In 2013, four former Vanderbilt football players participated in the rape of an unconscious 21-year-old student in a residence hall (“Vanderbilt Rape Case,” 2015). Video details of the incident emerged and a highly publicized trial ensued, subjecting a college campus and its intercollegiate athletic culture to a national media frenzy and intense public scrutiny (Luther, 2015). Ironically, the rape occurred only a few months after President Barack Obama signed the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, which included the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (S. 47, 2013). The sub-section called for campuses to improve sexual violence awareness, prevention, and reporting, affirming a study that suggested between 20-25% of women will be victims of attempted or completed rape during a 5-year college career (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000). Some studies revealed that when sex crimes like rape occur on college campuses, student-athletes are overrepresented as perpetrators (Crosset, Ptacek, Benedict, & McDonald, 1996; Fritner & Rubinson, 1993). In a survey of 925 randomly selected women, over 27% self-reported being a victim of various levels of sex crimes (Fritner & Rubinson, 1993). Of those, over 22% self-reported that the perpetrator was a student-athlete, despite male student-athletes representing less than 2% of the total male student population. Crosset et al. (1996) found that student-athletes comprised 35% of reported perpetrators of sexual assault or battery to judicial affair, despite representing only 3% of the student population at ten institutions. Despite efforts by institutions, the NCAA, and the government to quell sexual violence against women on college campuses, the issue persists, with student-athletes continuing to be a significant part of the problem.

The methodological approach to this research is a descriptive single case study. Yin (2014) defines case study, as empirical inquiry, in terms of its scope and its features. The scope of case study is to “investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 940). Further, a prominent feature of case study is that it “copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points” (p. 940). Additionally, Yin (2014) identified case study as appropriate methodology when answering “why” and “how” and when contextual conditions of a phenomenon warrant examination (e.g., why and how is sexual violence perpetrated by student-athletes?). One of the rationales that Yin (2014) espoused for the use of a single-case case study was the examination of an unusual case. The selection of the Vanderbilt football rape case responded to a noticeable gap in research on the issue of sexual violence committed by student-athletes. Very few single rape cases involving student-athletes as perpetrators have been studied in peer-reviewed journals; a majority of such coverage has been produced by the media. Hence, criterion sampling was employed. The researcher identified this case as unusual for three primary reasons: (a) it involved several student-athletes, either as perpetrators, accomplices, or witnesses; (b) the victim was an employee of the Vanderbilt athletic department and was involved in the football team’s recruiting efforts; and (c) the judicial process issued a conviction.

Case study calls for immersion by the researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Hence, the researcher pursued immersion by cross-referencing of primary and secondary sources to ensure accuracy and a thorough telling of the case, iterative readings of the completed case, and
reflection at every stage of the research and writing process. Using Crosset’s (1999) description of “recent conceptualizations” of the problem as a guide, the researcher let themes emerge from the case. Heeding the call of Crosset (1999) to take a more nuanced approach to sexual misconduct committed by athletes, this case study provides a platform for the examination of a substantial spectrum of elements – both individual and institutional. Ongoing analysis reveals three major themes: (a) alcohol consumption by student-athletes involved in sexual violence, (b) peer support, and (c) intercollegiate men’s athletics as a rape-supportive culture. Direction for future research will be discussed.

References:


