“This is What We Sign Up For”:

Questioning the Student-Athlete Experience at Haverford College

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Abstract

Historically, concepts and values of health have primarily focused on physical health without considering the implications that mental health has on physical health and general well-being. With growing conversations about what it means to maintain “good” mental health, this thesis explores the ways that mental health plays out in the dynamics of collegiate student-athletes, but this conversation is not always prevalent in regards to smaller NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division III schools like Haverford College. Mental health has a major role in the everyday life of collegiate student-athletes as a result of the emphasis on the physical body within athletics coupled with the pressures that come along with attaining a college education. Through feminist ethnography and autoethnographic work, I highlight the experiences of four fellow student-athletes as well as my own experiences as a student-athlete at Haverford College to explore the sailence of mental health for student-athletes, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. Through this exploration, I argue that structures within collegiate athletic departments and the higher education institution of Haverford College shown through expectations of student-athletes stress an idealization of the student-athlete experiences. This idealization leads to values and social norms that create an environment of toxic positivity that are internalized and impact the ways that student-athletes understand and approach challenges with mental health. Ultimately, these settings are not conducive with the promotion of positive mental health and can actually create more challenges, and this thesis questions whether the current structure of higher education is able to properly support student-athlete mental health and student’s mental health generally.

Key Terms: student-athlete, mental health, higher education, toxic positivity
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 1
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ 2
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 3
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 4
Expectations versus Realities ........................................................................................................... 16
  Expectations ................................................................................................................................. 16
  Realities ....................................................................................................................................... 23
Toxic Positivity and its Greater Implications ................................................................................... 36
What can/should Haverford do? ...................................................................................................... 47
COVID-19 Case Study ...................................................................................................................... 55
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 61
Bibliography .................................................................................................................................... 67
Appendix A ....................................................................................................................................... 71
Introduction

Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, Kevin Love—these are just a few of the names of professional athletes that have recently spoken up about the complexities, impacts, stigmas, and their own struggles with mental health related to their careers as athletes. Much of the conversation surrounding mental health in athletics is only just beginning, especially in professional sports, due to stigmas that mental illnesses make athletes weak or unable to perform to their best ability (Gavin 2021, accessed Feb 7 2022). While these conversations have sparked a lot more insight into how mental health plays out in athletics, it is also important that we look at mental health across any stage of an athlete’s life. Many former collegiate athletes have spoken out about mental health and mental illness during their careers, and many have gone on to start organizations and programs to support student-athlete mental health. For example, Victoria Garrick, former University of Southern California women’s volleyball player, has become a prominent figure in collegiate student-athlete mental health after her riveting presentation at a TedX talk during her sophomore year in college and proceeded to launch The Hidden Opponent, a mental health non-profit inspired by her speech (Garrick, accessed Feb 7 2022). As a student-athlete at Haverford College, I have seen more conversations open up about interactions and effects of athletics on mental health and vice versa, but these conversations do not cover more than team-specific scenarios and game-related situations. Even though these lessons can be translated into real-world scenarios, tying our mental health specifically to the sport we play instead of the balancing act of lives we lead as a student, an athlete, a Haverford College community member, and a person who has other obligations and struggles.

In thinking about mainstream conversations surrounding mental health, its connection with athletics, and athletics generally, most of the research conducted—if any—is done on Division
I athletes. If you were to compare a Division I school to a Division III school like Haverford College, you would find that Division I schools are significantly larger, receive significantly more funding, have sponsorships from major partners and brands, and many student athletes that attend a Division I school continue on to play their sport professionally. Unlike a Division I school where your sport is essentially your life on campus between training and competitions, Division III schools were meant to offer the smaller school option with the ability to play your sport, focus on your education, and be able to take advantage of college opportunities like study abroad. Because so few high school athletes go on to play at larger Division I schools, a good bulk of collegiate athletes compete at the Division III level, as 40% of all National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) schools belong to Division III versus 32% of all NCAA schools belonging to Division I (“The Difference in the College Division Levels”, accessed Feb 7 2022).

So, even though Division III programs make up almost half of the schools that collegiate student-athletes compete with and with the nuanced experience of Division III athletes in balancing school and sports, why is there so little discussion about Division III athletics and mental health?

With this in mind, the first objective of this thesis is to gain a sense of the ways that student-athletes at Haverford College understand and handle mental health issues. I want to explore how student-athletes at Haverford College interact with issues of mental health in their everyday life and how these issues of mental health intersect with their involvements and identities connected to athletics. Going further with these intersections, this work is also looking into the ways that perceptions and expectations of athletics–within the student-athlete community as well as with the general Haverford College community–at Haverford College can impact the ways that student-athletes experience mental health. Specifically, what structures
create and perpetuate the expectations of the student-athlete experience, and how does that connect to mental health? What factors or dynamics influence the way that structures of higher education impact student-athlete mental health? Ultimately, I hope that this research can speak to the ways that higher education structures impact mental health, using the student-athlete experience as a way to understand the constraints and expectations of elite liberal arts schools as well as how student-athletes empower themselves and others to combat this.

Entering my senior season on Haverford College Women’s Soccer—my final season as a collegiate soccer player and playing competitive soccer—I wanted to be excited to get the chance to lace up my cleats and put on the #20 jersey, especially after losing a year and a half to COVID-19. I wanted to feel energized by the fact that I would be playing with some of my closest friends for a team and a sport that I loved. I wanted all of those things to be true as I flew into Philadelphia International Airport in the days before I needed to report to the first day of my last preseason ever. And while there was some resemblance of all of those feelings, one thought I kept coming back to was being ready, but it was being ready to be done. Even thinking about it now, I feel guilty to have that thought; that it seemed like I was ungrateful to have the gift of being able to play an incredible sport and to have been able to get an education at an elite institution and play the sport I love. In the mix of the anticipation to get this season started and excitement to see my friends, it felt as though I was counting down the days until senior day in October despite it only being August. I had put three hard years, physically, mentally, and emotionally, into this program and it was going to take a lot of the physical, mental, and emotional strength I had to push through this last season. It was hard for me to come to realize that I had these feelings, especially because I was very grateful for the time I had spent playing on this team and for the lessons, experiences, and friendships I gained from this program.
As I arrived on campus and reconnected with my classmates on the team, many of them had similar sentiments about entering our final season—sarcastic cheers about going through our last preseason and fitness test, jokes about how old we are and how fast senior day needed to come, or conversations about our sore bodies and pure exhaustion from the summer training packet and the fact that we had four more months of nothing but soccer. We were just as ready to finish as we were to get started. My classmates and I were still grateful for the opportunities we had on this team and the impacts that it has made on our lives on and off the field. Yet, it struck me that so many of us had similar thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

I spent a lot of my final competitive season this fall looking back on my experiences as a student-athlete on campus, what that has meant to me, what I have gained, and the challenges that I have faced with these experiences throughout the years. It was easy to think of the ways that I pushed my body on and off the field—my mind almost immediately goes to the repeated full field sprints and hanging onto a chin-up bar for dear life trying to somehow gather the arm strength to lift myself up—but also the ways that I appreciate my body more after becoming a collegiate athlete, going from someone who had never touched a weight until college to someone who deadlifted over 200 pounds by the end of their first year. And yet, until my final season, I do not think I ever granted this grace to my mental strength of navigating academics, college life, and athletics. Mental health was not a typical topic of conversation within my team, and if there was any discussion it was not more than small talk or joking comments about someone’s day. Whether it would be in our warm-up lines before practice started or walking to the dining center after a morning lift, topics surrounding our mental health were not off-limits but it felt as though they were just a minor detail versus something that was worthy of being addressed.
My interest in exploring this topic on an ethnographic level peaked as we returned to campus for what we call our “COVID season”, the fall of 2020, where any competition was put on hold. During quarantine, as our coaches were sending over at-home bodyweight workouts and backyard foot skill videos, I felt disconnected to athletics as the routine that I had been following for the past two years was upended and I had to find the motivation to continue to push my body. Coming back for this COVID season, more conversations about athletics and mental health opened up, but these conversations stuck to topics such as what to do when you do not feel that you are performing to the best of your ability, how to hold together team culture in a time when you’re not necessarily competing, how to even keep that competitive fire during COVID.

Furthermore, these conversations typically occurred with sports psychologists hired by the Haverford College athletic department, emphasizing the prioritization of the team. Within the Haverford College athletic department, I think there was a missed opportunity to shine a light on more than just a sports psychology perspective on mental health and athletics; I think that more could have been done to address and support mental health generally, COVID-related or not.

To begin this conversation, I want to point out that there is not much conversation about collegiate athletics in academic settings. Most of the research on student-athletes and the dynamics of college athletics cannot be found in major journals or publications. In fact, Savyon Foster, Daniel Springer, and Molly Harry conducted a study to investigate the presence of college sports research within higher education journal and found that most articles about college athletics focused on athletic experiences, but most studies used a quantitative approach and that less than 1% of the scholarship disseminated through journals focused on intercollegiate athletics or college athletes (2021). This lack of publication and widespread dissemination was also due to the fact that most of the broader conversations about college athletes tend to rely on the business
and economic concerns of running a college athletic department. Even when there is research on collegiate athletics, most of the research is completed with Division I programs and athletes, leaving out the diversity of experiences that Division III athletes can experience. While there are general similarities between collegiate athletics at both levels, including similarities in the struggles that student-athletes have, the different structures of Division I and Division III programs creates a difference in how these problems play out outside of the realm of the athletic department.

The student-athlete experience, especially in college athletics, is a unique, nuanced experience because of the circumstances in which the challenges of the student-athlete life play out and the ways in which collegiate student-athletes create community to work through and persist through these challenges. In athletics generally, many student-athletes are impacted by different perceptions and stereotypes that impact the way they view themselves as athletes and their academic and athlete experience overall. More recent studies of student-athlete identity salience have found that there is a conflict between the student identity and the athlete identity of many student athletes and that this conflict exists even if one identity is stronger than the other (Di Lu et al. 2018, Miller and Hoffman 2009). When thinking about this in relation to mental health, this conflict was found to create mental and emotional struggles of balancing the roles of student and athlete that impacts both athletic and academic performance (Di Lu et al. 2018). As an athlete at a Division III school, I see this balance not only in my experience but in the everyday experiences of student-athletes around campus, not only the juggling act of trying to complete a biology problem set at 10 o’clock at night on the bus ride home from an away game on a Wednesday night but also in the mental dilemmas of figuring out what commitments to prioritize and when to prioritize them. Yet historically, stereotypes about athletes include being a
jock, or the ego-oriented “meat-head”, as contrasted to the athlete, who is disciplined and overachieving. These complex identities can have a major implication on mental health for student-athletes because of the added pressures that stereotypes can cause, especially due to the association of the “jock” identity with characteristics typically associated with masculinity which will be elaborated more on throughout this ethnography (Miller and Hoffman 2009). When thinking about this with student-athletes at a Division III school like Haverford, where discipline and overachieving is almost considered an expectation to succeed, how can these expectations make or break the student-athlete experience?

Answering these questions also requires looking at what it means to identify as a student-athlete. For this ethnography, I argue that the student-athlete experience can also be seen as an emotional experience, which is based on the combination of the output of emotions that people are theoretically capable of experiencing and the actual emotions being experienced that dictates interpretation and perspective of an event. Emotional experiences can be dependent on cultural context, especially when considering the prevalence and patterns of the emotional experiences, but still reflect the cultural models and structures that create boundaries on how emotions are formed and developed (Mesquita and Walker 2002, 778-779). In seeing how the student-athlete experience can elicit a variety of emotions on and off the field, it is also important to understand the ways that different contexts and structures define, shape, and influence the impact of these emotions.

Identifying as a student-athlete can have a strong connection to a sense of self as an emotional experience, especially when considering how different identities such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status can impact one’s experience as an athlete. This understanding of structural influences on emotional experiences can be used as a framework to explore the
psychological impacts of larger societal and systematic structures of different groups of people, especially within marginalized communities; looking at the experiences of student-athletes with mental health and structures of higher education can help show the ways that general social structures have cyclical impacts on the everyday lives of people. Thinking of the ways that the student-athlete identity is already contested, it is important to recognize the ways that these emotional experiences can be impacted by conflicting expectations of the student-athlete. On top of this, the expectations of a student-athlete can conflict with the lived experience of student-athletes, which I will show through the conversations I have with student-athletes, thus disrupting the student-athlete experience. I hope to extend this disharmony of the expectations of student-athletes and the lived experience of student-athletes to possible unfavorable impacts on mental health.

Having this conversation about what mental health in athletics means is important to me because athletics has been an incredible and substantial part of my life, within and beyond my experience at Haverford. Being able to compete on a team and play soccer has taught me so many valuable lessons and created lifelong friendships, and while there have been ups and downs and parts of my experience that I wish would have gone differently, soccer and being an athlete will continue to be a part of my identity even after I graduate from Haverford. Looking back on my struggles with mental health and how that has been impacted or directly impacted by experience in athletics, with this work I hope to allow for others to feel comfortable sharing experiences about mental health within Haverford College athletics and to create more conversation generally about what can be done to support athletes on campus. Athletes have a unique position on campus not only in their motivations for coming into Haverford, but also in the way that they experience campus in the balance between athletic life and life generally at
Haverford College, and because of this it is important to acknowledge the nuanced ways that emotional well-being and mental health can be influenced by this experience. With this work, I want to be able to make sure that current and future athletes at Haverford College are able to make the most of their athletic, academic, and social experiences at Haverford College while knowing that they are supported not only as athletes but as people. There is so much focus in athletics and athletics research on the body and how the physical body is impacted, viewed, and manipulated to be able to compete at the highest levels. Even though more conversations are beginning to open up about athletics, mental health, and their intersections, creating an understanding for how and why these intersections occur will only create more support and understanding for the athletic experience and for student-athletes.

By understanding the experience of student-athletes at Haverford College with mental health, I think this could open up a larger conversation about the ways that Haverford College is able to support its students generally. Although being a collegiate student-athlete is a unique experience because of the balancing of time commitments and academics, many other students on campus experience the need to juggle multiple commitments at one time. Whether it be student jobs, research opportunities, or club responsibilities, many students on Haverford’s campus must deal with different kinds of balancing acts that impact their mental health. Despite the individual differences in the experiences of these balancing acts, it is important to reflect on the structures that can cause and perpetuate these cycles of having to decide between your responsibilities in any role on campus and your mental health. While this specific conversation is limited to the experiences of student-athletes on Haverford’s campus, investigating the ways that student’s mental health on campus is impacted by different dynamics on campus can be significant for larger-scale conversations on how Haverford College, or even other small, liberal
arts colleges, can improve in supporting the mental health of students and the bettering of the student’s overall experience.

Throughout this research, I aim to explore this topic using a feminist ethnographic andauthentic ethnographic approach to guide my methods and to help shape how I analyze and interpret the information I collect from my own reflections and my interlocutors (Naples and Sachs 2000, Stacey 1988). For my work, I want to apply feminist methodologies that attend to dynamics of power in social interaction to ask broader questions about power and society that deconstruct what is valued by Western, imperialism ideals (Rosaldo 1980). Throughout this work, my goal is to deconstruct similar ideals in what it means to be successful in the context of higher education, connecting this to the ways that notions of being successful are tied to standards of conformity to greater social values and norms outlined by people outside of the immediate community.

Additionally, I hope to deconstruct the ways that health is typically only regarded as physical health, showing that mental and physical health are equally important and intertwined.

In creating an interpersonal ethnography rooted in connection and concern to the community I am collaborating with, I also want to acknowledge the limits of my research in that Haverford’s student athlete population is by no means representative of all student athlete experiences, at the Division III level or in general. But, I hope that understanding the nuances and complexities of the student athlete experience in relation to a higher education institution like Haverford will help current and future students athletes and the general Haverford community. In a similar vein, I draw upon Sara Ahmed’s feminist ethnographic concept of homework and willfulness in her book “Living a Feminist Life” to understand and contextualize student athlete experience at Haverford. Ahmed uses the concept of homework to describe “working out not being at home in the world” (7), which can apply to the daily experiences of
student athletes working out their particular experiences of balancing their student and their
athlete identities within the context of higher education. While student-athletes are not outsiders
within the Haverford community—when considering that a majority of the student-athlete
population are White and do not have similar struggles as other Haverford community members
such as first generation students or students of color—navigating specific spaces and contexts to
mold to the standards and expectations set forth by Haverford can have negative impacts on the
ways that student-athletes experience their time at Haverford.

These feminist methodologies will be used in collaboration with an autoethnographic
approach, involving self-reflexivity of my positionality not only as someone conducting research
but also my relationship to the topic of my research. Nancy Naples and Carolyn Sachs (2000)
discuss the importance of an anthropologist’s standpoint, or how specific identities provide
perspectives inside and outside of different values, systems, and structures that are universalized.
Naples and Sachs highlight how standpoint epistemology through a feminist lens help understand
how my social positions shape how I ask questions and how I analyze my research as a women
in my social position in athletics, which is historically associated with masculinity. By having a
strong standpoint, I hope to challenge power differences within the field and utilize
self-reflexivity “to reveal the processes through which [ethnographers] come to select,
understand, and interpret the complex social and political processes in specific contexts” (Naples
and Sachs 2000, 201).

The goal of this thesis is to center the experiences of student-athletes with mental health,
so I collected my ethnographic data through conversations with four current Haverford College
student-athletes. When using the term student-athlete, this means that the student attends
Haverford College and plays on one of the 23 varsity sports teams at Haverford College. Because
the conversations that I had with student-athletes centered around mental health and reflections about experiences with their teams and at Haverford College generally, their names, class year, and sports teams will not be revealed within this ethnography. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the hope to have more fluid and open conversations about different experiences and to ensure that the student-athlete is guiding the conversation, centering what they believe is the most important or influential aspects of their experience. Especially because many of the people I interviewed are my friends and peers, I wanted to maintain my relationships with my interlocutors and make this project as collaborative as possible. I also had conversations with students who were not athletes at Haverford College to understand perspectives and experiences with athletics on campus from those who are not necessarily involved with the athletic department. These conversations were supplemented by a document review of varsity team brochures, published student athlete profiles, and information on Haverford College’s website to see how Haverford admissions and the Haverford athletic department advertise the student athlete experience and athletics at Haverford to prospective students.

In collaboration with this data, I also incorporated a self-reflective aspect to this work because of my personal experiences within the athletic department. While incorporating some of my experiences with the experiences that were described by my interlocutors, I will also have an autoethnographic reflection on my experience with athletics and mental health during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, supplemented by stories from my interlocutors. I felt that discussing COVID-19 was important because the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be an influential factor in the way that mental health and athletics is impacted and experienced. Although most of my interlocutors briefly touched on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to expand on their thoughts to highlight a significant part of the athletic experience for many student-athletes
on campus. I hope to paint a full picture of what the student-athlete experience has been like for current student-athletes, the ways that these experiences impact mental health, and the influence of structures and dynamics at Haverford College on these experiences.

**Expectations versus Realities**

*Expectations*

As a prospective student-athlete that is looking to play their sport in college, across any division, visiting your top schools through an official overnight visit acts as a rite of passage to enter the collegiate sports world. At Haverford College, a prospective student-athlete will typically spend much of the first day of the overnight with the team; eating meals in the dining center, going to classes and labs with current student-athletes, observing a practice, and maybe even getting to see an acapella or Throng show after practice are just some of the ways that prospective student-athletes are introduced to the life of being at Haverford as a student-athlete. Most prospective student-athletes spend the night in the dorm of the first-year student-athlete that is hosting them, which leads into the second day of the overnight where most student-athletes get to see the game day preparation and observe a game or match. The overnight visit is as close as a prospective student-athlete will get to understanding and seeing first hand the life of being a collegiate student-athlete.

Through these experiences, Haverford student-athletes get to know the prospective student-athlete and that prospective student-athletes get to observe not only the culture of the team but the Haverford culture generally. Scarlett, a senior student-athlete, highlighted her conversations with current student-athletes on her overnight visit about the Honor Code, the essence of the Haverford community and culture, especially because her conversations with
students around campus shared the same kind of care of the Haverford community as she had heard from her admissions experience. Even though “[she remembers] going on the tour and like hearing all about like Haverford and the honor code, et cetera, and just kind of being like, OK I feel like this is just what they say on tour…”, her interactions with the community were reflective of the values that were advertised as the essence of Haverford’s campus and ultimately influenced her decision to come here. Every student-athlete that I talked to about their experience of choosing to play a college sport expressed that their overnight experience was essentially their deal breaker in making their final decision to attend Haverford to continue their academic and athletic careers. Jim, another senior student-athlete, highlighted that, “I think this is common with a lot of Haverford athletes, like my overnight visit was just like a really positive experience…it was just way better than, to be honest, way better than my [other Centennial Conference school] visit”. Similar to Scarlett, Jim’s overnight experience was influential in his decision to attend Haverford, going so far to say that his overnight experience made it obvious that he should come to Haverford.

Whether talking with student-athletes or other students on campus, the overnight was an influential part in not only the decision to attend Haverford but also the expectation of the academic, athletic, and social experience on campus. In a quantitative study about the reasons for men’s basketball players to attend a NCAA Division III school, researchers found that the campus visit was in the top ten influential factors, out of over 50 found influential factors in picking a school, its mean score only separated by 0.6 from the top reason found (Nichols, Stellino, and Smith 2020, 41-42). The student-athletes that I discussed this process with also emphasized getting the opportunity to watch the team play during their visit, noting the ways that they interacted with each other on and off the field during a game and the positive energy that the
team had. Paisley, a junior student-athlete, expressed that, “...I’ve never witnessed an environment, an atmosphere where everyone was so genuinely happy to be together and to be sharing these experiences”, which she thought was emulated on and off the field. These experiences in terms of getting to know the school and the athletic environment was echoed in the student-athlete profiles that the Haverford athletic department posted to their website as most of the advice that Haverford student-athletes had for prospective students was to visit campus and come for an overnight visit (“Haverford College Student-Athlete Profiles”, Accessed Jan 15 2022).

While the overnight experience was found to be formative in the conceptualization of the student-athlete experience and the general environment of Haverford, these visits were just snapshots of the day-to-day life of the student-athlete. The overnight visit is just two days of a year long journey, it is very hard to see the ups and downs that come with committing time and energy of being in the cycle of training as a student-athlete. Yet, coming to visit campus and experience the overnight may be the only way that prospective student-athletes are able to understand this experience. On Haverford College’s main website, there is very minimal information about varsity athletics on campus and the varsity student-athlete experience. Athletics is included under the section “Campus Life”–which speaks on things like residential life and clubs on campus–but aside from putting the link to the Haverford Athletic Department website there is nothing specific about the varsity student-athlete experience, except for the fact that there have been over 300 All-American student-athletes from Haverford (“Go Fords!”, Accessed Jan 15 2022). Additionally, admissions tours of campus do not speak much to the varsity athletic program, even at points just highlighting that there are not many special privileges for varsity student-athletes; one student-athlete that I talked to also has worked in the
admissions office for three years said that she only discusses varsity athletics when prospective student-athletes are on the tour and most questions come from their parents. The minimal advertisement of athletics at Haverford and the student-athlete experience relates to the work that Foster et al. (2021) completed in that information about Division III student-athlete experience is lacking not only in the research field, but this also shows that this extends into the lack of dissemination of information about the student-athlete experience. While it is important to make athletics on campus an inclusive space for everyone, no matter how one chooses to engage, there is not a great acknowledgement of the varsity student-athlete community generally, thus placing an unequal importance on the overnight visit.

When looking to see whether this is a similar trend across other schools in the Centennial Conference, you do not have to look much further than the main website for Swarthmore College in the different ways that they discuss athletics; there is in depth information about the varsity athletic program, such as the history of the program and recent accomplishments, in addition to information about other athletic endeavors on campus, they have a quote from a student-athlete about their experience, and they recently highlighted that their swim team won the Centennial Conference championship in their headline section (“Athletics and Wellness”, Accessed Feb. 27 2022). This comparison is interesting even in the “Headlines” section on both pages, where on Haverford’s website there are no stories about recent team or student-athlete achievements related to their sport, even though the volleyball team made the NCAA national tournament this year and the women’s basketball team will be competing in the Centennial Conference play-off tournament which are impressive feats with the competitive nature of the Centennial Conference (“News: Campus Headlines”, accessed Jan 15 2022). While the Haverford athletic department was able to sponsor the student-athlete profiles to share information about specific teams, many
of the questions were about personal reflections on continuing a sport in college, what playing a sport means to them, and their favorite memory; when student-athletes were asked about experiences on campus, they were asked either “What makes Haverford unique?” and “What are your thoughts on the honor code?” (“Haverford College Student-Athlete Profiles”, accessed Jan 15 2022). The lack of information about the day-to-day experience is also seen in the advertised team brochures in the athletic center (Gardner ‘83 Integrated Athletic Center) which only include the most recent schedule, program highlights, a coach profile, general information about Haverford, and sometimes a single quote from a student-athlete about the team. For student-athletes who may not have the economic means to visit or with COVID-19 protocols prohibiting overnight visits, there are only minimal resources available about the everyday student-athlete experience at Haverford. And, this can have many implications for the expectations about the student-athlete experience, thinking about the limited ways that prospective student-athletes can have in-depth engagement with athletics at Haverford.

In thinking about the lack of information about the student-athlete experience from the college generally and the influence that the overnight experience has on the expectations of the student-athlete experience and the decision to play a sport at Haverford, this creates an idealized image of the student-athlete experience. Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) describe the process of recruitment as “the socialization of prospective athletes into the culture begins”, and they also argue that specifically these recruiting events bring about this idealization by construing a notion of balance within the student-athlete experience (499). The overnight visit is structured as if it was a performance–prospective student-athletes typically attend classes within departments that they are interested in, current student-athletes are scheduled down to the minute to meet the recruit, all the current student-athletes plan their days around meeting the recruit in the dining
center for a meal, and all while still being able to make it to practice right on time to observe the team together. While these events do give a glimpse into a day in the life, it is just that—a single day. With the intense structure of an overnight and the way that they are set up to show the best sides of campus and the student-athlete experience, these visits can create unrealistic expectations of the commitment to becoming a student-athlete and living the student-athlete experience.

Furthermore, even the language used in calling prospective student-athletes “recruits” and describing it as a recruitment process emulates enculturating prospective student-athletes into these expectations of what it means to be a student athlete. In Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesus’ work (2019) on the ways that white supremacy is ingrained into American police academies, Beliso-De Jesus uses the concept of molding, depicted as “the process of manufactured sculpting through the easily manipulable material of police recruits”, to understand how police academies create idealizations of sameness in police recruits by emphasizing values of white supremacy (145). On a smaller scale, this concept of molding applies to the processes that prospective student-athletes go through during overnight visits. Within the structure of overnight visits, the student-athlete experience is displayed in a specific way to show the happy balance of being a student and an athlete, to show that Haverford’s culture allows student-athletes to explore new opportunities and adventures. The purpose of these overnights are to attract prospective student-athletes to Haverford through these very positive experiences, but these visits are highly structured to glorify what the everyday experience is of a student-athlete at Haverford.

When speaking to student-athletes about how they interact with prospective student-athletes, whether on an overnight visit or generally during different recruiting events, some expressed that they experience the pressure of creating the positive experience of visits.
Current student-athletes are expected to be a part of many prospective student-athlete visits, to be at the ready to answer any question, share the great memories, and elaborate on why Haverford is a great environment not just to be a student, but to be a student-athlete. Jim recalled that most of their conversations surround, “the great team environment, awesome camaraderie, being really family oriented…”. While there are many parts of the student-athlete life where these positive experiences are prominent and influential in the experience, no student-athlete said that they would openly discuss the challenges of the work life balance, or dynamics on campus within and outside of athletics. There is no explicit instruction to create this picturesque, positive experience of campus, but as Jim expressed, “I want to get the best players possible in the program to continue the success…so for me, I’m not going to let any other factors take away from the fact that I want [my team] to have success, so I want the best players possible to come”. Because of the strong connections and commitments that we have to the team and the program, student-athletes prioritize the success over the program and bringing players into the program by illuminating an inaccurately positive experience as a student-athlete.

This trend can be seen even in the overnight experiences of current student-athlete as many student-athletes conveyed that talking about challenges of being a student-athlete was not a part of their recruitment experience; Scarlett expressed that “that time [the overnight] is all about, Oh what’s good about being on a team and everything”. And, the reason why many student athletes do not include their negative experiences on overnight visits is that something that might bother them may not bother another person and what they say would not be appropriate for an overnight visit. This connects to the “cultural cover-up” that occurs during recruitment processes as the amplification of positive experiences within the student-athlete experience that is different from the lived experiences of student-athletes (Jayakumar and
The impacts of this idealization are far-reaching, especially as the athletic culture can impact many facets of life on campus in terms of the ways mental health is experienced and addressed through the student-athlete community.

**Realities**

When I got to the questions, “What does playing your sport mean to you? How important is college athletics to you?”, in my conversations with student-athletes, I heard many mixed emotions and perspectives. Paisley reflected on her motivation and passion about soccer as connected to the support that comes from her teammates to be her best and how welcomed she felt by her teammates, generating a sense of belonging. On the other hand, Scarlett was more hesitant to praise her time as a student-athlete, acknowledging that athletics becomes such a large part of the life of a student-athlete, but with becoming a student-athlete sports becomes less of an outlet as student and athlete become intertwined in college. Two different student-athletes, two different teams, both illuminating the issue with the overnight visit portrayal—no experience is necessarily the same, and can even change overtime throughout one student-athlete’s experience.

As Foster et al. (2021) highlighted in their research, there is very little information about the day-to-day experiences of student-athletes, not only at a Division I school but even less at a Division III school. Exploring the actual realities of being a student-athlete at a Division III school—especially in connection to the positive expectations prior to becoming a student-athlete—is important to understand the complexities when the expectations versus realities of this experience can clash. When this clash occurs, there can be a number of consequences that create negative experiences as a student-athlete that impacts their lives as students, their lives as athletes, and maintaining a positive outlook on the student-athlete experience after four years. One of the most popular questions that current student-athletes get
asked on recruit visits is “Why Haverford?”; this question is also one of the most asked questions on the student athlete profiles (“Haverford College Student-Athlete Profiles”, Accessed Jan 15 2022). Everyone wants to know why you chose to play at Haverford and why you chose to play a college sport, but no one asks why student-athletes continue to choose Haverford everyday. No one asks why we continue to play our sports while trying to maintain the balance of student and athlete and deal with challenges everyday surrounding our identities on campus. Illuminating these dynamics can shed light on the ways that mental health is a major factor in the lives of student-athletes as a result of their lived experiences.

Personally, I chose, and choose, to continue to play a sport in college because I could not see myself not playing a sport as it had become an integral part of my life, from the passion and love I had for the game, the lessons and skills I learned from it, and the relationships I formed throughout the years. This sentiment was reflected in conversations I had with the four student-athletes, and on the student-athlete profiles when athletes were asked why they continued to play a sport in college their answer was for their love of the game (“Haverford College Student-Athlete Profiles”, Accessed Jan 15 2022). In thinking about why student-athletes choose Haverford specifically, many cited the positive team environment on and off the field as seen through the positive portrayal of the student-athlete experience before even stepping on campus. And, for many student-athletes, this camaraderie and commitment to teammates is just as important in their experience as it was for their decision to come here, as exemplified by Paisley’s description above about what college athletics means to her. One way that student-athletes, including myself, describe this intense feeling of commitment is that their team is their family. Many Haverford teams use this feeling to advertise their team to recruits and to ingrain into current teammates the importance of the team; this is an example of the ways that
molding recruits to the student-athlete experience occurs and continues throughout the four years on a team. For example, on the soccer team we use the phrase “Our Family vs Their Team” to distinguish our team dynamics and culture from other teams in that we rely on each other on and off the field, we care about each other on and off the field, and we work hard for each other and with each other to make ourselves, our teammates, and the team generally better—which sounds familiar to the Quaker values of trust, concern, and respect at Haverford.

For me “Our family” always signified the closeness and importance of each member of our team and above all it meant that Haverford Women’s Soccer was a support system whether you were a current player or from the first graduating class that played on our team. I saw this as early as my first year, when one of my older teammates at the time sat with me in the Coop on campus, helping plan my class schedules and the classes I needed to fill different requirements. I still see to this day as my senior classmates and I are going through our women’s soccer alumni connection for advice and help with our plans for life after Haverford. This is connected to the ways in which Raabe and Zakrajsek (2017) draws connections to the support and quality of relationships from teammates, within and outside of athletic settings, can foster the feeling of teammates as family (76). Yet, there are some stipulations to the ways that this feeling of family is emulated as a support system, especially as the conception of the team as a family can be an extension of the idealized image of a team environment (Jayakumar and Comeaux 2016, 501). By using the connotation of a family to describe the student-athlete experience overemphasizes the expectations of what a team should feel like, especially with the time and energy commitment that is given to the team, instead of the realities of playing on a team. Advertising this as the team experience and having it be a core value on a team can have negative consequences when circumstances within the reality of the student-athlete experiences change.
Especially with the regulations of Division III sports, our time and energy commitments to the sport on paper are different throughout the year. Furthermore, this type of familial support is not emulated in every aspect of the student-athlete’s life and can impact the ways that student-athletes process and experience mental health and mental health issues, which will be explored later.

This notion of family bond between teammates is also facilitated by the structure of the student-athlete season and the nature of being on a team, competing towards a common goal. For student-athletes whose competitive season is in the fall, like myself, you start off your experience coming to campus two weeks before school starts for preseason, consisting of practices two times a day, fitness and skills tests, and spending the moments we are not on the field in team meetings and team bonding activities. The whole point of the structure is to have two uninterrupted weeks of soccer, to become immersed in the team culture and the expectations of what’s to come: the high level of competition, the mental strength and physical strength, the time commitment, and the mental commitment without the “distraction of school”. By spending so much time on and off the field, the goal is for teammates to foster relationships and trust that will translate to on field success. After preseason, you jump straight into the deep end, juggling school, soccer, and your personal life for four months until you are able to catch your breath for a few weeks until off-season training starts. Once winter break starts, your training for the next season commences with lifts, technical skill sessions, conditioning workouts, 7 AM SAQ (speed, agility, quickness) training, indoor soccer games and spring training sessions three times a week that leads you to the dreadful summer training, which is accompanied by an at least 60 page packet with fitness workouts, technical workouts, and articles with questions for response to get
ourselves mentally and physically prepared to commit to the long haul that is preseason and our competitive fall season.

Student-athletes across any season spend a significant amount of time with their teammates, especially during their competitive season but also in the off-season. First, due to the general time commitment to playing a college sport we have significant time commitments to practice, lifts, competitions, and team gatherings or meetings. In the 2018 Clearness Committee report completed by Haverford College, the committee found on average that student-athletes that are in season spend 16 to 20 hours a week on their sport and on average student-athletes out of season spend 9 to 15 hours a week on their sport (Haverford College Clearness Committee 2018, 14). This is also seen across multiple NCAA divisions, where Raabe and Zakrajsek (2017) cite that with the intense amount of time that student-athletes commit to their sport, whether through official commitments or voluntary commitments, peer influences and relationships from teammates become significant factors in the experiences of student-athletes in and out of their athletic experience (68, 70). This intense time commitment is not only to improve success on the field, but also includes taking the time to get to know teammates and form strong bonds that will supplement the relationships built on the field.

In experiences that I have had on my team, believing that you are spending this time and energy for people you consider your family is common language for justifying the time and energy that we put into playing our sport. Scarlett, whose competitive season does not occur in the fall, even recalled the immense amount of time spent with teammates even out of season to be able to have success in season, going so far to describing it as if, “you feel like the only people you have on campus are within your team, especially in season when you’re spending so much time with them already”. This common ground of spending this incredible amount of time
and energy on a sport that you are passionate about is able to connect teammates together, not only creating new relationships but also strengthening existing relationships as well. With these relationships, this common ground, and the time and energy commitment, your time within your team intertwines your life with your team and your sport for significant periods of time. And, as the student-athletes expressed, the love and passion for your sport coming into college only intensifies with the physical commitments of time and pushing yourself to succeed and the mental commitment of devoting energy to this success and creating such strong emotional ties to your team and teammates. The feeling of family that is associated with teams at Haverford can have many positive benefits in terms of creating different kinds of support systems, but this notion of the team as family is created for the success of the team and has greater implications for the ways that student-athletes experience everyday life on campus.

In a similar vein, another outcome of committing mental and physical energy to playing a college sport is the ways that the identities of student and athlete become salient. Because of the commitment that student-athletes must make to their sport, researchers found student-athletes identify more closely with that of an athlete, and in many cases this casts the stereotypical “jock” athlete identity that is found to continue to deter student-athletes from identifying as a student (Miller and Hoffman 2009). Yet, these identities were found at larger, Division I schools in which student-athletes commit to the school for a sport, or are looking to continue to play their sport after their collegiate career. In these studies, the jock identity was compared to the athlete identity, which was described as disciplined, overachieving, and specifically linking the athlete identity to being a student-athlete (Miller and Hoffman 2009, 335). At Haverford, similar to many Division III schools, student-athletes come to play a collegiate sport and receive a high-level education typically without the aspiration of continuing their sport professionally.
When discussing this with the student-athletes, two of them specifically highlighted that they did not want to pursue Division I sports because of limited time commitment they would have to getting an education and that the time commitment to sports was too intense; the other two athletes cited that it was important to attend a college where they could receive a great education and be able to play a sport without having to sacrifice either. Even though many student-athletes actively chose to pursue Division III sports to be able to balance school and sports, the time and energy commitment to sports even at the Division III level still has an impact in the ways that sports and athletics plays a major role in the way the student-athlete is positioned on campus and maintains their student and athlete identities.

Coming in to Haverford, Scarlett, Jade—a senior student-athlete—and Jim all expressed that they had assumptions about the balance between school and sports based on their experiences in high school; as these student-athletes said that the balance was not discussed at length prior to coming to Haverford, they assumed that it was just going to be a part of the experience. Even while discussing the challenges of being a student-athlete almost all of the student-athletes I talked to brushed over the subject of balancing school and athletics, usually starting off with “Obviously, it is hard to balance school and playing” or, potentially because I am also a student-athlete, would not elaborate on the topic and say something along the lines of “Oh, you know how it is, there’s always a challenge with the balance”. This implicit understanding that it is a struggle to balance school and sports in college is interesting because it is inherited knowledge passed down between student athletes that this balance is always going to present challenges. From experiences on overnight visits to interactions with teammates, even though there is no direct discussion of this balance, it is seen everyday when teammates are running from practice to class or staying up late to do homework after a midweek game. It is
assumed that you are spending every hour possible in your day either working on school or working on your sport, you are constantly working to achieve some sort of goal.

One day, I was sitting in the locker room getting ready for practice when one of my teammates walked in looking like there was steam about to come out of her ears. I asked her what was wrong and if she was okay, and she told me that while she was presenting on her thesis topic, which is also related to athletics, someone in her thesis group had asked, “What’s the difference between Haverford sports and high school sports? It seems like it’s just as casual”. I was not even a part of this interaction or knew the person who said it but I was just as upset as her when I heard this. This question strikes a chord for multiple reasons: it shows that college athletics at Haverford is not advertised to student-athletes and people who do not participate in varsity athletics in the way it is experienced, it discredits and undermines the amount of work that is done to commit and achieve in our sport, and, in connection to the last two points, it highlights the pressures placed on student-athletes to stretch themselves in school and sports that creates the challenging balance. But, why is there an assumed pressure that results in struggling to maintain this balance?

The commitment that student-athletes give to their academic and athletic lives contributes to the conflict not only of the physical work that is done to achieve in both, but also the way that both play out in everyday life. In attending a liberal arts institution, even thinking about the merits that one must have to get into the school, there is an implicit expectation to be involved in multiple facets of the Haverford community and to be a well-rounded student. As seen from Miller and Hoffman’s research and from the question above, many student-athletes at Haverford struggle with defying the “jock” stereotype, proving that we are more than just athletes and that we can do more on campus than just play our sport. At a small school like Haverford, not only in
population but in physical size of campus, student-athletes are more visible within their athletic identity in everyday life on campus; from walking out to practice and leaving class early to hosting social events, there is never a time that “student” and “athlete” are ever separate. Everyone attending Haverford has the common denominator of a student identity—that is what brought us all to this school—but having a common denominator of an athlete identity is limited to a third of Haverford’s already small population, specifically when thinking about varsity athletics. As the heightened visibility of the athletes dominates the identity balance between student and athlete, this limits the perception of the ways that student-athletes are viewed outside of the athletic realm. Scarlett and Jim, who are both involved in multiple clubs and activities on campus, expressed that they felt that most people just saw them as athletes and that being a student-athlete is what dominated their identity as seen by others. Jade pointed this out in the ways that teammates walking around campus together or sitting in the dining center are more noticeable, and in a sense more intimidating, than many other groups on campus. Thus, with this visibility when with teammates or participating in your sport associates student-athletes more so with their athletic identities even if they are a part of other aspects of campus life.

The perpetual balancing act, whether concerning commitments or identity, has many ties to central beliefs and attitudes within the athletic community. Historically, the body is central to the ability to compete and participate in a sport as the body is the main mechanism to perform these sports, therefore the body is normally the way that people are deemed as “athletic”. In many ways, the physical body acts as a reflection of social expectations and formalities that are dependent on cultural context; as Mary Douglas (1970) argues, “The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society” (69). This concept can also apply to cultural messages and attitudes that
permeate the athletic community and the culture of athletics as there are expectations of the sporting body within the “body culture” of athletics. One central concept of participation in athletics when considering the body is that of strength, the body is supposed to emulate strength in order to endure the physical pressures that come with playing a sport. This concept, and almost requirement, of strength has been found to extend outside of the physical realm of athletics, as Besnier and Brownell (2012) found that the connection between athletes and physical strength played out in highlighting social pressures that are inscribed on the body by competing in a sport (449). While this research was applied to professional sports in which there is a greater social pressure of success and winning as a result of multiple external factors, there are many assumptions and connections between strength and athletics that play out in collegiate athletics that also extend outside of the physical realm, specifically in regards with this balance and mental health.

Being in and around athletic culture for as long as I can remember, much of the language used relating to expectations of strength in and out of the context of athletics. The love and passion that many student-athletes have for their sport is a result of the young age at which they started the sport. For Jim and Paisley, they started competing in their sport around 4 or 5 and fell in love with it from the start; Scarlett and Jade did not start competing in their sports until early middle school but still had competed in other sports and had strong emotional ties to their current sport from the start. And, with starting to play these sports from an early age, athletes are exposed to messages such as “tough it out” and “push through it” while competing, which were meant to be motivational messages to preserve, to keep going and reach your goals. As sports become greater aspects of a student-athlete’s life growing up, these messages, as well as other lessons and values, transition from on the field to off the field and become a part of the ways that
athletes approach different situations and contexts within their everyday life (Dawes, Vest, Simpkins 2014, 1375). The permeation of these athletic cultural messages about physical strength do not stop once one becomes a collegiate student-athletes, if anything these messages about strength trickle into any aspect of life and represents a cultural narrative throughout our society that relates to success and what it means to achieve something.

One idiom that is particularly interesting in the context of the connotations of strength in athletics is “no pain, no gain” (Gross, Rubin, Weese 2020, 85). This phrase goes beyond some of the other common messages that you hear as an athlete as it explicitly links the concept of struggle in order to achieve a goal. Not only does it create this connection, it positions this struggle to the feeling of pain which implies some sort of harm or suffering in this struggle. “No pain, no gain” is typically something we joke about in the gym–I have had teammates motivate me with this saying while I struggled to do my least favorite workout, bench press–as the pain is associated with the physical sensation of pain in getting stronger, such as being sore after a workout, but that this pain will lead to better results or more accomplishments. Yet, these expectations of enduring pain to achieve something can be seen in the ways that student-athletes handle challenges in identity and commitment balance. In Scarlett’s conversation, she discussed the pressure she felt her first year when she was asked to step into a starting position; throughout her first season she felt she had to “push myself mentally to show up everyday” because of the compounding pressures between needing to perform in school and needing to perform on the field. In Jim’s conversation, when discussing balancing school and his sport, he expressed that he “definitely pushed the hours with school and academics”, in that his time and energy commitments were pushed to their limits in order to maintain this balance. In both of these responses, the notion of pushing through to achieve something comes out in the athletic and
academic sphere, and both have to do with the notion of mental strength. The struggle in balancing the student-athlete life and the sentiment of “no pain, no gain” relates to the ways that student-athletes endure mental and physical challenges, which plays into the fact that student-athletes push themselves to prove that they are more than just student-athletes on campus.

On the student-athlete profiles featured on the athletic department page, a popular question on the profile was “What does being a student-athlete mean to you?” (“Haverford College Student-Athlete Profiles”, Accessed Jan 15 2022). One student-athlete’s response was particularly interesting, especially considering the conversation of “no pain, no gain” influencing many aspects of student-athletes’ lives. In response to the question, a student-athlete said:

Although day-to-day life is not as strenuous as a Division I or II program might be, attending such a prestigious school on top of a demanding weekly practice and competition year-round schedule as a track athlete makes being a student-athlete very stressful. That said, it is still extremely rewarding. I get to look back at all my life-long friends, accomplishments, and awards with the tangible proof that it is all worth it.

This quote represents the meaning behind messages in athletic culture about physical and mental strength. Student-athletes push themselves, mentally and physically, and with these challenges student-athletes are able to achieve so much within their four years at Haverford. Like this student-athlete highlighted, not only are there tangible results of different accolades, but student-athletes also have these notions of family, of enduring connection between their teammates. Given the complex and changing dynamics that make up the life of the student-athlete, as outlined throughout this chapter, there are bound to be challenges that are a result of the constant balance in so many different aspects of life. But, even though there are these tangible achievements that prove that student-athletes did something meaningful on campus, at what cost does this come at?
One conversation that provided a different but relevant perspective to the conversation of the salience and complexities of student-athlete identities was my conversation with Jade. Jade’s story and experience within Haverford athletics is not as straightforward as other student-athletes. Jade was recruited to play on a team her first year, but subsequently left the team after her first year; her senior year, she decided to re-join Haverford athletics but on a different team. As we were discussing her experiences with college sports at Haverford, Jade described the transition from being a student-athlete to being a student as an identity crisis:

…it was like an identity crisis because I played sports literally since I was a kid all the way up until then and then stopped. So I was trying to figure out like, Oh, who are my friends, who am I, where do I fit in terms of the campus and whatnot?...When I played [sport], I felt like I put all my eggs in one basket my freshman year, my grade reflected it, my mental health reflected it. I felt like…I don’t know, I put a lot of my eggs in that basket. So in terms of my identity, it was just volleyball. I didn’t branch out. Honestly, all my friends were athletes and mainly just on the team…but you don’t branch out, you don’t mingle, so that was something that when I didn’t have that my sophomore year, I felt funky about in terms of like, Well, what do I do now? Am I supposed to focus on school?...which I should have done this whole time.

I want to end this discussion with Jade’s story because even this snippet of her experience as a collegiate athlete illuminates the ways that student-athletes come into college with different circumstances and expectations that clash with the lived realities of what it means to live the hyphenated student-athlete life, to maintain the delicate balance of these two identities and how historical expectations of these two identities can actually come into conflict and cause a major strain on the life of a student-athlete, particularly when thinking about mental health and the ways that mental health is approached within the Haverford athletic community. This reflection from Jade’s conversation brings many questions to mind: what are the implications and ramifications of these issues in terms of mental health, is there support for these issues, and do these issues permeate into other realms of the Haverford experience?
Toxic Positivity and its Greater Implications

In discussing mental health within collegiate athletics, I feel it’s necessary to talk about the recent events that have occurred within the student-athlete community. On March 1st, 2022, Stanford University Women’s Soccer and Stanford University Athletics shared that senior goalkeeper Katie Meyer passed away, and later announced that the cause of death was suicide (Stanford University, March 2 2022). Within the collegiate athletic community and the greater soccer community around the country, Katie’s death sparked conversations about mental health within athletics and the pressures experienced by student-athletes in day-to-day life. Although Katie is not the first student-athlete to suffer from mental health issues and had a very unique experience with the pressures of the student-athlete experience as a Division I athlete, this situation highlights the ways that student-athlete’s experiences with mental health are masked behind the expectations and pressures of being a student-athlete as many have expressed that Katie was a bright light with an equally bright future, even her parents had stated that there were no “red flags” (Editorial Board of Washington Post 2022). As a student-athlete, this news and the subsequent reactions have hit close to home, not only in the fact that Katie and I played against each other in high school and had connections from our youth soccer days, but in digesting this news I also had a lot of “what if” thoughts–what if this were to happen on my team, what if someone on my team is struggling with their mental health?

Scarlett expressed that she struggled with the pressure and criticism in her first year on her team, especially connected to the anxiety she faced about playing time as her team relied on her to play her position, which took a toll physically and mentally in terms of strength to perform. Jim discussed the challenges he faced with not playing as much as his classmates and the internal dilemmas of what his impact and importance was on the team if he was not playing,
as well as greater team dynamics with having a new coach his first year. Paisley experienced many hardships in the ups and downs of the season, connected to the immense behind-the-scenes time commitment that we put into playing a collegiate sport. Jade talked at length about her challenges with confidence in and out of her sport—which Jim also expressed—that resulted in her leaving the sport she came to Haverford to play, and how leaving that sport impacted her subsequent feelings about being at Haverford and her identity on campus. I resonated with many of the issues and perspectives that other student-athletes felt throughout their years here, wondering whether I would be able to keep up the student-athlete balance for four years. Ask any student-athletes on campus, and there most likely has been a time in their career at Haverford in which they have faced challenges, questioning their ability, mentally and physically, to be a student-athlete. Furthermore, in most cases no two situations are alike and while many issues have similar themes—for example both my experience and Jim’s experience both had underlying themes of imposter syndrome and how to value the student-athlete experience—there are a variety of ways in which student-athletes experience and handle these situations.

Balancing the student-athlete experience has direct impacts on the mental health of student-athletes, as seen through the pressures of performing on and off the field and the mental and physical strain of committing to the responsibilities as a student and as an athlete. These experiences of pressure and responsibility are not limited to student-athletes on a campus like Haverford, as seen in the 2018 Clearness Committee Report in which students across the board spend a significant time on academics and managing their school work (Haverford College Clearness Committee 2018, 14). Yet, there is an idealized separation of the “student” and the “athlete” even though the connections between these two realms are not just “turned off” in
either setting. From greater dynamics on campus that make the student and athlete identity
conflictingly salient to the general human nature of stressors impacting multiple facets of life, in
my experience the notion of athletics and school being separate added more stress because I felt
as if I was letting myself or my teammates down by not having that switch, by not being able to
fully commit myself to either realm because the stressors from sports and school never fully
disappeared. There were many practices where I was trying to focus on connecting a pass while
writing an argument for a paper, there were classes where I could only think about the scouting
report for the next game. Jim also mentioned that, “I think that individual and team success on
the field can definitely dictate the mood off the field. And it can go the other way too, if you’re
feeling good off the field you can translate that to positive energy on the field”. This energy also
extends to the stresses, pressures, and expectations of being a student and an athlete that dictates
the way that student-athletes interact and understand mental health issues in a team setting.

On top of the additional stressors of competing as an athlete, one theme I found was that
within team environments there was an emphasis on the fact that school and social life are
separate from sports. There is a common attitude that when you are competing with your team or
playing your sport there is no need to think about school or personal life especially when it
comes to stressors stemming from these areas of life. During practice, at lift, before games, it is
typical to hear “be grateful that we are all here together getting to play together” or “leave the
stress of school behind and let yourself just focus on sports”. Scarlett also expressed this idea
that at a Division III school, “academics becomes a huge stressor and trying to balance those
things can be so complicated…even though I think growing up sports was specifically an outlet”,
and that this change of the role of sports in everyday life is “just something you have to accept”.
In this sentiment Scarlett illustrates the ways that when attending a school like Haverford
athletics and academics are inextricably linked, and this is something that is implicitly understood in the same way that the balance between school and sports is understood. Unlike in high school, collegiate athletics connections between school and sports are even more intertwined on many levels, as an important factor in attending this school was to play their sport and that our academic standing must be adequate to compete. This change in the relationship of sports to a student-athlete’s everyday life is an important consideration when thinking about more indirect factors that mental health plays in student-athlete’s lives, especially when considering where student-athletes can find outlets for their stress.

Because of the unique experience that student-athletes live, being able to share and express concerns and questions about mental health and related experiences would be expected especially when considering the ways that many Haverford teams portray themselves as families and research that has shown the influence of teammates and coaches on student-athletes (Raabe and Zakrjasek 2017). Yet, from my own experiences and from the experiences of other student-athletes, conversations about challenges, struggles, or experiences concerning mental health were not occurring within the athletic or team setting. First, on the individual level, Paisley and Jim expressed that they preferred to handle any struggles on their own. Paisley connected to the self-reliance she thought was an important part of the student-athlete experience and Jim expressed that in most team situations unless mental health challenges directly impacted his sport they were not addressed. Jim also highlighted that when he did try to discuss his struggles with his classmates on his team, he felt that they did not truly understand or connected to the issues that Jim expressed and made the conclusion that these issues were not meant for a team setting because they were his issues, not those of his teammates. Similar to the ways that strength has acted as a hegemonic attitude within athletics, this individualization also is
perpetuated throughout many facets of the student-athlete experience which was seen in conversations with Haverford student-athletes and in previous research (Hextrum 2018). From the recruitment process that different student-athletes go through to the ways that student-athletes experience their identity salience and its conflicts on campus, many student-athletes perceive their experiences as unique despite the fact that they acknowledge that their teammates may have some similar experiences. This separation between the individual student-athletes and their teammates in terms of experiences with mental health struggles has connections to the attitude in athletics about being physically and mentally tough. By individualizing these conflicts and using the “handle it on my own” attitude, this becomes an indirect way for student-athletes to prove that they are strong enough to embody the identity of “student-athlete”.

As I asked Jade about what her perspective was on the ways that mental health challenges played out within and outside of her team experiences, she shifted in her chair and took a deep breath before asking whether I would be comfortable expressing to a teammate that I was upset about a younger teammate getting more play time than me. She went on to say, “Academically, everyone talks about how stressed they are and ways to manage it… in terms of playing time, sitting on the bench, having a freshman come in and be better than you, things that are very sports specific, you can’t really talk about with the whole team”, and emphasized that everyone needs to be happy, supportive, and “bottle that up and deal with it”. On a team level, one theme that dominated the understanding of why mental health challenges were not discussed with team and athletic settings were related to the ways that the student-athlete experience is portrayed in an idealized positive light. Thinking about Jim’s comment that mental health issues were not discussed within team settings unless they directly impacted athletics, Scarlett expressed that any negative emotions or situations, whether it be stress, sadness, problems between teammates, was
dealt with by “putting on a smile and pretending that it doesn’t exist”. The idea of putting on a smile was emulated in a lot of different ways in the experiences that Scarlett had as a student-athlete, not only in the ways that any negativity gets “swept under the rug” but also in that there is an explicit emphasis on being happy all the time and being 100% focused and committed to your sport. Scarlett hesitantly admitted that she herself has said to other teammates “What are you talking about? We’re playing, aren’t you just happy to be here?”. Furthermore, the idea of implicit knowledge about the student-athlete experience being passed down from other teammates is even exemplified in continuing the positive outlook on college athletics as Scarlett felt that as an upperclassman teammate, “you have to set that example and the idea of not letting anything be wrong in any way”.

When you think about this in terms of all of the other conflicts that student-athletes face in their everyday lives, from balancing work and energy to identity salience, there is a continual conflict of embracing and expressing true emotions and experiences about challenges and struggles whether pertaining directly or indirectly to mental health even within spaces that are supposed to act as “families”. These conflicts illuminate the ways that toxic positivity negatively impacts the student-athlete experience on multiple levels; this toxic positivity can occur in direct relation to mental health in terms of having open conversations about these issues and can occur as a cause to mental health challenges in not being able to find support for the conflicts and struggles. I believe toxic positivity best encapsulates this dynamic because of the facade created of what the student-athlete experience is like and its resulting negative impacts on the ways this lived experience and its consequences for adding additional burdens to student-athlete mental health. And, this is something that I have even actively acknowledged with my teammates; when one of my teammates would be sharing something stressful or negative and another teammate
would respond with “Don’t stress about it” or “You shouldn’t worry about that now, we’re at practice”, which would receive a joking, “Did you know you’re spreading toxic positivity?”. Even using it as a running joke was another resemblance of the ways that we knew and expressed, implicitly or explicitly, that we always had to present a positive attitude about our lives no matter what was happening.

At a Division III school, most student-athletes only have four years to play their sport, to come to terms with the fact that they will only have four more years to have a part of your life that is one of the most competitive, intense, and meaningful commitments. As a “retired” student-athlete, many have asked me what it feels like to have that “chapter” of my life come to a close. To me, calling it a chapter makes it feel more insignificant than it was; ending my collegiate student-athlete experience is not just finishing the last four years of my life but rather the last seventeen years of my life playing soccer. The finite four years that a student-athlete has to culminate all that they have put into playing their sport puts an immense amount of pressure on student-athletes to do whatever they can to make the experience “worth it”, as reflected in an earlier quote from the student-athlete student profiles. I believe that this toxic positivity that occurs within the team settings contributes to the goal of making an experience worth the physical and mental sacrifices. By creating the notion that everything must be positive and great about the athletic experience, this also creates the expectation that one must be strong enough to uphold this idealization of the student-athlete life.

Underlying these toxic positivity messages is the attitudes of physical and mental strength that are connected to multiple facets of life as a student-athlete. Many of the typical conversations that perpetuate and enforce this toxic positivity were about being able to forget what is happening around you or to put all your focus on your sport, which requires a lot of
mental energy and strength to be able to do when these thoughts do not just “turn off” automatically. Using the concept of embodied knowledge, illustrated by Rebecca Seligman (2018) as “knowledge that does not pass through conscious awareness but is learned directly by the body, through interactions, behaviors, and routines”, the messages of strength that applies to physical and mental capabilities are derived from cultural and societal norms of masculinity (400). Historically, the “body culture” around athletics were reflective of masculine standards of strength in connection “an extreme view of masculinity aimed above all at proving that they were not women--that is, were not weak, dependent, and emotional…” (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018, 151). Even though the ways that the body in athletics is assumed to be that of the physical body--how fast someone can run, how much someone can lift--the ways that strength in prioritized in this light is also related to the mental capacities that masculinity was expected to embody as a contrast to that of women. As mental health is as important as physical health is to competing as an athlete, these expectations of strength are unrealistic standards set as a means to reproduce and uphold standards of masculinity that have become normalized in athletics and our society generally.

In seeing these messages of strength in mental and physical abilities as a student-athlete at Haverford, the reproduction of social standards of normalcy in and out of athletics has greater impacts on the day-to-day challenges of the student-athlete experience. As Scarlett and I were talking about the other commitments that she has on campus, ranging from multiple clubs to involvement in the Customs program for first-years, she considered that even with all that she is involved with on campus that she believes people would still her primary identity on campus as a student-athlete. But, she specifically highlighted that her identity as a queer athlete has stood out to her since being open about her sexuality towards the end of her first year, saying that it has
been a “different experience” from her first year that has impacted how people saw her. Patriarchal standards of masculinity permeate many different aspects of society, and within athletics this can play out through a larger hegemonic structure and expectation of what is supposed to be normalized and accepted within the athletic community; this also relates to the ways that negative implications of strength have become normalized. In embracing an identity that does not fit into the standards of masculinity, Scarlett stands out among the student-athlete community, on top of the visibility that the student-athlete population has on Haverford’s campus. Despite all that Scarlett does on campus and how she sees herself in relation to her priorities and commitments, having to navigate the ways that she believes she is viewed on campus is an additional dynamic to encounter on top of grappling with the everyday challenges that she faces in being a student-athlete. While Scarlett did not cite this as a specific challenge within her student-athlete experience, Scarlett’s experience as a queer athlete and the ways that she feels it makes her stand out emphasizes the ways that standards and norms of masculinity impact the daily life of the student-athlete.

These standards and expectations coupled with the messages of toxic positivity illuminate the ways that the structure of Haverford athletics are created to control and shape the student-athlete. Because of the physical and mental commitments that are made to compete as a student-athlete, the body is the ultimate focus versus the actual individual; even when considering the ways that student-athletes are viewed on campus with the heightened visibility, the part of their identity that relies on their physical and mental capabilities is what stands out. Taking Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo’s (2004) approach to the ways that bodies act as agents and symbols of social norms to make “the body beautiful”, the body of a student-athlete, whether physically or mentally, is manipulated and changed in order to compliment the standards and
structures within athletics (299). Specifically thinking about the strong ties that athletics
generally has to ideals of masculinity, and the ways that patriarchal values have created
hegemonic structures throughout our society, these expectations are perpetuated to control the
ways that people live and maintain different social dynamics that allow certain people to keep
their power and control. In the same way, the structure of collegiate athletics at Haverford is
made to produce and reproduce student-athletes that embody a specific identity and mindset that
prioritizes the need to succeed in spite of challenges, but this success is not meant for the success
of the individual but rather the success of the institution.

Looking back at the statement from the student-athlete profile in which the
accomplishments and accolades obtained while competing made the whole student-athlete
experience worth it, there is an aspect of these accomplishments and accolades that is very
personal—it was your hard work that achieved these awards, you put the time, energy, and
commitment to get to a place of success. But in the long run, it’s probable that they will sit in
your resume like an old picture sits on a shelf as most student-athletes at Haverford do not go on
to play professional sports; while they can highlight the hard work that you are capable of
achieving, the awards and accolades may only hold personal significance in the future. So, what
is the point of these awards and accolades if they may only ever matter to the individual who
received them? That is where Haverford athletics comes in. This can be seen in the ways that
teams advertise their team in their team brochures, from the amount of conference or national
championships to the professional success that team alumni achieve after Haverford, many
brochures highlight these accomplishments instead of a quote from one of the student-athletes.
Even though these awards are given to a specific individual, this individual is tied to the
institution; when you win an award, so does Haverford athletics. With the success of the
student-athletes, Haverford athletics is able to use these awards as an optical bonus because they show that the program that is run helps produce athletes and teams that are capable of winning these awards—they hire the coach, who then recruits the student-athletes, who then help garner success but in the end it was the athletic department that can take credit for that success.

Thus, in producing and reproducing success by shaping the ways that student-athletes understand and relate to their identities on campus as well as their physical and mental capabilities, the structure and perpetuated messages from Haverford athletics allows for a standardization of what the student-athlete is on campus. From the ways that toxic positivity does not allow student-athletes to actively express their experiences to the heightened visibility on campus that leads to athlete identities dominating perceptions of athletes, the true individual is taken out of the equation when it comes to being a student-athlete. Even in cases such as Scarlett’s when student-athletes are active on campus outside of their sport, the structure of athletics on campus perpetuates the idea that the athlete is not viewed as an individual within the greater system. Some may argue that that is the nature of being on a team and choosing to commit to being a student-athlete. Before interviewing Paisley, we were in her kitchen cooking dinner and having a casual conversation about my thesis when I started telling her my idea to look into the student-athlete balance and that there should not need to be this conflicting balance. She stopped stirring her pasta, turned to me, and asked, “But what does that mean? Isn’t this what we signed up for?” Inspiring the title for my thesis, Paisley’s sentiment about the expectations of the student-athlete highlights the greater structures and systems in place that continue to project the challenges and struggles of being a student-athlete rather than finding a solution to the issue.
What can/should Haverford do?

In many ways, the topic of mental health is still a stigmatized topic within the student-athlete experience and community as seen through the perpetuation of the idealized student-athlete experience that creates a variety of mental health challenges and burdens. Despite the increases in attempts to highlight mental health issues within the athletic communities, the values of open and ongoing conversations regarding mental health have not permeated the Haverford student-athlete community. The attitude of mental toughness has greater reaches than just the environment of the team, it also has an impact on the ways that student-athletes find help or support within the greater campus community. Betsy Cutler and Brendan Dwyer (2020) investigated the perceptions of mental health services and stress from student-athletes at a Division I school and found that student-athletes felt very little comfort in reaching out to school-sponsored mental health services, which was different from the comfortability of reaching out to athletic and academic services provided by the school. In other research, this discomfort in reaching out to school-sponsored mental health services was derived from student-athlete perceptions that the school mental health services did not have an extensive understanding of the challenges and difficulties of the student-athlete experience and thus would not be helpful (Watson 2005, 447). Between the personal beliefs of individualizing mental health challenges, the lack of team support in being open about mental health challenges, and greater stigmas about school mental health services, there are direct connections to the reason that many student-athletes, whether at the Division I level or at the Division III level, struggle with managing and understanding mental health issues.

In the 2018 Clearness Committee Report, the authors found that student-athletes were less likely to experience mental health issues versus students who were not athletes (48). But, the
ways that the questions were framed may not have uncovered the complete story of mental health in athletics. The appendix of the report showed that the committee asked three self-reporting statements when assessing mental health, “I experience obstacles in my daily life due to mental health issues”, “At least half of my friend group struggle with mental health issues”, and “A significant portion of the Haverford student body struggles with mental health issues”; students were subsequently asked to choose options ranging from never to strongly agree or frequently. Although over 40% of respondents reported only having minimal obstacles with mental health in their everyday lives, 78% of respondents agreed to some capacity that a significant proportion of the Haverford student body struggles with mental health issues. And, a majority of people agreed to some capacity that at least half of their friend groups experience mental health issues (Haverford College Clearness Committee 2018, 119-121). Thinking about these different dynamics that occur within the student-athlete community in which mental health is not openly discussed is important when considering the responses to these questions. Even though people who identified as student-athletes may have reported experiencing less mental health issues versus students who are not athletes, from the idealized, overly positive expectations in the ways that student-athletes experience their everyday lives and the individualization of dealing with mental health issues could have influenced the ways that student-athletes interpreted and subsequently answered these questions. And, considering that many student-athletes’ friend groups consist of their team or other student-athletes, the dynamics around mental health in the student-athlete community could have impacted the reporting. Thus, it is important to understand the underlying circumstances and expectations of the student-athlete experience when considering the ways that mental health issues are understood and supported on campus.
At Haverford students have the option to seek support for mental health issues through the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), offering one-on-one sessions to group therapy as well as connecting students to off-campus resources. One frequently asked question used on their website is “Do you have experts or counselors who specialize in particular areas, like eating disorders, sexual assault, OCD, or sports psychology?” (Haverford College CAPS, Accessed March 20 2022). While the website states that they cover most of the topics and more, including decisions about a major or career, family issues, and learning difference, aside from the mention of sports psychology as an example topic the CAPS website does not directly show any services, experience, or programs for student-athletes. Jade and Jim both expressed that they chose to use CAPS but neither said that the reason for reaching out to CAPS was connected to being a student-athlete. For Jim, while he was handling other mental health issues separate from his life at Haverford, when thinking about his mental health challenges in relation to his student-athlete experiences at Haverford, he never really considered going to CAPS because “this was something [he] could deal with on his own”. Even still, Jim said that his student-athlete experiences only came up in his CAPS sessions because it is so prominent in his everyday life. Jade decided to utilize CAPS during her sophomore year because of the transition that she described as an “identity crisis”, in that sports had played a major part of her life for so long and wanted help to figure out, “who are my friends, who am I, where do I fit in in terms of campus and whatnot?”. But, she did not use CAPS her first year despite the mental health challenges that she was experiencing in relation to her sport, instead reaching out to friends who were not athletes and her family.

Historically, students have had a difficult relationship with this service due to a dislike of the way that CAPS was structured and the counselors were not adequately addressing or
recognizing the student’s issues and needs. The 2018 Clearness Committee Report found that, “In terms of general trends, students tended to receive positive support from friends and family, have highly mixed experiences with CAPS and faculty, and hold skepticism against the broad institution (‘Haverford’) or administration (‘deans/staff’)” (48). Despite the fact that students had these mixed relationships with CAPS and the broader Haverford institution in regards to support for mental health, there was no mention of ways that CAPS or the institution could work to resolve these issues. In the “Steps Forward” section for student health, a majority of the section was devoted to changing the environment of the GIAC–where student-athletes spend a significant portion of their time due to team strength and conditioning programs and it is the location of the training room, locker room, and coaches’ offices–to ensure the accessibility and comfortability of students who are not athletes in the space. While the report found that mental health had the greatest impact on physical wellness, it is interesting that instead of proposing the creation of more resources for mental health support or an improvement of current resources the solution focused around the use of the GIAC, especially in relation to the visibility of student-athletes in the GIAC.

While there are other resources on campus that can help relieve the stressors and pressures of the student-athlete balance, which myself and many other student-athletes use on a day-to-day basis, it is interesting to see that student-athletes are less inclined to utilize CAPS when faced with mental health issues. It is not uncommon to use the Office of Academic Resources peer tutoring to help catch up and work on class materials when we would have to leave early from a class for a game or were stressed about an upcoming test; some of my teammates are peer tutors for other teammates and student-athletes. Around junior year, you can see many student-athletes utilizing workshops and services provided by the Center for Career
and Professional Advising as they prepare to plan for life after Haverford. These services, and many more, are utilized by all students, athletes and non-athletes alike, as an indirect way to address aspects of our life that are causing or exacerbating mental health stressors. Yet, when experiencing these mental health stressors, it seems as though student-athletes would not turn to CAPS as their first resource even though CAPS is advertised. From the expectation of not discussing mental health issues to the pressure to individualize grappling with and understanding mental health issues, with my own personal experience despite many of the ups and downs I have faced within my student-athlete career I never thought about using CAPS as support, it was never suggested to talk to CAPS, and I rarely heard of my teammates talking about using CAPS.

Where did student-athletes find support on campus outside of their team and CAPS? Jade and Scarlett were able to find support in their friends who were not athletes, and Scarlett specifically cited the importance in her first year to build friendships outside of the team to maintain a balance of relying on the team for support. Additionally, Jade and Paisley highlighted that they turned to their families as a way to vent about different issues and ask for guidance; Paisley chuckled before saying that she calls her dad multiple times a day, especially in season, just to get a different perspective but sometimes the fatherly advice is not as helpful as she hoped and even makes her more upset. But, one common theme throughout these support systems outside of the team is that they were not always completely equipped for understanding the daily challenges of the student-athlete life because of the unique experiences and dynamics that student-athletes must grapple with. And, when student-athletes were given resources that were connected to mental health, which typically comes directly from the athletic department, these resources mainly take a sports psychologist perspective and situate mental health in relation to your position on the team and the ways that team culture is created. Again, the student-athlete is
not an individual who is dealing with mental health issues that impact everyday life, but rather a member of a team whose performance is being impacted by issues—which are situated outside of the team—that the individual student-athlete must solve for the bettering of the team.

Thinking about the concept of support for student-athletes on campus can be an important consideration to gain deeper understanding about the reluctance of student-athletes to utilize school sponsored services. As Paisley and I were sitting on her couch, I asked her if there was anything she would like to see change about the student-athlete experience. Without hesitation, her first thought was, “I wish athletics were–from an administration standpoint–taken more seriously”. Listing off the lack of regular field maintenance to not providing new uniforms, Paisley’s sentiment reflects one common attitude about the support from Haverford’s administration in that there is not much support. One aspect that many student-athletes note about the lack of support from the Haverford administration is through financial support. Just recently, a fundraising opportunity called Gameday Fords was advertised to student-athletes and the student-athlete community—including families of student-athletes and alumni—as a way to fundraise for the athletic department generally and specific teams. Not only did families of student-athletes and alumni donate, but Haverford coaches and current student-athletes also donated to the cause; while this was not explicitly asked of coaches and athletes, this fundraising opportunity was only advertised to the student-athlete community through the Haverford athletic department social media, such as the Haverford athletic department website and the Haverford athletic department Instagram. Student-athletes and coaches already devote an immense amount of time and energy to the athletic department to generate success for their specific programs, so this leads many to wonder why the Haverford administration is relying on the student-athlete community for financial support.
The lack of support felt by student-athletes from an administrative standpoint is not necessarily that there are not resources available for student-athletes, but rather that student-athletes are not a priority on campus or integral in campus life. Even as small as team accomplishments not being advertised on Haverford’s main webpage, the lack of action and prioritization from the Haverford administration towards student-athletes creates the notion that varsity athletics generally is not an important part of campus life to the Haverford administration. Because of the general lack of support that student-athletes feel, I believe that this translates to perceptions about the efficacy of school-sponsored services like CAPS. Especially when mental health conversations are typically lacking within the student-athlete community—and that when these conversations occur, they focus specifically around sports psychology and the student-athlete’s relationship to their sport and team—the personal feelings of student-athletes regarding the accessibility and capabilities of school-sponsored services in understanding and support are more likely to lead someone to not utilize these services for their student-athlete experience.

When considering the compounding factors that impact student-athletes’ experiences with mental health, generating solutions to these issues can be hard to come by, especially when so many different groups of people are involved, from the Haverford administration as a whole to different teams to the individual athlete. Many would think that the athletic department would play the biggest role in generating solutions and changes, along with teams changing their specific dynamics and cultures surrounding mental health. Yet, when more stories and conversations came about through Katie Meyer’s recent tragedy, most articles did not cite her athletic identity as the guiding factor in influencing what happened to her. In fact, many of the articles focused on what Stanford University as a whole could do rather than her specific team or
the athletic department. Even though it seems as though athletics is a very separate part of campus, the ways that other structures run in specific ways is because of the structure of the greater institution that ultimately dictates the capabilities and standards of the community as a whole.

From conversations over the years to conversations I had with student-athletes about changes they would want to see at Haverford, many of the concerns and issues that student-athletes see within their own experiences and the general experiences on campus involve the Haverford administration. Paisley’s example of maintaining the fields or having enough funds for new uniforms are direct ways that the Haverford administration could facilitate support towards student-athletes; though this may not have a direct tie to mental health, showing support even in small ways can help show student-athletes that they are valued by the campus community. One major issue concerning student-athletes on campus is the athlete/non-athlete divide, which has significant impacts on what it means to balance the student-athlete experience and the ways that the student body relates and interacts with each other on a day-to-day basis. While I will not be moving into a deeper conversation about this topic as it deserves an extensive analysis and conversation about its impacts on campus, I would like to highlight this issue as an example of the Haverford administration actively knowing this problem exists and not taking productive steps to find a solution. Even within the 2018 Clearness Committee report there was a comprehensive examination of students’ perspectives on the athlete/non-athlete divide, and despite the nuanced and informative responses they received, the only step forward provided was to make a committee to investigate the issue. From a student-athlete’s perspective, there has not been much achieved in working with the student body in creating ways to work towards a less divisive separation within the campus community. While the school boasts the guiding principle
of trust, concern, and respect, their actions—or lack thereof—puts this principle into question especially when portions of the student community feel they are not a priority on campus.

COVID-19 Case Study

A discussion about mental health in the student-athlete community at Haverford would be incomplete without a conversation about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student-athlete experience, mental health, and the community of Haverford as a whole. Across the board, the isolation and traumatic experiences of the pandemic have left a lasting impact on the ways health, mental and physical, is regarded especially in terms of broadening the definition of health and the continuum in which we understand the dynamics of health. In reflecting on my own experiences with the pandemic in relation to my experiences as a student-athlete, supplemented by the experiences of fellow student-athletes, looking back can help generate steps forward in learning more about the challenges of the student-athlete experience in a time that lacked normalcy.

In March 2020, my classmates and I were on spring break in Montreal, trying to get some much needed rest and relaxation before heading into our spring season that was set to start the following week. That was until we received the news that Haverford was going to be transitioning to virtual learning and that dorm rooms would need to be cleared out after spring break. As the promise of our spring season vanished with the news of the realities of COVID-19

1 In this reflection, I will also be drawing from self-reflections from my experiences during COVID-19 that I also reflected on for a paper I wrote in 2020 on COVID-19 and body image for female athletes in Juli Grisby’s Feminist Ethnography class. While the reflection for this work will not be focusing on body image specifically, many of the underlying themes that came out in my self-reflection for that work contribute to a greater understanding of the student-athlete challenges in and out of the pandemic. In a sense, the paper I wrote in 2020 acted as a catalyst for inspiration in choosing to pursue a topic about the student-athlete experience on campus, so I hope that the self-reflections drawn from that paper will help to draw a clearer picture of some of the issues and structures highlighted in this current work.
pandemic, as well as the potential that we would have a regular fall season, sports became a limited priority for me. While I was encouraged to maintain my fitness and technical skills for soccer from coaches and teammates, my motivation for pushing my body physically correlated to the mental motivation I had for training as the stressors of the pandemic became a greater aspect of day-to-day life. On top of physical barriers to being able to train, especially with gyms and fields being closed and not having access to the equipment needed to complete the strength and conditioning training, grappling with how to be able to maintain the attitude of a competitive student-athlete from home expended a lot of mental energy. At the beginning of the pandemic, I would wake up and complete a morning lift, using as much stuff in my house I could find to replicate barbells and free weights, followed by a two hour afternoon agility, conditioning, and technical session, my attempt at replicating what I would be doing as if I was still training in a spring season. Doing this was a way to try to stay connected to a central part of who I was and how my life had been structured for the past two years, yet as the pandemic pushed on I found myself feeling less and less connected to my identity as a student-athlete despite the replication of the physical commitment I made in order to maintain this identity.

Looking back now, the liminality I experienced in understanding how to maintain an identity that had become such an important part of me in my time at Haverford created a lot of mental stress and hardships. When the novelty of the water jug dumbbells and the umbrella pole barbells wore off, I struggled with coming to terms with the fact that physical health and fitness were going to hold different meanings, along with changes to everyday normalcy that was impacting my life whether it was related to sports or not. The shift in understanding what fitness meant was hard because it was one of the most important parts of being a student-athlete; there are expectations and standards in the physical capabilities of student-athletes in which meeting
those standards translates to success within your sport. And, as seen previously, this success is
defined by what Haverford values in being able to advertise and reproduce the student-athlete
experience. This change in what it meant to be a student-athlete without the same commitments,
mentally and physically, to the sport came with positive impacts as well; I was able to exercise
and work out in ways that made my body feel good and not for someone else, I reconnected with
my drive for what it meant to be a collegiate athlete, and with all the uncertainty of the pandemic
I was able to use exercise as an outlet again. But, with these new perspectives, returning to
campus and getting back to playing competitive seasons created a new kind of liminality in terms
of what it meant to be a student-athlete on campus when COVID-19 had created significant
changes to multiple aspects of our lives.

“We blinked and then we were seniors” was something that was repeated a lot within my
classmates and teammates throughout our competitive fall season and from conversations I had
with other senior student-athletes. Jim and Scarlett both expressed similar experiences, especially
because becoming seniors on the team means stepping into new and important leadership roles.
As Jim reflected on his role within his team in relation to his mental health, he paused for a brief
moment before saying, “And yeah…COVID year was strange…but sort of forced me into a
leadership position earlier than normal”. And for Scarlett, who only had one competitive season
before COVID-19, her feelings towards COVID-19 impacted how she saw her growth as a
person and a player in that no one got to see that growth because of having two seasons canceled;
when her schedule was released for the current spring season, she had past teammates and
alumni texting her about how surprised they were that she was already a senior, and she said she
felt the same way. On top of needing to adapt and adjust to the changing policies and structures
put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 when returning to campus while also trying to
practice, lift, and be together as a team, the acceleration of needing to lead a team was stressful
to navigate because as underclassmen the leadership experiences you have are very different than
those that you have as an upperclassmen. Even entering this last fall season, out of four different
class years on our team, only two had experience playing collegiate sports, and the senior
class–my class year–was the only class year to have experience playing more than one
competitive season. Even for the junior class this year, they were put into leadership positions
that they had never experienced before because their only experience of a typical competitive
season was their first year when they were still trying to figure out how to be a student-athlete.

Throughout the ups and downs of figuring out what it means to be a student-athlete at
Haverford when the normal structure of our everyday lives was turned on its head, the
expectations and realities of the student-athlete experience did not adapt to the changes. Even
while at home, we were sent workouts and foot skill videos do to with the incentive that they
could be done at home, my team scheduled Zoom workouts that we could do so that it still felt as
though we were working together; when we returned to campus, they essentially moved the gym
outside and we went right back to early morning lifts and running to practice after our Zoom
classes. While the world around us was changing to the uncertain circumstances that came with
the pandemic, it felt as though the expectations of student-athletes, specifically with maintaining
their “athlete” identity and what it meant to be able to identify as an athlete. In the uncertain
times of the pandemic, we were still talking about the next time we will be playing against Johns
Hopkins. Even with the ways that the athletic department and Haverford offered mental health
conversations and services to student-athletes, these conversations continued to be through the
perspective of sports psychology, focusing on maintaining team culture and how to keep our
competitive drive during COVID-19.
Thinking about the experiences of liminality and uncertainty experienced by student-athletes in relation to their identities and positions generally and on their teams, the concept of languishing can be useful in understanding the ways that mental health challenges played out for student-athletes. Originally researched by Corey L.M. Keyes (2002), languishing is described as the absence of well-being, a dull in motivation that can occur even when someone is not experiencing what is typically conceived as a mental illness. As Keyes highlights, “Is the absence of mental illness reflective of genuine mental health?” (2002, 217). Recently, Adam Grant connected the concept of languishing to mental well-being, or lack thereof, during the pandemic. In mourning the loss of normalcy, Grant argues, languishing comes from the unreal expectation of being able to flourish when facing hardships and challenges, like enduring a global pandemic (Dr. Laurie Santos and Adam Grant 2022). In this lingering emotional state, Grant expresses that, “‘Not depressed’ doesn’t mean you’re not struggling. ‘Not burned out’ doesn’t mean you’re fired up. By acknowledging that so many of us are languishing, we can start giving voice to quiet despair and lighting a path out of the void” (Grant 2021). When exploring the concept of languishing, the connection to the expectations for flourishing resonated with student-athlete experiences of needing to fulfill the expectations of growth and success throughout the pandemic while concurrently experiencing mental and emotional challenges associated with the general hardships of the pandemic. From an individual expectation of continuing to maintain one’s identity through the physical body to the structures and expectations for participating in athletics returning to campus, the cultural messages surrounding what it means to be a student-athlete persisted even when what was normal did not exist.

The emotional long haul of the pandemic, on top of continuing to manage school and athletics, was not reflected in the ways that mental health was regarded in multiple aspects of the
student-athlete community. While the transition from COVID sports to our normal competitive season was a frequent conversation topic within our team, the transition back to the classroom after Zoom fatigue was not a common conversation within team settings, from casual conversations to one-on-one meetings with coaches. And, the messages of being grateful to be playing and being together as a team only became stronger as the pandemic practices without being able to play a competitive game became more monotonous. While being able to practice was something that should not have been taken for granted during the pandemic, these messages coupled with the focus on sports psychology in conversations dedicated to mental health reflects reminisce of messages and expectations associated with toxic positivity. In attempting to create athletics as a space that echoed previous, “normal” seasons, it only reproduced standards and norms that did not combat or support the mental and emotional stressors experienced in the pandemic. If Haverford could not provide support to students during a time in which stress followed everyone like a shadow, even considering that student-athletes only make up about one third of the student body, what does this say about Haverford’s capabilities to support students across campus?

**Conclusion**

Looking closer at this topic, nothing I have written here today is new. These are matters that have been talked about in everyday conversations between student-athletes on their way to practice or sitting in the Coop doing work. The experiences drawn from my self-reflection and the stories that student-athletes shared with me that informed this thesis are from informal interactions and minute moments. Everyday, there are student-athletes across campus who confront challenges with mental health on multiple levels and patch together solutions like band
aids to continue to obtain a well-rounded education and play the sport they are passionate about. I want to emphasize that student-athletes find a way through these challenges; where we can, we build communities, find support systems, and do what needs to be done. But, student-athletes should not have to be replacing these band aids day in and day out, taking a mental and physical toll in navigating each day, each class, and each practice to be able to say that they are a student-athlete. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic—when confronting mental health issues became a regular conversation—the conversation of mental health in athletics, including collegiate athletics, has always been present, it just depended on how well you were listening.

The goal of this work is to bring to light an ongoing conversation about mental health in collegiate athletics, specifically at Haverford, by looking at the expectations and realities of the lived student-athlete experience and the origin of preconceived notions about this experience generally and tied to mental health. In highlighting these experiences and conversations, I hope there can be more honest dialogue at multiple levels of the collegiate athletic sphere and at Haverford about the values and norms that are perpetuated and what kinds of consequences this has on students across the board. As I reflect on my experiences and hear the experiences of fellow student-athletes, it is my hope that these ideas of reimagining different structures and systems will not just be imaginations but the lived realities of future student-athletes who also want to be able to actually do both, to play the sport they love and get to learn and grow intellectually and personally at Haverford.

With this being said, can Haverford—or even higher education—adequately and effectively address creating solutions that truly benefit its students, not as the product of the Haverford system but as individuals who all have unique experiences, emotions, and needs? From what I have experienced first hand and what this research has emphasized about the reproduction of
detrimental social values, I say that a lot would have to change about Haverford for that to happen.

Let’s then imagine what needs to be done to make Haverford a place in which students can feel that they are more than just another student that Haverford successfully molds to step into the world. Considering the student-athlete experience specifically, we need to reimagine what it means to be an athlete and what mental and physical energies and commitments are necessary to be able to be a collegiate athlete, especially considering the expectation of a struggling balance in order to live the student-athlete experience. Why can there not be existing support systems, services, resources, and structures that attune to the expectations of student-athletes which work towards alleviating the obstacles in maintaining a healthy balance, creating short- and long-term systems to benefit student-athletes rather than benefiting the institution? Extending this to students generally at Haverford, eliminating the struggles in balancing different commitments and the pressures for success that these struggles are derived from, we would need to reimagine the goals of higher education and what it means to be successful. This imagination creates a cascading effect that ultimately begs the question, what do we prioritize as a society and what are the means that we go to in order to achieve these values?

The athletic experience, whether within or outside of a college setting, provides another lens to observe the ways that societal norms and values are emulated within everyday life and throughout larger structures and systems that create this successful student ideal. When thinking about the connections between the body, mental and physical commitments to sports, and mindsets and mentalities that dictate values of athletics, looking at college athletics can reveal the ways that cultural values, social norms, and hegemonic ideals can be inscribed onto people and shape experiences within different facets of life. These dynamics are not limited to
Haverford’s campus, thus continuing to look into the ways that structures of higher education influence and shape the lived experiences of mental health in students, athletes and non-athletes alike, and how the values inscribed on students during their experiences of higher education reinforce negative social values that inflict more harm than good. This focus of college athletics should take into account experiences across different divisions, whether NCAA or smaller associations, as many of these issues can overlap and expose the ways that higher education generally can perpetuate hegemonic societal values on multiple levels.

Ultimately, there needs to be a collective effort, from individual student-athletes, specific teams, the athletic department, and the greater Haverford administration, to approach a solution to providing support for student-athletes. It should not have to be that student-athletes are in a mental health crisis for support to be given, this support should be constantly available no matter the circumstances and student-athletes need to know that they can and will be supported on campus in terms of their mental health and well-being. The explicit expression of support, whether that be dedicated programs or service for student-athletes or even smaller steps such as updating the equipment in the gym, is an important step in driving more open conversations about mental health within the student-athlete community because of messages of positivity and idealization of the student-athlete experience that inhibit the prevalence of these conversations. In advocating for greater mental health support for student-athletes, finding solutions for these challenges can also help improve the ways that mental health issues are addressed on campus. In similar ways, many students have their own balancing acts; whether it be maintaining three jobs on campus or spearheading two different organizations on campus all the while trying to plan for life after Haverford, students across campus grapple with external and internal issues every day that dictates their experiences as a student at Haverford. Thinking about the ways that structures
and systems are in place to reproduce the ideal student-athlete at Haverford, this can be extended to think about whether similar structures and systems place pressures on students to become the ideal Haverford student who stretches themselves thin to appear as a well-rounded student, for example.

This idea of reproduction applies to dynamics within and outside Haverford’s institution and Haverford’s athletic department. The patriarchal expectations that are seen in the values and messages throughout the student-athlete community are seen in multiple facets of everyday life, from expectations of what it means to be successful, what family means, what it means to take space in your environment, and so much more. On Haverford’s campus, the strike organized by students of color in the 2020-2021 school year highlighted the harmful policies and practices impacting people of color that have been perpetuated and reproduced in different settings across multiple aspects of campus. While these issues have occurred on campus for longer than most of us have been a part of this community, the strike is an example in which students of color pushed back against the idealization and expectations surrounding the experience at Haverford. To understand where these influences play out within the student experience at Haverford, understanding mental health on campus can illuminate the reproduction of these standards because approaches to care of and addressing mental health does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with patriarchal structures in which normalcy and perfectionism are cornerstone values seen in everyday life.

The nature of higher education plays into the standards of normalcy and perfectionism: different schools compete against one another for who can create the most successful student and thus the most productive member of society, and students must comply with the norms of these schools in order to become that successful student. But, when you add in the fact that these
expectations can negatively impact mental health and the capability of these students to become successful, the schools approach these issues ensures that “helping” means the student can return to the reproduction of the successful student. With this reproduction, the student as a person, independent of the goals of the institution, is negatively impacted—as seen in the ways that mental health challenges play out within these institutions. Until the student is seen as a person instead of a pawn within the game of higher education, students will continue to face unnecessary hardships that impact their lives within the college experience and beyond.
Bibliography


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Lu, Landy Di, Kathryn L. Heinze, and Sara Soderstrom. “Playing Multiple Positions:


Appendix A

MOOREA MORRISON SENIOR THESIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM
HAVERFORD COLLEGE

The interviewee, ______________________________________, agrees to participate in a recorded conversation with Moorea Morrison for her senior thesis in the Anthropology Department at Haverford College. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of student-athletes on campus in connection to mental health and the perceptions of athletics on campus.

This research is for my senior thesis, attempting to understand the experiences of student-athletes on campus in connection to mental health and the perceptions of athletics on campus. Your identity will remain anonymous and you may use pseudonyms of your choosing. Along with names, the specific sport you play will not be provided to preserve anonymity. This will ensure the confidentiality of our conversation. The notes and recordings of our conversations will be password protected to also maintain your confidentiality. After the completion of this research, the recordings and notes will be deleted from the device and will only be accessible to me prior to their deletion.

This conversation should last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes. You are welcome to end this conversation at any time if you need to. Because some of our conversation may involve discussing mental health and sensitive topics, I am happy to provide resources for mental health support on and off campus if you want them; they are also listed below. If you have any further questions about the study you can always ask me or contact my advisor Josh Moses at jmoses@haverford.edu. You will also receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

Haverford College CAPS program:
https://www.haverford.edu/counseling-psychological-services
List of additional resources in Haverford area:
https://www.haverford.edu/counseling-psychological-services/resources

If you have any questions regarding your treatment or rights as a participant in this research project, please contact David Owens, the chair of the Institutional Review Board at Haverford College, at hc-irb@haverford.edu. (The Institutional Review Board is a committee that reviews and approves research by students, faculty and staff of Haverford College that involves human subjects).
Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and I agree to continue participation in this conversation.

Interviewee: _______________________ Signature: ________________________
Location (City, State): _______________________ Date: ________________________

Interviewer: _______________________ Signature: ________________________
Location (City, State): _______________________ Date: ________________________

Witness: _______________________ Signature: ________________________
Location (City, State): _______________________ Date: ________________________