

# Examining health and wellbeing of student athletes in a BSN program to strategically impact student retention

Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies

Vol. 11, No. 2, 13-21, 2025.

e-ISSN: 2518-0614



Kelli D. Whittington

BSN Program in the School of Health Sciences, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1365 Douglas Drive, Mail Code 6615, Carbondale, IL 62901, United States of America.  
Email: [kellid@siu.edu](mailto:kellid@siu.edu)

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine student perceptions of their mental health and well-being to foster retention. Identifying and understanding these perceptions is pertinent to program development, which ultimately impacts the faculty's approach to student persistence. The study design used a convenience sample of students enrolled in a BSN program who were identified as student-athletes by the Midwestern University athletic department at a Division I sports institution. Those students were solicited for participation via their university email and provided a QR code and hyperlink for survey completion. The survey questions were provided by the Student-Athlete Well-being Scale (SAWS), developed by the National Athletic Association (NCAA), to explore student-athletes' perceptions of their well-being. The NCAA provided permission for the modified use of this survey instrument, using specifically requested questions. Study findings utilized descriptive statistics to determine relevant themes related to collegiate student persistence. The themes identified, which are also similar to those found in the literature, include resilience, mental health, wellness, and transition to practice as essential components. The long-term impact of these themes can be relevant to workplace readiness. Practical implications include fostering the ability of faculty members to strategically design student engagement offerings that promote these areas, thereby intentionally impacting student retention.

**Keywords:** Mental health, Nursing student, Resilience, Student-athletes, Transition to practice, Wellness.

**DOI:** 10.55284/gjss.v11i2.1569

**Citation |** Whittington, K. D. (2025). Examining health and wellbeing of student athletes in a BSN program to strategically impact student retention. *Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 11(2), 13-21.

**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Funding:** This study received no specific financial support.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The Ethical Committee of the Southern Illinois University Carbondale, United States of America has granted approval for this study on 14 February 2025 (Ref. No. 25003).

**Transparency:** The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

**Competing Interests:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

**History:** Received: 8 April 2025/ Revised: 26 August 2025/ Accepted: 29 August 2025/ Published: 12 September 2025

**Publisher:** Online Science Publishing

### Highlights of this paper

- Highlights of this paper include an examination of student-athletes' perceptions of mental health and well-being.
- Identifying factors that influence individuals' perceptions of mental health and well-being can provide faculty with valuable information. This knowledge can be used to develop strategies that positively impact these areas, fostering a more supportive environment for mental health.
- Purposefully engaging with student athletes can promote persistence in nursing programs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Collegiate student-athletes often face significant challenges balancing the rigorous demands of both their sport and academic pursuits. As a result, many prospective nursing students who are also athletes may choose alternative educational and career paths due to perceived difficulties in managing both commitments. Nursing programs require not only mastery of didactic content but also participation in laboratory sessions and extensive clinical experiences. These requirements demand substantial time for in-person coursework, assignments, and test preparation. The intense scheduling demands make it particularly difficult for student-athletes to excel in both their sport and a nursing program simultaneously (Engelke & Frederickson, 2022).

Historically, student-athletes have been encouraged to pursue other academic disciplines due to these scheduling conflicts, potentially depriving the nursing profession of highly skilled and resilient individuals. Research suggests, however, that student-athletes possess unique strengths such as discipline, time management, and perseverance that position them for success both in the classroom and in professional practice (Engelke & Frederickson, 2022). Given these attributes, it is essential for nursing faculty to develop strategic approaches that support student-athlete persistence in nursing programs.

This study explores how health and wellness impact the academic persistence of student-athletes in nursing programs. Motivating this study is the prospect of attracting student-athletes to a nursing program while playing a crucial role in the recruitment of the student, not only as a student-athlete but also as a nursing student. Recruiting and retaining these highly motivated individuals play an important role in growing collegiate athletic programs as well as nursing programs. The literature review examines key themes that influence student success, including resilience, mental health, and overall well-being. Additionally, the study considers how these factors contribute to a successful transition from nursing education to professional practice.

While accommodating the demanding schedules of both nursing programs and collegiate athletics presents challenges for students and faculty alike, fostering student-athlete success is a worthwhile endeavor. By analyzing existing literature and research findings, this study aims to identify strategies that nursing faculty can implement to support student-athletes. Understanding the intersection of athletic commitment and nursing education can provide valuable insights for improving student persistence and fostering success among diverse learners across various backgrounds.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

When examining research related to student athletes, four themes are easily identified. These themes include resilience, mental health, wellness, and transition to practice. It is crucial to analyze each theme within the context of how these concepts can be addressed to positively impact student success within the academic setting.

A consistent theme identified in the literature review is that of resilience. According to Barber (2013), resilience refers to the ability of the individual to function when faced with adversity. Similarly, Johnston describes resilience as the ability to demonstrate positive outcomes under adverse conditions. When described as such, it is easy to see how necessary resilience is to collegiate student-athletes. Furthermore, resilience is an integral feature of nursing

students as they progress through a challenging curriculum. The ability to master resilience not only assists student athletes/nursing students to persist within their academic endeavors, but it will also assist them in their transition to practice. As noted by [Stephens \(2013\)](#), developing strategies for faculty to utilize and building resilience within their nursing students will assist with not only student retention, but eventually transitioning those individuals into the workforce. Similarly, [Guo et al. \(2024\)](#) assert that resilience mediates academic procrastination. This is especially helpful within nursing curriculum progression, as assignments are often expected to be completed within specific time frames. The ability to complete assignments within these time frames prepares students for success in the workforce, as it can be translated into the completion of patient care within designated time frames.

Two complementary themes noted in the literature review are mental health and wellness. Building on resilience, mental health compromises adaptive skills needed to mitigate anxiety and stress. Introducing tools that promote mental health and wellness during the nursing curriculum can equip individuals with techniques they can use within the program as well as in their professional roles post-graduation. Experiencing anxiety, which negatively impacts mental health, is found in nursing students as they learn how to manage large amounts of information, high-stress testing, required memorization, clinical judgment applications, and patient care responsibilities ([VanderSchaaf, Webb, & Garlock, 2020](#)). Nursing faculty can ensure nursing student/athletes are aware of mental health services available on campus ([Bird, Chow, & Cooper, 2020](#)). Nursing students who learn strategies to positively impact their mental health within a nursing program may see the value in continuing these strategies post-graduation, influencing not only their mental health but also that of the patients for whom they render care ([Hrabe, Melnyk, Buck, & Sinnott, 2017](#)). Similarly, [Gulvani, Jima, Geleta, and Hussein \(2024\)](#) suggest the importance of developing student-athlete-centered strategies and interventions, such as counseling and mental toughness training, which can promote resilience and minimize the negative impact of stress. Student perception of wellness is also impacted by sleep and sense of belonging ([Storey, Hewitt, & Ogrodniczuk, 2024](#)). Building a sense of community within nursing programs can promote recognition of cultural impact on students, not only within the program but as an indicator of future job possibilities.

The ultimate goal of nursing programs is to produce competent and safe nursing professionals who are ready to enter the workforce. When given tools within a nursing program that promote resiliency, mental health, and wellness, these tools can be utilized throughout the individual's career to positively impact their transition to practice. One of those tools is the ability to demonstrate work-life balance. Crucial to that balance is the ability of the individual to demonstrate excellent time management skills, utilize communication techniques, and identify a support system ([Steed, 2019](#)).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research received permission from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to utilize some components of their Student-Athlete Well-being Scale (SAWS) and was approved by the university's human subjects committee. The researcher worked with the Athletic Department to identify all sophomores, juniors, seniors, and Accelerated BSN students who had competitively participated in collegiate athletics at the Division I university.

The survey instrument was sent to all identified student athletes (11) within the nursing program at a medium-sized, public university in the Midwest via school email with a QR code to the questions embedded within SurveyMonkey; the email request for participation was repeated one week after the first email request was sent. Utilizing SurveyMonkey allowed the researcher access to anonymous individual and aggregate responses of the eight students who completed the survey. Descriptive statistics were obtained using SurveyMonkey survey analysis features, with the time for completion averaging just over eleven minutes.

SAWS is divided into eight sections, with the following content in each section: Section 1 - Demographics, Section 2 - Mental health and peer support, Section 3 - Sleep, Section 4 - Weight, body image, and nutrition, Section 5 - Competition and injury, Section 6 - Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, Section 7 - Supplements, and Section 8 - Support.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Demographically, 100% of the respondents were female and played on women's collegiate sports teams, with the majority (75%) noting senior status. The majority described themselves as white (75%), with 25% describing themselves as black. Seven individuals reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, with one individual reporting a gay or lesbian orientation. The majority (62.5%) identified as being older than 22, with three identifying as either 19, 20, or 21 years of age.

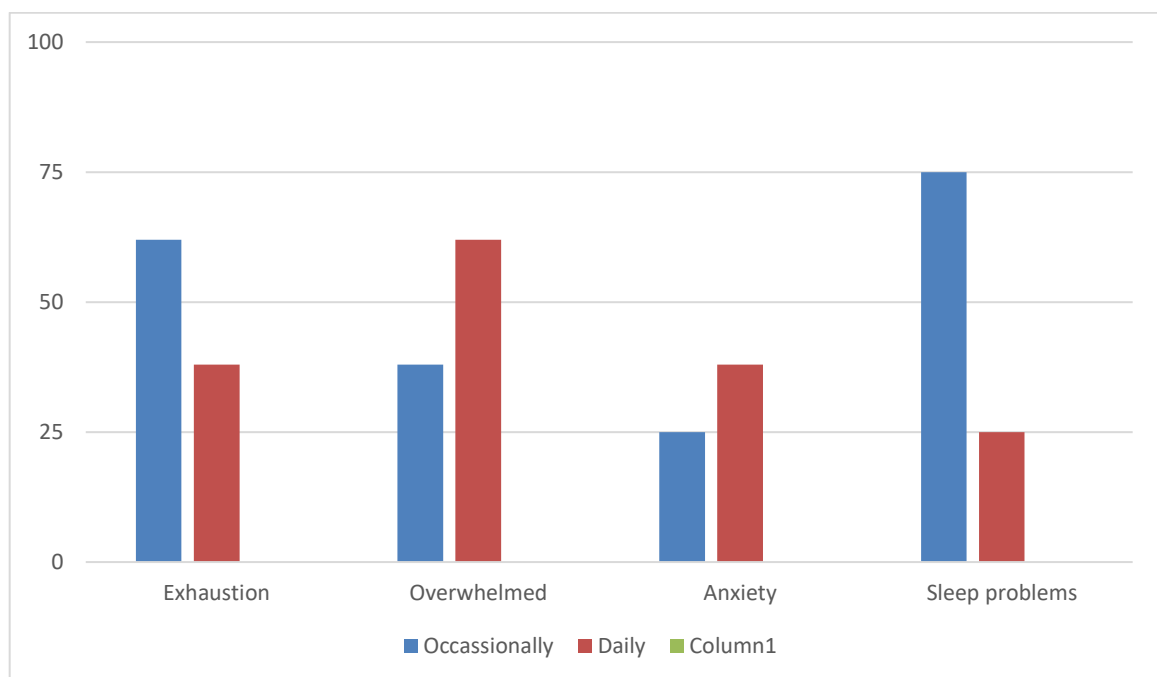


Figure 1. Students' perception of their mental health and peer support.

Figure 1 demonstrates the students' perception of their mental health and peer support. Using a Likert scale where one star equals never and four stars equals constantly, consistent findings noted feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, having anxiety, and demonstrating sleep difficulties were experienced either occasionally or daily by all respondents (100%). Eighty-eight percent reported that their academic worries and 75% reported financial worries negatively impacted their mental health within the previous month; fortunately, all respondents reported never experiencing feelings of hopelessness. All students reported knowing how to access mental health assistance on campus, feeling comfortable seeking mental health help, and identifying people they can trust for support. Additionally, all students disagreed with statements inferring negative connotations to seeking mental health support, such as "seeking psychological help would make me feel less intelligent," which infers a high degree of acceptance in seeking assistance. Similarly, peer support was reported to be very high, with responses > 75% indicating they would accompany a teammate home if that individual had too much to drink at a social gathering or stop a fight involving a teammate. Interestingly, 38% responded that they were unlikely to report a teammate's involvement in academic misconduct.

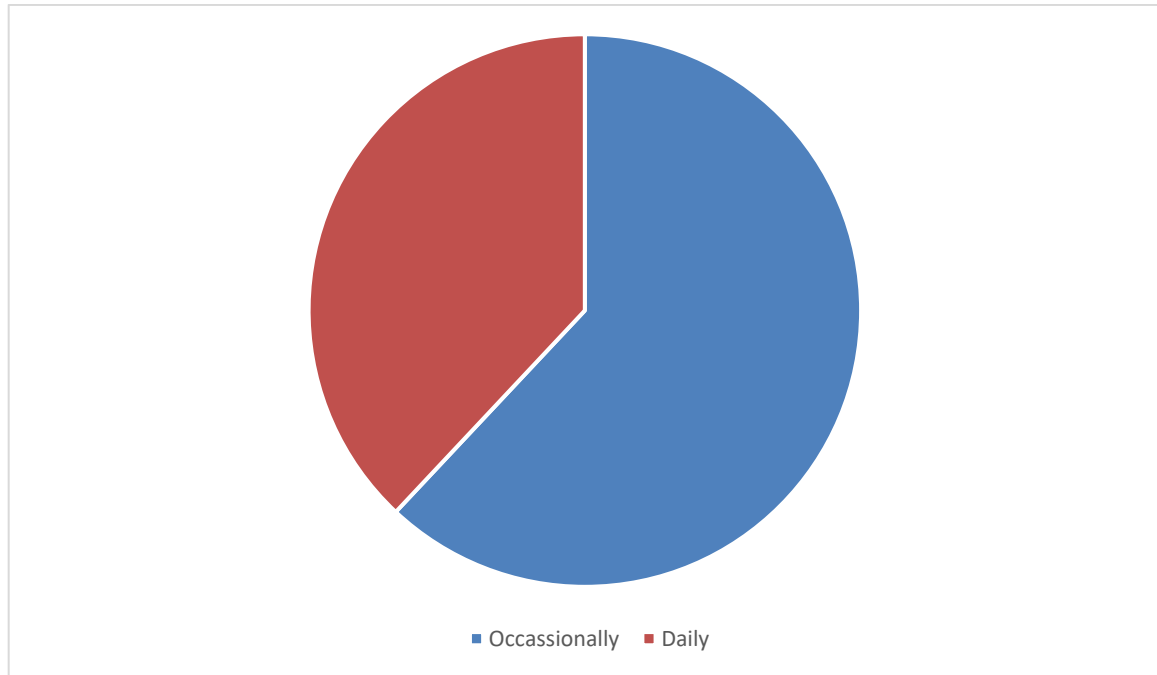


Figure 2. Students' report of their sleep patterns.

Figure 2 depicts the evaluation of sleep, with 38% of the respondents stating they felt exhausted (outside of physical training needed for their sport) daily, and 62% reporting exhaustion occasionally. None of the respondents reported getting enough quality sleep so they felt rested for seven days of the previous week; all reported awakening too early with the inability to get back to sleep on one to four days of the previous week. All reported feeling tired or sleepy during the day at least two days of the previous week.

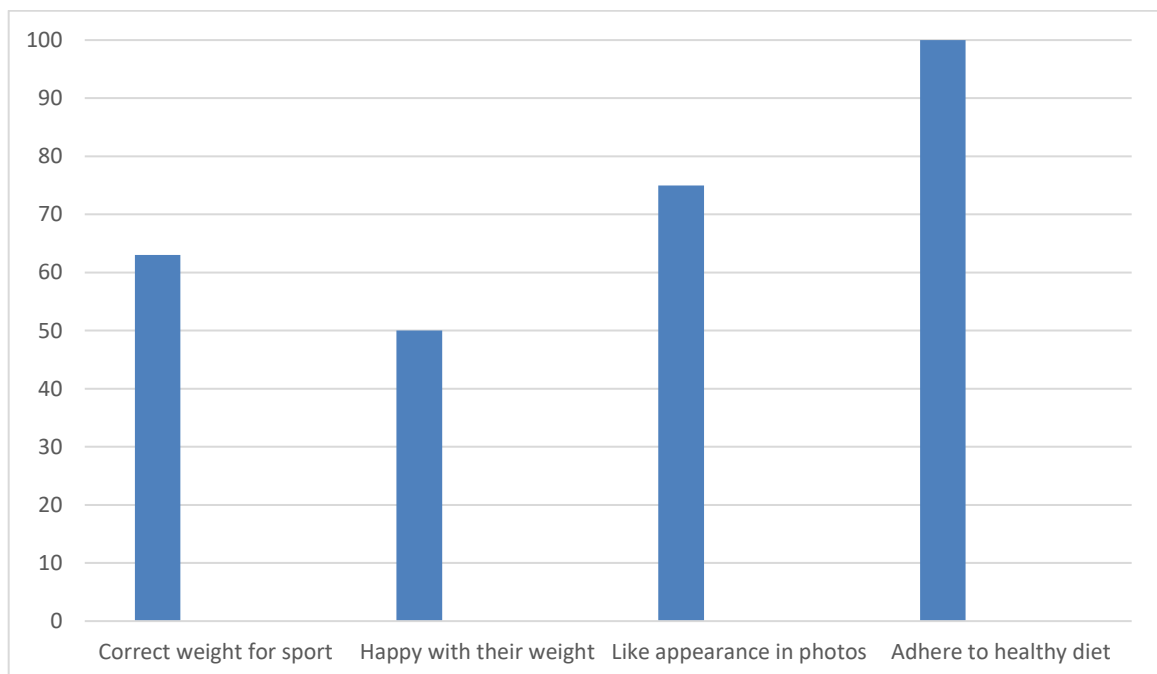


Figure 3. Students' perceptions of weight, body image, and personal nutrition.

Figure 3 addresses several topics, including weight, body image, and nutrition. Sixty-three percent reported their weight was about right for their sport, with just over 50% reporting they thought they had a good body. The responses were exactly split when assessing the students' happiness with their current weight. Seventy-five percent

liked how they looked in pictures. Moving to nutrition, the students reported being cognizant of what they eat, with all trying to eat fruits and vegetables daily and generally following a healthy diet. Of concern was the perception that healthy food options were not always readily available after practice and competition and were not always affordable (25%).

Competition and injury are discussed in Section 5. Less consistency in responses was noted in this area, with the majority of students reporting they feel so fatigued from their sport that they have difficulty finding energy to do other things (88%) and feel exhausted by the mental demands of their sport (63%).

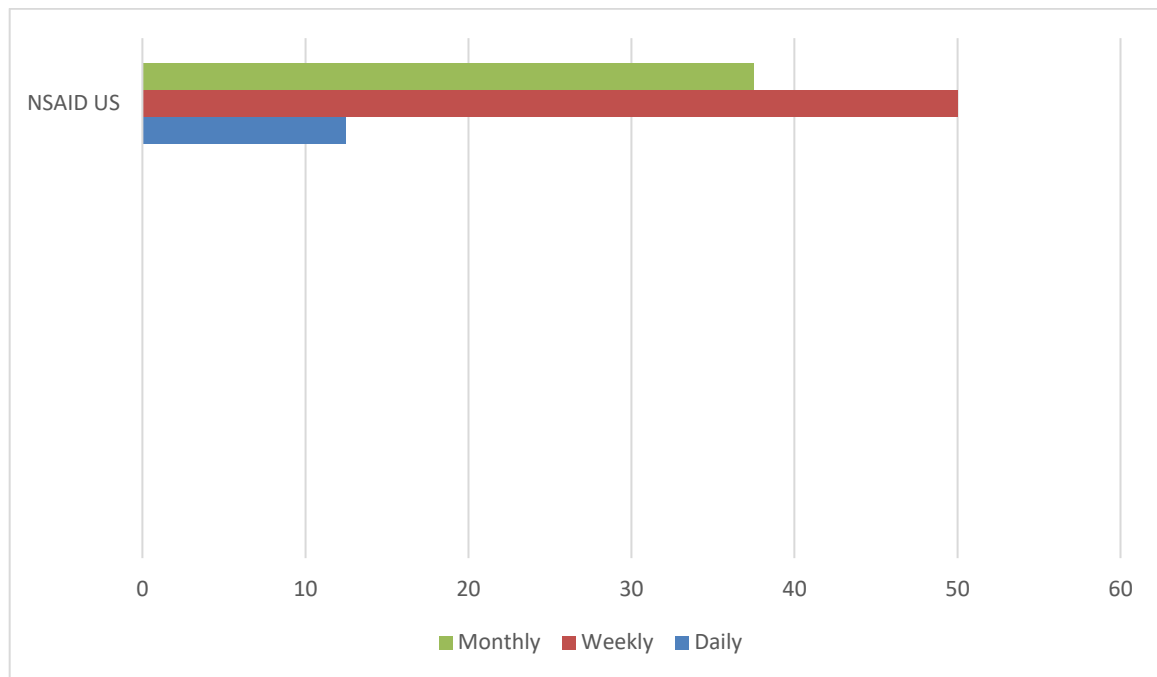


Figure 4. Students' perceptions of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.

Figure 4 depicts alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. None of the respondents reported the use of cigarettes, spit tobacco, nicotine products, or marijuana, with one student reporting vaping. When asked about the impact of occasional (defined as less than once a week) cannabis use by student athletes, 37.5% believe it does not threaten their health and well-being, 37.5% believe it does, and 25% were unsure. None of the students reported daily or weekly alcohol use; similarly, none of the students reported drinking more than four alcoholic beverages in one sitting. All students report using nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) as frequently as daily, with 50% reporting weekly use.

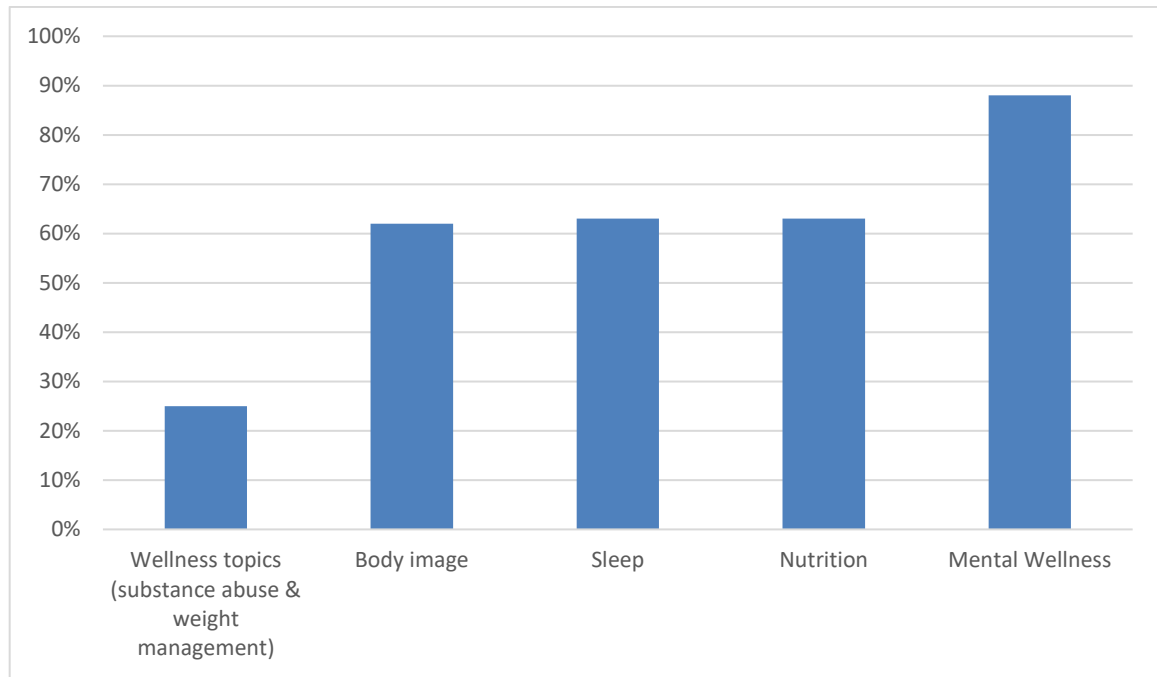


Figure 5. Students' report of areas of needed support.

Figure 5 explores the support identified, with students reporting a desire for more discussion on wellness topics such as body image (62%), mental wellness (88%), and sleep/nutrition (63%). Twenty-five percent of the respondents expressed the need for wellness topics on drinking/substance abuse or weight management.

Finally, an open-ended question was included to provide the student with the opportunity to state how the BSN program could promote the success of the student athlete within the nursing curriculum. Responses included the importance of professors demonstrating concern, being available and interested, willingness to be flexible with assignments, promotion of study skills, and consistent organization with class materials.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Traditionally, many nursing programs are reluctant to accept student athletes into their student population. This reluctance is based on the potential challenges of balancing athletic schedule demands with those of the nursing program. Specifically, nursing programs rigorously meet prescribed clinical requirements and set classroom obligations to maintain compliance with both state nursing boards and accrediting agencies.

Student athletes demonstrate resilience, not only in their sport but in their program of study (Keating & Fairbanks, 2025). To foster persistence and success within a competitive nursing program, nursing faculty must access this resilience in a way similar to how coaches keep their athletes performing at an optimal level (Diffley & Duddle, 2022). Assisting faculty in the development of techniques crucial to building resilience may positively impact student athletes' persistence within a nursing program and in the workforce beyond graduation.

Similarly, nursing faculty have a responsibility to student athletes in designing a culture that promotes mental health (Marek, 2024). The development and cultivation of a culture that embraces mental health will facilitate not only mental health awareness among student athletes but also among nursing students across the curriculum. This culture will lay a foundation of mental health expectations that travel with the student, not only throughout the academic program but as they enter the nursing profession. Building these skills within a nursing program enhances the ability of the student nurse/athlete to persist with these skills within the workplace (Melnyk, Hrabe, & Szalacha, 2013).

Enhancing wellness is fundamental to nursing; it must also be essential within the nursing curriculum. Fostering wellness within nursing programs promotes the adoption of skills and techniques that will serve the student nurse/athlete well, not only within a program but throughout their professional life. Bedside nurses regularly assess their patients holistically; it is no different for the nurse educator. When interacting with student nurses/athletes, the nurse educator has a responsibility to view that individual holistically, in a way that positively impacts their overall wellness. Developing strategies that assist individuals to express themselves creatively, identify coping mechanisms, and nurture their social and physical selves can assist with an improved report of overall wellness (Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017).

Finally, nurse educators must assist student nurses/athletes in being successful in their transition to practice. Several factors impact workplace readiness, including work/life balance, flexibility with work/life responsibilities, competence in meeting physical and emotional demands, and stress adaptation techniques. Nursing faculty can model behaviors that best support workplace readiness, such as regularly participating in physical activity and maintaining healthy eating habits (Chust Hernández, Fernández García, López-Martínez, García-Montañés, & Pérez Ros, 2022). Additionally, fostering work/life balance through journaling can be incorporated into the nursing curriculum with the intent that the practice be carried forward into their professional practice as a coping mechanism. Demonstrating flexibility with schoolwork while maintaining high student expectations can assist students in developing an appreciation for work/life responsibilities. Introducing coping strategies within a mental health course is another way to prepare students for the stress experienced in the workplace (Melnyk et al., 2013).

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

Two immediate limitations are noted with this study. The first is the small cohort size. This specific nursing program admits 50 traditional sophomores and 30 accelerated students to the curriculum annually. At any given time, the maximum number of students within the nursing program is 180. The nursing program is new, accepting students into the first cohort of sophomores in the fall of 2020. As a Division 1 athletic program, the expectation of athletic performance is extremely high. This expectation, coupled with the known demands of the nursing curriculum, may lead to some athletes choosing a major with a more flexible and less demanding schedule. As of this date, only 11 student athletes have been admitted to the nursing program, with eight of the students completing the survey. Additionally, the gender of the responding student athletes mirrors that of the program, being predominantly female. While the results can speak to female student nurse/athletes, they cannot be widely extrapolated to male students. As the nursing program continues to grow, reputation, and entrance demand, nursing administration must work closely with the athletic department to recruit and retain student athletes with a proclivity for nursing.

## REFERENCES

- Barber, B. K. (2013). Annual research review: The experience of youth with political conflict—challenging notions of resilience and encouraging research refinement. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4), 461–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12056>
- Bird, M. D., Chow, G. M., & Cooper, B. T. (2020). Student-athletes' mental health help-seeking experiences: A mixed methodological approach. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 34(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2018.1523699>
- Chust Hernández, P., Fernández García, D., López-Martínez, L., García-Montañés, C., & Pérez Ros, M. P. (2022). Female gender and low physical activity are risk factors for academic stress in incoming nursing students. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 58(4), 1281–1290.



- Diffley, D. M., & Duddle, M. (2022). Fostering resilience in nursing students in the academic setting: A systematic review. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 61(5), 229-235. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20220303-03>
- Engelke, E. C., & Frederickson, K. (2022). Dual collegiate roles—The lived experience of nursing student athletes. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 61(3), 117-122. <https://doi.10.3928/01484834-20220109-01>
- Gulvani, D., Jima, A. K., Geleta, L. A., & Hussein, A. (2024). Medication adherence and associated factors among chronic heart failure patients on follow-up in North Shewa public hospitals, Oromia region, Ethiopia. *BMC Cardiovascular Disorders*, 24, 444. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12872-024-04090-9>
- Guo, J., Wang, J., Qiao, Y., Huang, X., Smith, N. G., Liu, Z., . . . Chen, L. (2024). Greening-induced biophysical impacts lead to earlier spring and autumn phenology in temperate and boreal forests. *Earth's Future*, 12(11), e2024EF004618. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2024EF004618>
- Hrabe, D. P., Melnyk, B. M., Buck, J., & Sinnott, L. T. (2017). Effects of the nurse athlete program on the healthy lifestyle behaviors, physical health, and mental well-being of new graduate nurses. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 41(4), 353-359. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NAQ.0000000000000258>
- Keating, S. R., & Fairbanks, C. (2025). A new look at resilience in nursing students: Stress, social media, and student athletes. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 46(1), 37-39. <https://doi.10.1097/01.NEP.00000000000001260>
- Marek, A. (2024). *Stepping into mindfulness: Enhancing mental health for nursing student athletes*. Scholar Works at University of Texas at Tyler, MSN Capstone Project. Paper No. 332.
- Melnyk, B. M., Hrabe, D. P., & Szalacha, L. A. (2013). Relationships among work stress, job satisfaction, mental health, and healthy lifestyle behaviors in new graduate nurses attending the nurse athlete program: A call to action for nursing leaders. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 37(4), 278-285. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NAQ.0b013e3182a2f963>
- Steed, R. (2019). A phenomenological study of graduated nursing student athletes experiences balancing academics and athletics. Dissertation presented to liberty University in 2019. Stephens T.M. Nursing student resilience: A concept clarification. *Nurs. Forum*, 48, 125-133.
- Stephens, T. M. (2013). Nursing student resilience: A concept clarification. *Nurs. Forum*, 48, 125-133. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12015>
- Storey, Q. K., Hewitt, P. L., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2024). Managing daily responsibilities among collegiate student-athletes: Examining the roles of stress, sleep, and sense of belonging. *Journal of American College Health*, 72(6), 1834-1840. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2093610>
- VanderSchaaf, M., Webb, S., & Garlock, A. (2020). Triad of anxiety: A qualitative analysis for anxiety in nursing student collegiate-athletes. *Journal of Counseling and Psychology*, 3(1), 13-23.
- Warehime, S., Dinkel, D., Bjornsen-Ramig, A., & Blount, A. (2017). A qualitative exploration of former college student-athletes' wellness. *Physical Culture and Sport*, 75(1), 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pcssr-2017-0018>

**Online Science Publishing** is not responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability, etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content. Any queries should be directed to the corresponding author of the article.