say they monitor their academic progress, (7.1%) say they have been provided additional academic support, and (28.6%) say their coaches set academic goals for their athletes. Similarly the communication between the teachers and coaches is very low with both falling under 20%. Effective communication between teachers and coaches can provide a positive atmosphere for the student to perform at their best. This would require a medium level of time commitment from both the coaches and teachers, and be able to reach a high level of students, as well as be very effective to

improving both the students' academics and athletics.

There was also further research conducted during individual interviews that showed that 6 of the 8 elaborated even more that they found it difficult to think of all of the aspects of stress. Most answered on the paper that they experienced somewhat and neutral stress on the survey, but when asked verbally of the challenges of being a student athlete during the interview, many stated that they actually do experience an increase in stress. Juggling their classes and sports is incredibly tiring for them and they also stated some symptoms of burnouts. That at times if they are so tired they will choose to not do homework and just miss the points. They also explained that they are extremely tired during school and it causes them to not pay attention in all of their classes. But there was also the universal opinion that athletics was a huge positive in many ways as well and would consider not participating in sports.

Seasonal mental health and time management training

The amount of time students spend in the classroom and dedicated to their athletics is not only tolling on the physical body, but also can be a big contributor to mental health issues. Schools can offer mental health support to student-athletes, including counseling services and resources to help them manage stress and anxiety related to their academic and athletic responsibilities. We asked students how they would rate the impact of the following questions from significant positive to negative: (35.7%) say lack of support in as a student athlete has a negative impact on their time management; (57.1%) say negative impact on their stress levels;(35.6%) say being a student athlete has a negative impact on their mental health. If schools partnered with mental health professionals such as clinically trained sports psychologists to work with, train, and consult coaches on the topic of mental illness in adolescents these coaches would have a better chance in successfully aiding students (Kroshus & Herring, 2019). Our action

would involve a seasonal mental health and time management training run by the coaches or staff who are trained and knowledgeable in mental health issues, and who can teach ways to balance commitments. The time required would be very low and only require one training per season to their student athletes. The reach would be high, knowing that all teams would require their players to attend meetings. Finally the effectiveness is very high, showing students techniques to implement in their daily lives can make a drastic difference in their students personal overall health both physical and mental.

During the interviews a few of the participants stated that they face a higher level of stress because at Salad Bowl High School all classes have make-up days on Friday. In many cases due to their athletics they often miss more than one class and have to decide which class they will be able to attend so they are able to make up assignments. The only other option if they are unable to make up all of their missed class materials they will have to come in for Saturday school. That really impacted their stress because that is even less time they have free to do other things. They lose even more of the very little time they have because of the school and athletics commitment.

Online Communication platform for teachers and coaches

Student athletes having to balance both school work and athletics is very difficult. Teachers and coaches need to be informed with how their students are performing in both the classroom and in their sports. After analyzing our data we found that (14.3%) communicate with the students' coaches, and (14.3%) say coaches have reached out to their teachers. From this finding there is a clear direction to improve the communication between students, teachers and their coaches. The creation of an online platform that is shared between the school, teachers, and coaches that cross references the test days and games days for students. The students then will be

able to see when they have tests and make accommodations based on the schedule. The teachers will be able to pick the most productive day to test. The coaches will also be able to have direct contact with the teachers in case they need to address a certain student's needs. Optimal communication for each individual student will allow for a system that both teachers and coaches can rely on. Schools receive little support in helping students strengthen academic growth by only encouraging athletes to maintain eligibility requirements (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). The platform would allow for observation on the progress of a student. This in turn will give the staff the opportunity and knowledge to attend to each individual student's needs. This program only works if the teachers and coaches use it consistently, and would require a high time commitment. The reach is high given that all students would be monitored through the program. The effectiveness is high allowing for the clear understanding of the academic and athletic state of each student.

Conclusion

The three action options can positively change high school student athletes' experiences. Out of the three options described above, our recommendation is option 3. Option three's main focal point is communication between teachers and coaches, to provide seamless sharing of data regarding the student. The creation of the program would allow for all schools to adopt and implement with tools at hand. The implementation of this program will allow for collaboration between teachers and coaches and can help build a cohesive and supportive school community. By sharing information and resources, teachers and coaches can work towards a common goal of helping students reach their full potential. Delivering an effective communication system can ensure that important information is shared between teachers and coaches, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication and misunderstandings. This can lead to better relationships

between teachers and coaches, as well as with students and parents. When teachers and coaches communicate effectively, they can identify and address issues that may be hindering a student's performance. By working together, they can develop a comprehensive approach to support the student's academic and athletic success. By improving communication between teachers and coaches, parents can stay informed about their child's academic and athletic progress. This can increase parent engagement and involvement in their child's education, which can have a positive impact on student success

Limitations.

Implementing a new program would be costly, in both financial resources and time. Depending on the structure and complexity of the software, it would determine the cost as well as the training required. Regulating staff, parent, and student communication can raise some privacy concerns in regards to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Acts (FERPA). We would need to redirect our approach to how we execute the methods and elements of the program. With the increased communication between teachers and coaches, there may be a risk of information overload for the staff. They may become overwhelmed by the volume of information and communications, which can lead to missed messages or important information. Implementing this new online program would help teachers and coaches communicate about their students has many potential benefits. However, schools and districts must carefully consider the potential drawbacks and challenges to ensure that they can successfully implement and maintain the online program.

Potential negative outcomes

One of the main negative outcomes that could come from using this platform is that coaches would have access to the athletes' grades. This could cause a potential privacy concern for the students with granting their coach the ability to look and share private information. To

make the online platform it would cost a lot of money to create, and if it is not used that would be a major cost that was for a waste. This platform can work if students, teachers, and coaches are all in agreement and willing to use the website.

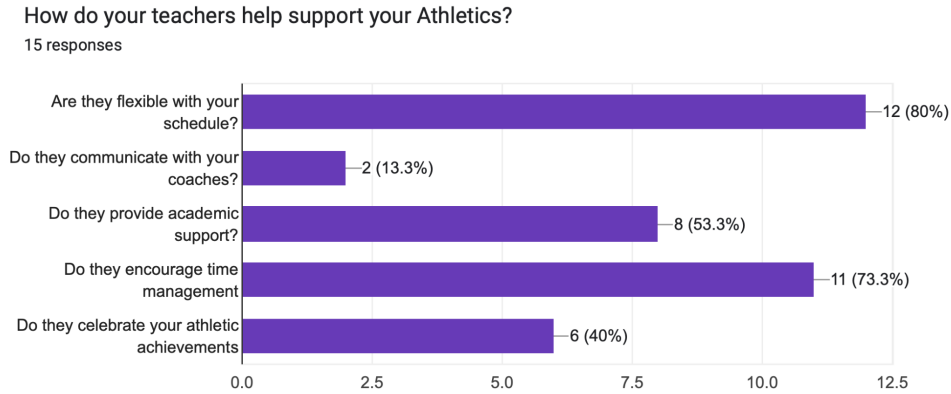
Conclusion

The reason our continued support is for the online platform is because it will be accessible on any electronic device. This makes it incredibly accessible to everyone so that they can access it at almost any time. Another advantage of this option is that it has so many layers to it. This online tool can be used in so many ways. Coaches can have better communication with teachers and vice versa. This also opens the door for students to have the ability to set up meetings and check their teachers schedule and make accommodations in advance. This will also cultivate an environment in which students will have the ability to exercise good time management but be supported by their schools to conduct this responsibility. Teachers will also be able to see when a lot of their student population will be out due to sports and plan activities, lessons, and tests on days that take into account the students availability as well.

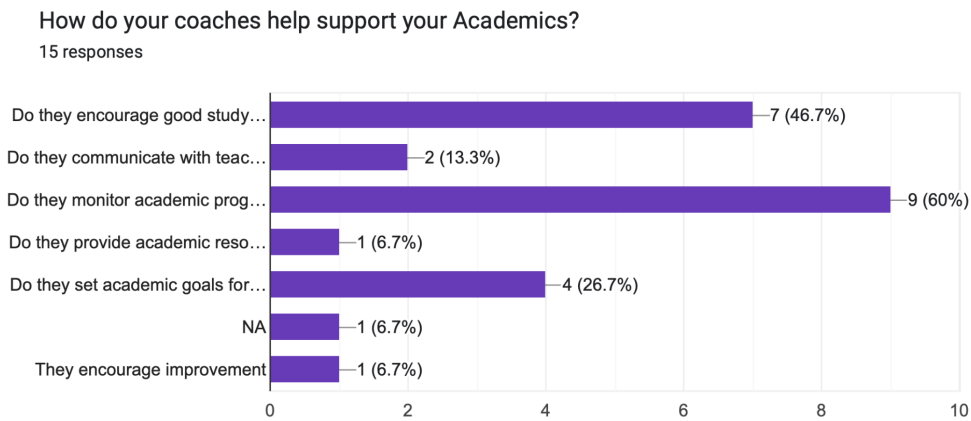
Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

For our capstone project we focused on how high schools can better support their student athletes so they are performing academically while also maintaining their commitment to their sport/s. To better understand the issue we interviewed 10 high school student athletes as well as had 15 survey participants. The data we collected in the interviews and surveys, we found three action options. Option 1: Providing student athletes with tutors, study programs, and other resources for academic support, Option 2: Provide seasonal mental health and time management training, and Option 3: the creation of an online platform where teachers and coaches can keep track of students grades, tests, and schedules. After analyzing the time required, reach, and effectiveness of these actions the creating of an online platform was concluded to be the most effective and the

highest reach to help students. Furthermore, the creation of this online platform keeps teachers and coaches in connection to collaborate on how to better support their students.

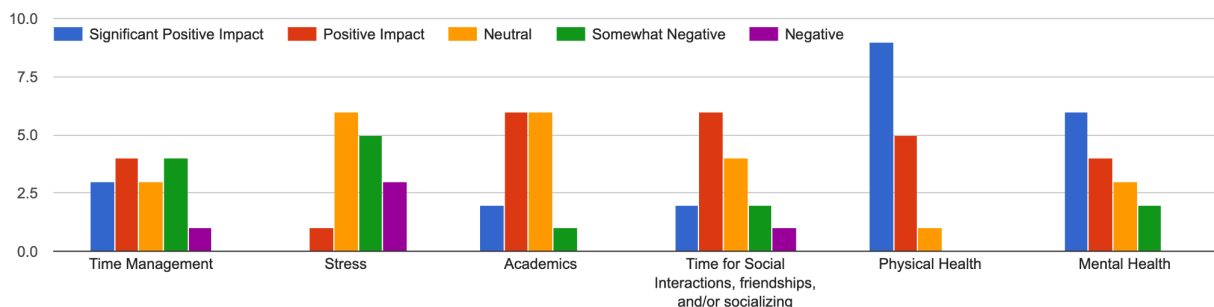


Data collection taken from the student athletes regarding their teacher involvement within their athletics.



Data collection taken from the student athletes, regarding their coaches involvement in their academics

As a high school athlete, how would you rate the impact of the following:



Data collection regarding the student's impact on being an athlete scaled from "significant positive impact" to "negative" impact.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection (Group)

We researched how high student athletes can be better academically and mentally supported by their schools.

We interviewed and surveyed 15 high school student athletes with questions regarding the support they already receive from their coaches and teachers. Along with their mental health, impact on social interactions, and their academic standings we analyzed where students would be possibly struggling.

In retrospect of collecting the data, we inferred that the stress levels of the students would be high. On the contrary most of the student athletes that we interviewed made points that they were able to manage their stress, directly due to participating in a sport.

When choosing how to collect our data we found that interviews alone would not reach enough stakeholders and would take up the majority of our time researching. We then decided that to

collect as much data and reach as many students as we could, putting together a survey was our best option. When we ended up with much more specific information about our stakeholders, opposed to what we would have collected in only interviews.

The data was very interesting to analyze. The survey highlighted a lot of the students and how they truly enjoyed their sport and were able to maintain a great GPA while in season. However the results from the interview did not correlate with what the students were expressing within the interviews. The students who participated in interviews and also claimed to have low stress in season when asked verbally of the challenges of being an athlete they responded that the main challenge was stress. They stated that having so little time in the day as well as having a lot of homework they experienced high levels of stress.

One thing that we wished we would have known from the start was how little research there is regarding this topic. It was incredibly difficult to find any research relating to any difficulties student athletes face due to participating in sports. This caused us to begin to create data on the topic. We created surveys, conducted interviews, and created an online portal to find an answer to this question.

When thinking of what needed to change, I reflected on my own experience with being a highschool student athlete, connecting what issues I faced and finding out that they are still prevalent in today's schools. I found myself striving for change in our school system, noticing my effort increasing due to the topic at hand.

Synthesis and Integration (Individual)

This topic really expanded my knowledge in the very different fields of what it means to be an educator. There are so many roles to being a teacher and this research topic opened my eyes to the outside of the classroom duties that Teachers have to do. Their importance as educators and how they make themselves available to their students. There needs to be a community effort that supports students and that is a hefty job that should not be taken lightly. Through a lot of conversations that stemmed from this project you realize how intricate each interaction personally affects students. This made me think deeply of what pedagogy I will one day implement.

I was able to see how many different perspectives there truly are and how two people may have completely different perspectives solely because of their background. They may have different social views as well and personal views and as a future educator I will have to navigate these different perspectives. I will also have to take a deeper look into my own views and not allow them to be clouded while I teach. My greatest hope is that I will bring up great critical thinkers. And in doing so I don't want them to just regurgitate the opinions I stuffed down their throats. I want them to find their own voice and understanding of the world.

This research topic also heightened my ability to use technology. I learned how to incorporate more technology into my classroom by experimenting with all that Google has to offer. I was able to create a survey that helped formulate a chart for me that helped greatly. I also conducted live interviews and it was so interesting to gather research this way. I also got to practice finding research. This was definitely an experience because there was so little, but learning how to dive deep for the answers is a skill I will use for a very long time.

I also found the value of how to lead a group effectively. Our group definitely had its

difficulties but that just gave greater insight into how it should be run. The roles in a group are important because they hold people accountable to complete a task and you are able to see where some need extra support. The group effort and support of one another should come first and with great leadership that is what is conducted. When this is not done that is when unnecessary trouble arises. I also learned a lot from working with others and gave me great insight into how I will run groups when I am a teacher. I will facilitate and explain how a group should be structured and give guidance along the way. It was a joy to bounce ideas off of one another and see real learning take place.

One huge take away from this also is how much there is to learn. There are so many ways to tackle an issue in education and that in many cases there is not one solution that fits all. To be an effective educator you have to be open to change and try new things. I don't ever want to be a teacher that is not evolving with the needs of my students because then I am being more of a hindrance to their learning than a teacher.

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