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Student-Athletes' Perceptions of COVID-19 Guidelines and if They Ensure Safety

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OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to investigate Division III student-athletes' concerns about their health and safety with the guidelines put in place amidst a global pandemic. The significance of this study was to give Division III student-athletes the ability to voice their opinion about their sports and how they feel COVID-19 is affecting their future as student-athletes.

DESIGN AND SETTING

This study was a quantitative survey research study conducted at one small Division III institution in southwestern Ohio. The independent variables in this study were upperclassmen and underclassmen student-athletes, indoor and outdoor-sport student-athletes, student-athletes from a rural and urban background, and male and female student-athletes. The dependent variable was if they felt their athletic training staff was following the COVID-19 guidelines, if they agree with the guidelines that are in place for their sport, and if they feel as though the guidelines will keep them safe. The paper surveys were distributed by hand, on-site, at each practice for each student-athlete.

PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted as a convenience sample. A total of 335 surveys were distributed with a return rate of 100% (n=335). Each team received surveys for each member of their team, including wrestling (n=9), football (n=84), men's soccer (n=27), women's soccer (n=24), volleyball (n=17), women's basketball (n=14), men's basketball (n=15), softball (n=20), baseball (n=28), men's lacrosse (n=7), cheerleading (n=17), cross country (n=32), swimming (n=23), track and field (n=10), and equestrian (n=11). Results were gathered from male (n=203) and female (n=124) student-athletes. These athletes were then broken

down into upperclassmen (n=122) and underclassmen (n=208). Finally, the athletes were broken down by their hometown being considered rural (n=163) or urban (n=155).

INTERVENTION

A panel of experts determined the face validity of the survey. The content validity was shown through the Table of Specifications (ToS). The College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study. Quantitative descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) were calculated for every applicable item on the survey. The survey was comprised of 21 questions. Pearson's Chi-Square test was used to analyze statistical significance for upperclassmen and underclassmen student-athletes, indoor and outdoor-sport student-athletes, student-athletes from a rural and urban background, and male and female student-athletes. The alpha level was set at $p=.05$ *a priori*. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0.

MAIN OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

Questions 1-16 all used a 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree⁵, Agree⁴, Neutral³, Disagree², Strongly Disagree¹) to collect ordinal data. Question 17 used a 15-point Likert Scale (Football¹⁵, Volleyball¹⁴, Cross Country¹³, Men's Basketball¹², Women's Basketball¹¹, Cheerleading¹⁰, Men's Soccer⁹, Women's Soccer⁸, Swim⁷, Track and Field⁶, Baseball⁵, Softball⁴, Lacrosse³, Wrestling², Equestrian¹) to collect nominal data. Question 18 used a 2-point Likert Scale (Rural², Urban¹) to collect nominal data. Question 19 used a 4-point Likert Scale (Freshman⁴, Sophomore³, Junior², Senior¹) to collect nominal data. Question 20 used a 2-point Likert Scale (Male², Female¹) to collect nominal data. Question 21 used a 4-point Likert Scale (24

and over⁴, 22-23³, 20-21², 18-19¹) to collect nominal data.

RESULTS

56% (n=188) of participants in the study strongly agreed or agreed that they believed the guidelines put in place will keep them healthy and protect them during a pandemic. 55% (n=185) of student-athletes in the survey strongly agreed or agreed that the coronavirus pandemic is an important current event that is a serious health risk to themselves and others. 99% (n=333) of participants believed that the coronavirus pandemic has made an impact on college athletics such as loss of seasons, change of schedule, and other changes. 77% of all participants (n=255) agreed that there are three different phases in the guidelines created by the NCAA for college athletics ($X^2=11.444$, $df=4$, $p=0.022$). When asking if the student-athletes agree with the three phases of return-to-play, 81% (n=103) of outdoor-sport student-athletes agreed with the statement, and 85% (n=176) of indoor-sport student-athletes agreed as well. 45% (n=72) of student-athletes from a rural background agreed that the coronavirus pandemic is an important current event that is a serious health risk to myself and others, where 67% (n=101) of student-athletes from an urban background agreed when asked the same question ($X^2=17.689$, $df=4$, $p=0.001$). 53% (n=87) of student-athletes from a rural background and 60% (n=93) of student-athletes from an urban background reported that they believe the guidelines will keep them safe. Additional analysis showed 84%

(n=170) of male student-athletes and 95% (n=118) of female student-athletes reported that they have been wearing their mask when not performing an athletic activity during practices ($X^2=12.838$, $df=4$, $p=0.012$). 61% (n=123) of male student-athletes and 71% (n=88) of female student-athletes reported that they were staying within their functional units outside of practice ($X^2=8.548$, $df=4$, $p=0.073$).

CONCLUSION

It is important to notice that most of the participants understand and agree with the guidelines for their sport, especially in a time where these college student-athletes are not guaranteed their seasons. This in turn allows them to feel safe about playing their sport in a pandemic if these guidelines are enforced and followed. They feel that those around them such as athletic trainers and coaches are setting a great example for advocating and following these guidelines as well. These student-athletes understand that this is an important health risk to themselves and others around them, and their reporting of wearing masks when outside of practice or staying within their functional units shows this. Without the education and understanding of the guidelines, there is more of a risk of spread through these athletic teams. Even though this is a very dynamic time in the life of college athletes, making sure that there is an education and adherence is an important role of athletic trainers and coaches to keep their student-athletes' seasons safe.

KEY WORDS: *Athletic Training, COVID-19, Coronavirus, Guidelines, College Athletics*