

# Study highlights 'emotional labor' of college student-athletes

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A recent study from North Carolina State University highlights the "emotional labor" required of collegiate student-athletes, which can leave student-athletes feeling powerless, frustrated and nervous. The study calls on universities to better prepare their student-athletes with communication skills they can use to address the challenges of emotional labor.

Emotional labor is effectively the requirement that an individual display certain emotions. For example, 911 operators are required to be calm no matter what circumstances they must deal with. Similarly, collegiate student-athletes are expected to present a positive, upbeat image consistent with the teams they play for - regardless of their personal thoughts and feelings.

"I wanted to know how athletes manage this emotional labor," says Lynsey Romo, an assistant professor of communication at NC State and author of a paper describing the work. "How do student-athletes deal with the pressure they're under to present a specific emotional image all the time, in addition to the other performance and academic requirements they face?"

For this qualitative study, Romo conducted in-depth interviews with 17 student-athletes at a Division I university in the Southwest.

"I found that student-athletes often felt powerless - that they had little control over their lives on or off the field," Romo says. "They also felt frustrated that they couldn't speak their minds, and nervous that they would somehow fail to present the desired image to the public, perform at the required level, or meet academic expectations."

Study participants also reported that they had to express [mental toughness](#) and feelings of gratitude about the opportunity to participate in college sports, regardless of what was happening in their personal lives—such as the illness or death of family members.

"Study participants openly acknowledged the pressure of constantly being in the public eye and having their emotions regulated," Romo says. "Whenever they were in public, even if it was just going out for a meal, they felt like they constantly had to be 'on.'"

Overwhelmingly, the student-athletes reported the need to turn to teammates for emotional support, and as a group in which they could "be themselves."

"Both providing and receiving [emotional support](#) helped participants work through their emotions and conform to rules about how they presented themselves in public," Romo says.

"These findings showcase the need for universities to institute policies and programs to prepare student-athletes for this sort of pressure," Romo adds. "These athletes can become celebrities right out of high school, and they often don't have the maturity or [communication skills](#) they need to navigate this type of emotional labor. And unlike most employees who perform emotional labor, who can freely express their emotions when they are not on the job, student-athletes have such a high profile that their emotions are constantly regulated."

The paper, "College Student-Athletes' Communicative Negotiation of Emotion Labor," is published in the journal *Communication and Sport*.

**More information:** L. K. Romo, College Student-Athletes Communicative Negotiation of Emotion Labor, *Communication & Sport* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/2167479516650591](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479516650591)

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