

A Systems Approach to Understanding and Counseling College Student-Athletes

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Student-athletes have unique challenges as they confront pressures to perform both athletically and academically. The authors present a systems approach that will enhance the conceptualization skills that counselors need to intervene more effectively with college student-athletes as well as address counselors' own stereotypes and biases about student-athletes.

Colleges and universities vary considerably in philosophy, size, emphasis, and specializations, and their athletic programs differ as well. College counselors who have not participated in college athletics may not be familiar with the unique challenges that are imposed on colleges by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the college/university itself, the athletic department, and the school's team. The purpose of this article is to provide information to college counselors that increases their knowledge and enhances their conceptualization skills so that they can work more effectively with student-athletes; the information will also encourage these counselors to examine their own stereotypes and biases about this student population.

Systems That Influence the Student-Athlete

Like other college students, athletes can present to counseling centers with normal developmental issues, such as developing autonomy or establishing identity (see Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Valentine & Taub, 1999). College athletes must also cope with additional influences that affect their cognitive, social, moral, educational, and psychosocial development during college (Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996). For example, student-athletes' success in college and their emotional well-being are linked intimately with success in their sport; thus, success is often defined as winning and playing at a consistently high level. Athletes experience significant disappointments and fears when their team has key losses or when they perform poorly; among the athlete's fears are the fear of losing the opportunity to compete because of injury, fear of being cut from the team, or fear of being forced to retire from sports (Baillie, 1993). By gaining a greater understanding of the multiple systems within which college/university athletes must function, college counselors can more effectively help student-athletes negotiate the many challenges

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they may face. Athletes must function within a multilevel system that includes NCAA rules and regulations, university policies, athletic department standards, and team dynamics. To facilitate counselors' awareness of their own biases, we discuss each of these key systems and subsequent issues in this article.

The NCAA

The majority of 4-year institutions that have athletic programs are members of the NCAA, which requires member institutions to abide by specific policies, procedures, and bylaws. The NCAA is organized into five divisions: Division III, Division II, Division I-A (schools that have major football programs), Division I-AA (schools whose football programs are smaller than those in Division I-A and whose programs are classified according to stadium size and average paid attendance), and Division I-AAA (schools that do not have football teams). Divisions share some guidelines (e.g., eligibility of athletes), but they also have their own unique policies. For example, whereas Division I, I-AA, I-AAA, and Division II athletes are eligible for athletic scholarships, Division III athletes do not receive such assistance. Not all colleges/universities choose to become members of the NCAA; some schools choose to belong to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, the NAIA.

In addition to requirements for the institutions, the NCAA also has various requirements for the student-athletes themselves. The athletes must, for example, maintain full-time student status, earn minimum grade point averages, and take a minimum number of course hours each semester. In certain circumstances, athletes are prohibited from seeking outside employment to assist with their college expenses. Such requirements or restrictions often differ from requirements for students who are not athletes. To effectively counsel student-athletes, college counselors must be familiar with unique regulations and policies that (a) apply to these students and (b) affect their lives during college. More information about policies and procedures that may affect athletes is available in manuals such as the *2001–2002 NCAA Division I Manual* (NCAA, 2001), available from the athletic department of each member institution or from the NCAA's Web site (i.e., www.ncaa.org).

Colleges and Universities

In addition to NCAA requirements, each college/university develops and adopts its own policies, procedures, and philosophies for student-athletes. These may be complicated by conflicting messages about university policies that student-athletes may receive. For example, student-athletes frequently must miss classes in order to travel to scheduled sports events and typically are required to make up missed material, assignments, and exams. Some institutions, however, do not have policies to protect these students from being penalized for missing class, although their participation in athletics necessitates their absence.

Related problems may occur if faculty members have little understanding or empathy for the special needs and requirements of student-athletes. Many faculty

and staff members (including college counselors) may hold stereotypes of student-athletes as “dumb jocks,” who are “overprivileged, pampered, lazy and out of control, and whose primary motivation to attend school is to participate in sports” (Ferrante et al., 1996, p. 4). Even if this stereotype fits some individuals, many athletes take academic requirements quite seriously. Graduation rates for athletes (51%) and nonathletes (52%) are roughly the same, although student-athletes often enter college less academically prepared than students who are not athletes and must devote 20 or more hours per week to extracurricular activities (Sellers & Damas, 1996). At the other extreme, some faculty members may give preferential treatment to athletes for participating in sports, sending a message to other students and to athletes as well that athletes are held to a different or lower set of academic standards, thus helping to perpetuate negative stereotypes.

These kinds of college/university policies (or the absence of such policies) can cause athletes to become frustrated and confused about their dual roles. Student-athletes may also receive mixed messages regarding their performance in the classroom. For students who are inadequately prepared for the academic rigors of college/university life, this conflict can make it even harder to balance competing responsibilities. Even academically capable athletes may struggle with keeping up with academic expectations while simultaneously trying to be successful in their sport. Athletic departments must work in conjunction with administrators to hold athletes to appropriate standards and must also offer resources to help them balance their roles as student and athlete. College counselors who are knowledgeable about issues that affect student-athletes can be key participants in these efforts.

Athletic Departments

Athletic departments of large institutions (i.e., primarily Division I programs that emphasize men's football and/or basketball) often operate as separate entities that receive substantial funding from outside sources such as gate receipts, contributions from booster organizations, revenue generated from granting media rights, and corporate sponsors. Intercollegiate sports are not all the same, and there can be tremendous differences among different sports even at the same institution. Differences among colleges/universities (and within individual institutions) can include the amount of money spent on intercollegiate sports (ranging from less than \$100,000 to more than \$30 million), the number and relative support of sports sponsored for men and for women, the number of coaches, and the role of coach versus coach/faculty member (Coakley, 1998). Because athletic departments differ from one campus to another, college counselors need to become familiar with the range of norms, beliefs, and values of the departments on their own campuses. For example, the level of talent tends to be higher among student-athletes in Division I schools, and student-athletes in this division are more likely than those of other divisions to have scholarships and access to academic support. These athletes often travel more, receive more regional and national media coverage, and risk higher stakes for winning and losing (Coakley, 1998).

One issue that all student-athletes confront is how to prioritize their two roles. Whether student-athletes are students first or athletes first has long been a controversy within collegiate athletics. Even when the institution's policy clearly states that they are "students first and athletes second," trickle-down effects can create a sense of inconsistency that affects the teams and the individual athletes (Ferrante et al., 1996). Athletes are sometimes given mixed messages when team priorities are set, and academic studies are actually expected to come second to practices and competitions. Also, athletes with inadequate academic preparation may have difficulty balancing team commitments and schoolwork, or they may be forced to take lighter course loads in order to comply with minimum NCAA or institutional standards; either situation would make it difficult for these athletes to graduate in 4 years (also an increasingly challenging goal for many students who are not athletes).

Finding and maintaining a balance between athletics and education are ongoing challenges for student-athletes. If winning games is the ultimate (if unstated) goal of the college/university, concern for the quality of the student-athlete's academic and athletic experiences may be lost. Coaches and administrators at all levels of collegiate sports may focus more on winning than on what is in the general best interest of student-athletes (Coakley, 1998). College counselors can serve as advocates and can assist athletes to cope with rules, policies, and procedures that are part of the overall athletic system.

Teams

Another important unit in the collegiate athletic system is the team. A sport team is a special type of group that shares a collective identity, a shared purpose, structured patterns of interaction, structured methods of communication, personal and task interdependence, and interpersonal attraction (Carron, 1988). Teams are constantly developing and changing as they attempt to respond to both internal and external factors. These changes may be "rather minor and barely noticeable or major, causing significant upheaval and adaptation" (Hardy & Crace, 1997, p. 3). Similar to other groups, athletic teams have their own group dynamics, interpersonal dynamics, and intrapersonal dynamics, all of which operate simultaneously (Penland & Fine, 1974).

In sports, there are two types of teams: *interactive* and *coactive*. Interactive team members must coordinate their efforts and performances to produce a team performance outcome, such as a win in volleyball, hockey, or basketball. In coactive teams, performance outcome of the team is the sum of individual performance outcomes, such as the team score in golf, tennis, bowling, or diving (Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). Understanding the dynamics of the different types of teams can help college counselors conceptualize sources of stress and distress for student-athletes. Group dynamics include the aspects that make up the group environment of a sport, for example, roles, leadership, communication, and norms.

Roles. The variety of roles within the context of sports teams include formal roles (e.g., team captain or cocaptain) and positional roles (e.g., quarterback, setter, guard, running back, and goalie). There also are informal roles such as the scapegoat, the informal leader, the spark, the coach's pet, the "go-to" person, and the social director. Other roles include *expected* roles (what others expect the individual to do), *perceived* roles (what the individual thinks should be done in his or her role), and *enacted* roles (what the individual actually does). If there is too much deviation from the expected role, the individual risks rejection by the team or the coach (Carron, 1998; Wheelan, 1994). Discrepancies between the coach's expected role for an athlete and the athlete's perceived role can negatively affect an athlete's performance and performance satisfaction. Counselors can help athletes to proactively clarify and establish player and coach expectations regarding roles.

Establishing apposite leadership. Leadership is probably one of the most important concerns of sports teams. Carron (1988) outlined four decision-making styles used in coaching and noted that the most effective team leaders use a variety of styles. *Autocratic* coaches make decisions alone, independently of others. *Consultative* coaches solicit others' perspectives and opinions before making the final decision alone. *Delegative* coaches make decisions themselves, but then hand over the responsibility for implementation to other members of the coaching staff or to team members. *Participative* coaches involve team members and other affected parties in making decisions.

Because coaches control many aspects of training and competition, they can positively or negatively influence an athlete's attitude, mental state, and performance. For example, according to many accounts at the time, the coaching style of Bobby Knight, former coach of the men's basketball team at Indiana University, was so autocratic that he was fired because of abusive behavior toward his players. His style worked well for some players, but others eventually decided to transfer to other schools. Effective leaders must assess their own styles of leading and decision making, taking into consideration the needs of the team and the style to which team members respond most favorably. Gardner, Shields, Bredemeier, and Bostrom (1996) found higher perceived levels of team cohesion when coaches were high in training and instruction, democratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback and low in autocratic behaviors. College counselors can help athletes cope and communicate with their coaches about issues related to leadership style and expectations.

Systemic Bias in Sport

Because college athletic departments tend to be diverse, college counselors must become knowledgeable about different types of biases that may exist on their campus. Researchers and practitioners have recognized subgroups among college athletes, underscoring the need to address diversity issues (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Parham, 1993), including gender bias and culture bias. Gen-

der and culture bias are so pervasive in sports (as in society) that they warranted our special attention in this article.

Gender Bias

Women athletes have been found to be more likely than are men to struggle with eating disorders or weight management and to participate in sports that operate with smaller budgets (e.g., fewer scholarships, less media exposure) and to encounter societal biases regarding their participation in sports (Parham, 1993). Cogan and Petrie (1996) cited role conflict, negative stereotypes toward female sports participants, limited career possibilities in sport, and little campuswide support for women athletes and their sports. Gender discrimination within athletic departments can include inequalities in travel budgets, pay for coaches, size of coaching staffs, quality of facilities and equipment, and the number of available athletic slots. Many schools have yet to fully comply with Title IX, a 1972 federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions and provides a legal basis for women athletes to challenge discrimination through formal civil rights complaints and lawsuits (Sharp, 1994). Although Title IX was implemented more than 20 years ago, "nearly all . . . colleges and universities [still] are vulnerable to Title IX lawsuits" (Tungate & Oric, 1998, p. 603), despite a recent poll that found strong support among Americans for equitable funding for men's and women's sports (Suggs, 2000).

Women who engage in college athletics also may struggle with role conflict between social norms for femininity (submissiveness, grace, beauty) and attributes needed to succeed in sport (strength, aggressiveness, achievement; Cogan & Petrie, 1996; Miller & Heinrich, 2001; Nelson, 1991). Although most female athletes seem comfortable with their roles (Allison, 1991), conflict can arise when women student-athletes confront negative stereotypes, such as being viewed as "unfeminine" or having their sexual orientation questioned (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1983). Kane (1988) found that women who participated in sports that were viewed by society as less gender appropriate (e.g., softball or basketball) were less likely to be chosen as a dating partner by men or as a best friend by women than were athletes in sports that were considered more gender appropriate (e.g., tennis, gymnastics, swimming). In addition, "sexual harassment and abuse of female athletes are part of the reality of women's sports" (Heywood, 1999, p. B4), a problem that has received media attention in recent years. Beyond college, career opportunities in professional sports or coaching are more limited for women than for men (Acosta & Carpenter, 1992; Parkhouse & Williams, 1986). For example, a recent study found that only 9% of Division I athletic directors were women (Suggs, 2001b).

Culture Bias

Racial or cultural bias often exists in the subculture of college athletics. To date, most literature on this topic has focused on African Americans, who have experienced a long history of segregation and discrimination in the world

of sports, including college/university athletics. Coakley (1998) used the term *race logic* to describe the phenomenon of conceptualizing different expectations regarding athletic ability and success for Caucasian and African American athletes. Expectations for intellectual ability applied to sport and position within the sport may be affected, as well as administrative and career opportunities for African American athletes (e.g., Anderson, 1996; Lapchick, 1996; Myers, 1994; Suggs, 2001a). For example, in past decades few African American athletes were placed in such skill positions as quarterback or point guard. Furthermore, the introduction of Propositions 48 and 42, reforms implemented by the NCAA to increase eligibility requirements for potential student-athletes, has been criticized as discriminatory toward African American student-athletes. Examples of racial discrimination can include unequal treatment when an individual is allowed to participate in a sport, unequal compensation (scholarships and pay), and limited opportunities for advancement into management or administration. African Americans have higher rates of participation than do Whites in high-profile sports like boxing, track and field, college and professional football and basketball, and major league baseball. However, they are underrepresented in many other sports, such as hockey, volleyball, swimming and diving, softball, ice skating, skiing, gymnastics, and soccer (Coakley, 1998). Minority women athletes seem to have even more difficulties than do minority men. A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that 70% of college women athletes are White and argued that "Title IX has done little for minority female athletes" (Suggs, 2001a, p. A35).

Unfortunately, culture bias in collegiate athletics is not limited to African Americans. Among the Native American population, participation in sports has been limited by poverty, poor health, and lack of equipment and programs in Native American communities. Participation has been discouraged within the culture because of "prejudice, government legislation and programs, lack of understanding, and fears of being cut off from the cultural roots that are at the heart of personal identity for many Native Americans" (Coakley, 1998, p. 270). The lack of research regarding sports participation of Asian American athletes and athletes from Latino, Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Hispanic cultures is itself a form of bias (Coakley, 1998).

Implications for Working With College/ University Student-Athletes

Student athletes have long constituted one of the most recognized populations on U.S. college/university campuses, attracting honors and praise for their successes along with resentment of their privileges and special status. Because they confront the same fundamental age and stage-appropriate developmental issues as other college students, "intercollegiate athletes and their non-athlete peers share very similar profiles" (Parham, 1993, p. 411). The student-athlete, however, faces additional pressures and may not have mastered basic develop-

mental tasks because of the consuming nature of athletics. Additional challenges for student-athletes can include dealing with limited time for social and leisure activities, maintaining health and fitness, managing complex schedules and responsibilities, and terminating their involvement in sports because of injury or retirement (Parham, 1993).

With increased knowledge and understanding of the overall college athletic system, college counselors can more comprehensively and accurately conceptualize student-athlete issues. Counselors can then help athletes confront these issues at an appropriate level, assist them in developing coping skills, or use psychoeducational interventions to enhance an athlete's individual development. At another level, knowledge of NCAA policies can help counselors understand the pressures and restrictions placed on athletes that can influence their ability to function and cope. Also, counselors who believe that athletes are treated unfairly can serve as advocates by voicing professional concerns and opinions about policies and procedures set by the organization (NCAA, 2001).

Working collaboratively with college/university and athletic department officials might be a realistic and manageable place for counselors to begin advocacy and intervention on behalf of student-athletes. For example, some institutions develop task forces or special groups of faculty and staff members to serve as advisers for developing policy and procedures and for addressing issues specific to the student-athlete population. These policies are often established by governing boards or chief administrators who may not understand the psychosocial needs and unique concerns of student-athletes. If counselors understand the impact of these rules on student-athletes, they can provide input as their schools develop or modify institutional policies and procedures.

In addition, college counselors can appeal to an athletic department if they become aware that coaches are not acting in the best interest of the athletes. For example, an NCAA policy stating that athletes may spend no more than 20 hours per week in their sport during its season was implemented to protect athletes from being forced to practice so much that it would not be feasible to maintain academic requirements. Some coaches, however, have circumvented this rule by implementing "voluntary practices" that do not count toward the 20-hour NCAA policy. Athletes frequently consider these practices mandatory and comply for fear they will be penalized if they do not. For many student-athletes, this compliance can considerably weaken their ability to also maintain academic and social functioning. College counselors can play an important role by problem solving with athletes, coaches, and athletic departments to address specific issues.

College counselors who are trained in group dynamics can help student-athletes gain a better understanding of their team culture. Identifying leadership within the team and helping athletes develop their own leadership skills are additional ways that counselors can provide assistance and support. In addition, college counselors can assess the interpersonal and communication skills of student-athletes and offer help where needed. By helping student-athletes identify written (formal) and unwritten (informal) norms of their teams, college counselors can prepare the students to (a) understand the consequences of deviating

from team norms and (b) identify reasons that they might be tempted to deviate; counselors can also help the student-athlete develop strategies for setting new team norms or conforming to existing norms. Counselors can help student-athletes identify player-coach personality differences and help them become more tolerant and accepting of those differences. Also, student-athletes can be helped to deal with incongruities between expected, perceived, and enacted roles, as well as learn strategies for communicating and negotiating with their coaches.

Recognizing the unique challenges student-athletes face, many institutions have created special support programs, including academic monitoring and tutoring, personal counseling, career development, and life-skills programs (Ferrante et al., 1996). For example, Stier (1992) developed a TRIAD model, which uses special advising efforts, program and tactics, and formalized evaluation and assessment strategies to assist student-athletes in academic, psychosocial, and athletic dimensions of college life. Another program, Student Services for Athletes, was developed as a comprehensive, integrated program of support services to address issues of student-athletes from a holistic perspective (Jordan & Denson, 1990). This program is designed to help student-athletes balance academics and athletics and to address developmental needs such as transition to college, career planning, or athletic retirement (see Roper & McKenzie, 1988). College counselors can encourage athletes to participate in these programs as well as help their institutions develop or maintain such programs on their campuses.

Conclusion

In order to empathize effectively with or to develop effective intervention strategies for student-athletes, college counselors need to have a comprehensive understanding of the various systems involved in college athletics. Because college student-athletes are affected by myriad policies imposed by the NCAA, their institution, the athletic department, and the team, understanding what these systems require and how they affect athletes is a first step in conceptualizing student-athletes' issues and planning interventions. In many cases, college counselors may need to work with individual athletes to teach them new coping and communication skills. In other cases, counselors may need to go beyond the individual athlete to work with a team or possibly intervene with the larger systems, such as the athletic department or the university, to advocate for student-athletes. Finally, as they become more informed about the subculture of athletics on campus, college counselors can better understand and address their own attitudes and assumptions about athletes, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in working with this student population.

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