

Center for Concussion Education and Research Publishes Two Articles in Journal of Athletic Training

by Kathleen Dolan

Two articles were recently published in the Journal of Athletic Training that examine the work of Chestnut Hill College's Center for Concussion Education and Research, which develops, evaluates, and disseminates educational programs.

The first article, written by William Ernst, Psy.D., the executive director of the Center for Concussion Education and Research and an associate professor of psychology, and Meredith Kneavel, Ph.D., the director of research and assessment, focuses on the development of the Peer Concussion Education Program.

A second article, written by Kneavel, Ernst, and Kevin McCarthy, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology, provides the findings of a national randomized control trial that investigated the results from ten different universities that implemented the peer concussion education program.

Kneavel, Ernst, and McCarthy led the study and found, according to Ernst, that there was an "increase in knowledge, intention to report concussion in self and teammates, and positive attitudes around concussion safety and reporting." These results provided important evidence supporting the effectiveness of the program.

"The goal is to change the culture of concussions and mainly to help athletes be more cognizant of the attitudes and any other barriers that might keep them from honestly and quickly reporting," Ernst said of the concussion center, which was established at the College in 2015.

The center's mission is to educate and increase student-athlete and youth athlete safety, to provide high-quality research on the effectiveness of these programs, and to expand reporting.

Ernst said there are many reasons athletes do not report a concussion, from internal factors such as not wanting to lose playing time to a perceived pressure from the competitive culture of collegiate sports and a “suck it up” attitude.

“Finding out scientifically what are the gaps in the knowledge and then using an intervention to identify the barriers and to change that to facilitate reporting” is how the center relies on education to combat these attitudes, Ernst said.

“The change has to come from within,” he added, referring to the center’s flagship program: the Peer Concussion Education Program.

The program was first implemented at the College five years ago when two members of the men’s lacrosse and women’s soccer team became peer educators. Today, the program spans 10 teams at the College, including basketball and sprint football, with each team having two peer educators.

Ernst emphasized the importance of having a teammate serve as a resource for knowledge and encourage behaviors associated with concussion safety, especially when paired with the efforts of a coach, an athletic trainer, or a clinical neuropsychologist. He noted that with peer educators not only knowledge increases, but attitudes change.

“We tend to listen to our peers more, no matter what the context,” Ernst said, adding that research demonstrates the positive results of peer intervention. “They’re embedded on a team. They’re at every practice, at every game, hanging out in the dorm. They are a constant resource.”

Elizabeth McCormick '19, who worked as a peer concussion educator in the concussion center, recently graduated with a B.A. in psychology and minors in philosophy/religious studies and education. She is currently enrolled in the College's School of Graduate Studies where she is studying clinical and counseling psychology, with a concentration in child and adolescent therapy. By the end of the program, she hopes to receive her Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) licensure and become a full-time counselor for children and adolescents.

Recalling her time working in the concussion center as a peer education educator, McCormick said the most valuable experience she had was teaching her teammates about the importance of reporting concussions.

“The opportunity allowed my team to speak openly about their fears and concerns in regard to reporting their own concussion or their teammates' concussions,” McCormick said. “It is important to address these fears and concerns so that we can have conversations about how to overcome these fears and put the well-being of our teammates ahead of those concerns.”

McCormick added that she believes the program is “extremely beneficial and helps players understand that their well-being always comes first.”

“The work and goals of the center are important because there is often a stigma that is associated with reporting concussions,” she said. “Open discussions with teammates about the importance of reporting concussions can help to rid this stigma and keep student athletes safe.”

Speaking further about the program, Ernst said the environment and the faculty and staff at the College have been integral both to it and to the center's success.

“We have a pro-health, pro-safety, pro-academic culture here, and I think that comes from the top,” Ernst said, referring to Jesse Balcer, the director of athletics. “We have a lot of support and an outstanding athletic training staff.”

Along with Balcer, Lynn Ortale, Ph.D., the vice president for Student Life and the director of Strategic Planning and Marketing for the center, was instrumental in the center’s founding and continues to collaborate on its initiatives, Ernst said.

The peer concussion education program includes an online manual that provides a step-by-step guide to implementing the peer education program. Ernst said the increased utility of the manual and related research may reveal future opportunities for concussion research and education, such as modifying the program so that it may be introduced to youth and high school athletes alike, which is currently being planned. Furthermore, a focus group is in the works to examine how international student-athletes and other countries approach the topic of concussions.

Ernst, Kneavel, and McCarthy have presented research on the peer concussion education program at several national conferences alongside doctoral students at the College. They were invited to present their findings at the Concussion Education Research Summit at the NCAA in June 2019.

Currently, Ernst is working with SUNY Albany’s Science Research in the high school program with both a high school student and a doctoral student, Louise Moss, M.S., to examine how parents and coaches think about concussions. Partnering with other institutions, such as New York University’s concussion center, is also on the horizon and stands to present more opportunities to expand knowledge. Ultimately, all of these efforts are driving Ernst and his colleagues toward their uppermost goal, which is “widespread, broad dissemination of the program.”