

ADVISING FEMALE AND MALE STUDENT-ATHLETES: HOW GENDER DIFFERENCES AFFECT THE ADVISING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

There is much discussion in the advising profession today regarding the special needs of student-athletes. However, the issue of how gender affects the advising process has been a neglected topic. How does being male or female affect the way students behave in academic and athletic settings? How does gender affect self-esteem, expectations for success, stress, and the resulting behavior of student-athlete populations? How do these issues and advisors' own assumptions affect the way they advise students? The present paper begins a much needed exploration of this important topic.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970's, academic advising has taken on a developmental framework wherein the advisor and the student have shared the responsibility for the academic, social, and career-related progress of the student. According to Crockett (1979), academic advisors concern themselves with the process by which students learn the following tasks: (1) clarifying values and goals; (2) understanding the nature and purpose of higher education; (3) learning about educational and occupation options, requirements, policies, and procedures; and (4) learning to have control over and monitor their academic progress.

Additionally, students are assisted by academic advisors to "... realize the maximum educational benefits available to them by helping them to better understand themselves and to learn to use the resources of an educational institution to meet their special educational needs and aspirations" (Grites, 1979, p. 1). Research on the advising process has based itself primarily upon the theoretical underpinnings found in individual development theory, moral

reasoning theory, and student development theory (Gordon, 1992). Additionally, recent trends in research have been to address the needs of special student populations, such as first-year students, adult students, multicultural student populations, student-athletes, honors students, high-risk students, and others.

One common thread that weaves its way through each of these student populations, but which is rarely discussed, is gender and how it affects the advising process. This paper will explore research on gender-based differences and how these differences are translated into behaviors which affect the educational process. This paper will also discuss implications for advisors and how sensitivity to gender differences can be of assistance in the growth and development of college-aged students.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

In order to look at gender differences in college-aged students, it is first necessary to review what has been said regarding earlier stages of development for girls and boys. Most student development professionals have at the minimum a working knowledge of Erikson's (1950, 1968) theory regarding the eight stages of psychosocial development. Additionally, Chickering (1969) has identified seven developmental tasks which college students need to master in order to move into the realm of adulthood. Along with Erikson and Chickering, most professionals are somewhat familiar with Kohlberg's (1969) six stages of moral development and Piaget's (1965) theory regarding children's moral judgement.

Critics of these traditional theories of human development have pointed out that the original research done to validate these theories used male subjects only and that the male point of reference became the generalizable norm for female development as well. When females have been tested using these norms, differences have been found, which have for the most part been explained as deficiencies in female development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Lyons, 1983). These critics contend that the study of women's development cannot be generalized from statistics about men and that women's development is legitimately and qualitatively different from that of men.

Chodorow's (1978) work discusses the gender identity formation of children as related to the mother, who has typically been designated as the primary care-taker in the family during the early childhood years. She believes that mothers experience their daughters as more like themselves, whereas they experience their sons as male opposites. Consequently, as girls begin to identify themselves as females, they see a closeness, similarity, and certain attachment with their mothers. Boys, however, see themselves as separate and different from their mothers, as Chodorow indicates:

Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own. From very early, then, because they are

parented by a person of the same gender . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world. (p. 167)

Gilligan (1982) agrees with the theory espoused by Chodorow and extends it:

For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. Since masculinity is defined through separation, while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. (p. 8)

In a society where individual development has been defined and valued through individuation, self-knowledge, separation, and independent thought and action, it is difficult to believe that there might be an equally valid alternative—one that may be more appropriate for females and that allows males to explore the connectedness that exists in all of us. Perhaps an alternative exists that sees value in both individuality and connectedness.

What do these theoretical issues regarding human development have to do with how college students pursue their education and interact with their college environment? How does gender affect the way students learn? To what do they attribute their academic successes and failures? Are there differences in what women and men expect with regard to academic success, and how do these expectations match actual academic performance? How does this affect their stress levels, their self-esteem, and their resulting actions? What are the advising implications of these needs for female and male college students? In light of any differences which may exist because of gender, how do academic advisors approach advising student-athletes? In particular, how do female and male student-athletes interact with and utilize information about their college experiences? What differences can be seen in the educational and advising needs of female and male student-athletes? Are these perceived differences contrived through advisors' biases, or are they real differences based upon the student behaviors that advisors see on an everyday basis?

Five specific issues found in the literature are of primary concern to the educational development of students: (1) parental attachment; (2) attributions for success and failure; (3) expectation for success; (4) approach to the learning process; and (5) effects of stress. A discussion of each factor as it pertains to gender differences will be followed by specific implications for the advising process.

PARENTAL ATTACHMENT

A recent investigation by Kenny and Donaldson (1991) explored the area of adjustment of first-year college women. The authors confirmed existing research which indicates that most college women remain closely connected to their parents. In fact, parental positive affect, support for autonomy, and

emotional support are clearly associated with the personal and academic adjustment of college women. Additionally, Kenny and Donaldson found support for the idea that parental relationships fraught with guilt, anxiety, or resentment by young women indeed interfere with personal and academic adjustment during the college years.

Other supporting research (Kenny, 1987, 1990; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991) shows that male college students are less attached to parents and more independent of parents in general than are college women. Also, maladjustment to the college experience does not appear as a result of the separation of males from their parents.

The implications for collegiate academic advisors seems clear in this area. When an advisor is working with a female college student who is having difficulty adjusting to her college experience, it is important to explore the student's connection to her family, including the type of parental support that is available. It is critical for advisors to validate the connectedness which females maintain with their families, rather than mistakenly interpreting these feelings as unhealthy dependency. Additionally, it is important to discuss specific parental pressures, expectations, or conflicts which exist, since these may contribute substantially to difficulties in adjustment. This is not to say that males, especially student-athletes, will not also experience stress or parental pressures to perform both academically and athletically. Indeed, for student-athletes the differences which exist with regard to gender and parental attachment might not be as great as with non-athletes. However, advisors should pay particular attention to the debilitating effects which may occur for women.

ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SUCCESS AND FAILURE

A second area of investigation which has been active in the literature for nearly twenty years deals with the attributions which college students make for academic successes and failures. Strong evidence supports the conjecture that in successful situations both males and females tend to use the internal attributions of perceived effort and ability to explain their successes. However, in failure situations females typically use internal attributions, while males use more external attributions (Sweeney, Moreland, & Gruber, 1984). These differences may have a connection with evidence indicating that women report lower levels of self-esteem than do men (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Zuckerman, 1989). In other words, if women believe that the reason they fail is because they do not have the ability or cannot put forth the required effort, they may be more likely also to believe that they are not worthy of success. Additionally, feelings of self-esteem tend to drop as college women move through their academic careers, whereas for males self-esteem tends to rise during the college years. This low self-esteem has been directly related to levels of stress and levels of depression in females (Makosky, 1982).

How can advisors use this information on attributions of success and failure in academic advising settings? First, they can discuss with students what the students believe to be the causes of their successes and failures in specific academic situations. If it is found that a student has difficulty taking personal responsibility for success, areas where success is directly tied to the student's own actions and decisions can certainly be pointed out. If a student attributes failure to a lack of ability in understanding the material, advisors can help the student find strategies to improve in the comprehending or interrelating of the material. If the student believes that the problem was lack of effort, then advisors can suggest alternative behaviors that will connect effort to success, since effort is a changeable factor and one that the student can control.

Because females are more inclined to blame their failures on personal factors, advisors should watch for these patterns of reasoning. Additionally, because males tend to attribute their failures to external factors, advisors may want to consider the implications for a lack of personal responsibility in some situations. The practice of reattribution training, which teaches individuals to attribute successes and failures to more appropriate and psychologically healthy factors, could be used to assist students to modify their beliefs about themselves.

EXPECTATION FOR SUCCESS

A related area of concern in the academic realm is the level of expectation that students have concerning success and failure. Research has indicated strong support for the finding that females have lower expectations of success than do males in academic settings (Basow & Medcalf, 1988; Erkut, 1983; McMahan, 1982). These lower expectations may be a second contributor to women's feelings of lower self-esteem and self-confidence. A critical factor in this research, however, is that although females expect to do worse than males, evidence indicates that there are basically no gender differences in actual academic performance (Basow, 1986; Erkut, 1983).

The advising implications of these differences in expectations for success in males and females are two-fold. First, advisors can assist students to set expectations for achievement based upon past information and behaviors in similar situations. For example, if a student believes that poor performance is likely on an algebra exam, the advisor can explore the student's past experiences and current beliefs about why the student is convinced of this. Then a connection can be made between the reality of past success or failure with the activities and behaviors which led to that outcome. Once a student can connect a series of successful events to specific modified behaviors, then given these same types of behaviors, the expectation for future successes may rise.

Secondly, because males' levels of stated expectations are generally more realistic in relation to actual performance than are females' levels of stated expectations, advisors can work with female students to set realistic, attainable

goals and expectations, to evaluate those goals and expectations periodically, and to make adjustments which more closely match their performance.

THE LEARNING PROCESS

A fourth area of interest for which gender differences have been found is how female and male students approach the learning process. Recent work by Miller, Finley, and McKinley (1990) has shown several major gender differences in how students approach learning. These authors indicate that women tend to be more organized in their approach to learning information than are men. They also appear to be more intrinsically motivated than men. Males are more likely to adopt a learning style that emphasizes the meaningfulness and interrelatedness of material, whereas females tend to move more slowly in the learning process, using an approach which emphasizes memorization and attention to factual evidence. Males score higher on achievement motives than do women but also tend to have more negative attitudes about the purpose for being in college. Men also tend to believe that it is more acceptable to "just get by" academically than do women. Both females and males have difficulty with procrastination and the ability to get started on projects or assignments.

There is certainly a plethora of advising implications for both females and males with regard to learning approaches and motives. First, student services personnel should assess the various learning approaches and strategies used by students and discuss how successful those strategies seem to be in specific learning situations. Secondly, strategies which focus upon a deeper, more integrated method of learning should be used in connection with specific course content. The introduction of an organized and systematic approach to studying can be followed with regular feedback on how useful these strategies are or on how they can be modified to meet the needs of individual students. Males can be encouraged to reflect upon and discuss specific reasons for pursuing their academic careers, thereby connecting professional and personal goals to academic goals. Females can be shown specific methods and learning strategies which will help them more fully integrate material into contextual meaning. Both males and females can be taught step-by-step methods on how to begin preparing for a variety of projects such as research papers, various types of exams, and presentations, so that the feeling of being lost or not knowing where to start will not be transformed into procrastination.

Many of these suggestions and implications regarding the learning process go far beyond the scope or realistic workload of an advisor who has a caseload of 100+ student-athletes. However, student-athletes generally enter the college experience with lower academic performance histories than non-athletes, and they have time and pressure constraints that non-athletes may not experience. Because of these factors, student services personnel must explore the availability of assistance in these areas, looking for way that students can benefit from adjusting the methods they use in approaching their studies.

STRESS

Research has shown that both self-esteem and self-concept are directly related to stress for both women and men (Zuckerman, 1989). In the general literature, females report greater stress in family relationships than do males. Additionally, females tend to avoid rather than confront the problems which they encounter. Males tend to react to stress by becoming more active. A recent report by Smallman, Sowa, and Young (1991) gives additional, specific information on student-athletes' response to stress. These authors found that male student-athletes showed more anxiety around stressful life events but felt more comfortable and less anxious in the competitive athletic setting than did female student-athletes, who showed the reverse reactions.

The implications for academic advisors of student-athletes regarding the different responses that females and males have to stress in their lives are several. First, it is apparent (but not conclusive) that males cope with stress in the athletic setting better than do females and that females cope with stress in their roles as students better than do males. Consequently, academic advisors may wish to assess the specific environments for which stress is the most obvious for both their male and female students. Activities which focus on stress management should be specific to the nature of the stress which is evident. Gender differences in life situations and settings which produce stress should be attended to by student services professionals. Further, advisors must consider the possible differences in how females and males react to stressful situations and help them find coping mechanisms to relieve the stress in a physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy manner.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed several basic differences in how female and male college students experience themselves in relation to their college environment. Where appropriate, specific concerns for student-athletes which go beyond those of non-athletes have been discussed. Men and women make certain general assumptions about how they relate to the world and how they develop into healthy adults. There exists an emphasis in the literature upon theoretical paradigms of individual development which have historically been validated and valued in terms of a male model. Females have virtually been ignored in this process. Further research on gender differences among student-athletes may also produce some interesting implications for advisors.

The purpose of this paper was to bring to light some of the differences in how males and females relate to their life experiences and to validate those developmental patterns. The available information regarding college-aged women indicates that student services personnel must acknowledge and validate the differences which exist for both female and male college students. Advisors must also legitimize the process by which both genders relate to the world, while promoting life skills which allow each person to develop and grow toward individual potentials.

Finally, it is important for student service professionals to continue to assess their own ways of relating to the world as individuals, family members, significant others, advisors, colleagues, and friends. How are such professionals connected to each other and how are they separate? What sorts of gender expectations, myths, and identity development have been experienced? How do those experiences affect the ways advisors relate to each other and to their students? How can advisors advocate healthy, caring, goal-oriented development of their students in ways that are valid for both men and women? These are questions which require continual reflection and dialogue—questions which can be answered only through the day-to-day challenges which confront advisors and the ways in which they choose to respond.

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