

# **Assisting Freshman Student-Athletes With Educational Planning and Career Development**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In many academic support centers, a primary focus is on helping student-athletes adjust to the collegiate environment and the increased demands of being a student and an athlete. This paper will discuss the primary issues facing student-athletes with the interrelated career development issues, a description of a freshman academic and career exploration class, the results of the Survey of Career Development, and a discussion of intervention strategies and referral agencies.

## **PRIMARY ISSUES FACING STUDENT-ATHLETES**

In the current research, several primary issues have been identified which affect the development of student-athletes in the collegiate setting. The academic issues cited include weak academic preparation and study habits (Gurney and Stuart, 1987; Kennedy and Dimick, 1987; Stuart, 1985), poor attitude toward learning (Sowa and Gressard, 1983), little relevance in education related to athletic careers (Sowa and Gressard, 1983), and academically at-risk students (Gordon, 1986). Several authors included issues related to the multiple demands placed on student-athletes (Gurney and Stuart, 1987); Whitmer, Bostic, Phillips, and Waters, 1981), numerous demands on time (Sowa and Gressard, 1983), and dual roles (Gordon, 1986). Witmer, Bostic, Phillips, and Waters (1981) cited social issues through rigidly controlled social life and regulated social relationships as causing problems of segregation from the total educational structure. Gordon (1986) added that student-athletes have a unique status on campus and lack interpersonal relationships.

While student-athletes may closely identify with their sports (Petipas and Champagne, 1988), they also lack self-confidence (Lanning, 1982) and self-identity (Witmer, Bostic, Phillips, and Waters, 1981) and become very preoccupied with their sports (Blann, 1985). Petipas and Champagne (1988) cautioned that student-athletes are not rewarded for questioning, which causes conflict. Other areas of concern surround the lack of adequate life skills (Petipas and Champagne, 1988); personal development in educational skills, educational and career planning, and career mobility (Kennedy and Dimick, 1987); decision-making skills (Sowa and Gressard, 1983); and long-range goals (Nelson, 1982).

### CAREER DEVELOPMENT ISSUES FACING STUDENT-ATHLETES

The specific career development issues which affect student-athletes are reviewed as they provide the background for an academic and career exploration course for freshmen. These issues are somewhat causally interrelated to those general issues previously mentioned. One author stated that athletic participation at a high level of competition detrimentally affects athletes' ability to formulate mature educational and career plans (Blann, 1985), while Chartrand and Lent (1987) believe that commitment to the sport restricts the individual from considering other alternatives concerning career decisions.

Kennedy and Dimick (1987) found male basketball and football players to be lower in career maturity than non-athletes, while Lee (1983) found that student-athletes lack reality in relation to their career plans. Cooker and Caffy (1984) found similar results, noting the unrealistic goal of becoming a wealthy professional athlete while, in reality, less than two percent of college football players become professional players. Stuart (1985) found that student-athletes have a limited vocational outlook, while Nelson (1982) stated that college athletes lack realistic long-range goals. Career exploitation of student-athletes was reported by Lanning (1982) in the areas of sales and marketing. It was assumed student-athletes would be interested in and qualified for this career area while, in reality, the occupational field was in conflict with the individual's personality. Because some student-athletes come to college with inadequate academic preparation and attitude, tremendous time demands and responsibilities, poor self-identity, and a lack of goal setting and decision making skills, they need services to support and insure their success in post-secondary education.

### ACADEMIC AND CAREER EXPLORATION: A COURSE FOR FRESHMAN STUDENT-ATHLETES

Several publications recommend that student-athletes participate in career development programs, classes, and career counseling to help them become involved in the career planning process early in their college careers (Blann, 1985; Gordon and Grites, 1984; Nelson, 1982). Several authors recommended that the courses use a developmental approach (Gordon, 1986; Petipas and Champagne, 1988; Walsh, 1985).

As a part of the Freshman Enrichment Program at Penn State University, all freshman student-athletes were enrolled in the Academic and Career Exploration course in spring semester 1988. The course met twice a week throughout the 15-week semester. Six goals for the course were identified: (1) to understand the importance of continual involvement in the academic and career planning process; (2) to increase self-awareness through the identification of skills, values, and interests; (3) to identify and use sources of information while exploring academic and occupational options; (4) to understand the decision making process and apply it to academic and career decisions; (5) to process information into realistic academic and career goals; and (6) to understand how the responsibilities of being a student-athlete relate to the demands and responsibilities of the work place following graduation.

The primary topics covered in the class included the following: (1) self-information (skills, values, and interests); (2) educational planning; (3) academic and occupational information; (4) a decision making model; (5) goal setting; and (6) resume preparation. These topics were covered through lectures, small group discussions, the use of DISCOVER (a computer-assisted guidance system), panel presentations, guest speakers, and homework assignments. Feedback on the course was received through evaluations completed at the end of the semester.

### THE SURVEY OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The Survey of Career Development (SCD) was designed in 1978 by Dr. Jack Rayman with some assistance from Dr. Donald Super. It was designed specifically for use with the DISCOVER system to assess the career development growth of individuals while evaluating the use of DISCOVER. The SCD is a practical tool which is taken through the paper-and-pencil method and self-scored. Pertinent information can be obtained from the instrument to aid the counselor in designing effective counseling interventions. The self-scoring is completed by tallying the raw scores for each of the five subscales. If a user's raw score subscale total is less than 21, intervention strategies are recommended in that specific topic area.

Several studies using the SCD as an outcome measure found positive results indicating that the SCD helped to identify areas requiring intervention and also distinguished between identity issues and informational deficits (Garis, 1982; Garis and Harris-Bowlesby, 1984; Rayman and Super, 1978; Yonkovig, 1986). Rayman and Super contend that the SCD provides a more thorough understanding of the potential need for intervention since the subscale scores are discriminant in determining the specific area of weakness related to the subject's values, interests and competencies, decision-making skills, occupational information, and career planning.

The areas of interest on the Survey of Career Development are divided into five scales with six questions in each subscale, for a total of 30 statements: (1) Statements About Myself I (Clarification of Values); (2) Statements About

Myself II (Understanding Interests and Competence); (3) Statements About Occupations (Knowledge of Career Information); (4) Statements About Decision Making (Knowledge of Effective Career Decision Making Skills); and (5) Statements About My Career Planning (Understanding How to Achieve Goals). The user responds to each of the items with a number from 1 to 5, with 1 ("I have not yet thought much about this") indicating low development and 5 ("I have already done this") indicating a high level of development. A total score of 105 or less indicates career development deficiencies. A user's score which totals less than 21 in any of the five subgroups indicates a need for intervention and assistance in that specific area.

### Administration

The Survey of Career Development was administered to all freshman student-athletes involved in the Freshman Enrichment Program in the academic year 1988-89. It was administered in health education classes at the beginning of the fall semester and again in the Academic and Career Exploration course at the end of the spring semester. The analysis was conducted only on the surveys completed by an individual in both the fall and spring semesters, forming a matched sample of 127 freshman student-athletes. A gender breakdown included 62 females and 65 males.

### Results

A  $t$ -test ( $t(127) = 6.70, p < .0001$ ) was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the 1988 fall semester and 1989 spring semester responses provided by 127 freshman student-athletes. The comparison indicated significant growth in career development from the fall semester to the spring semester. (See Table 1.) Pre-test and post-test comparisons made between gender groups, low priority and high priority teams, low financial aid and high financial aid, mother's education, father's education, and predicted low and high non-science GPA showed no significant difference in their survey scores. Due to previous research findings (Blann, 1985; Chartrand and Lent, 1987; Kennedy and Dimick, 1987; Lee, 1983; Stuart, 1985), significant differences were expected between gender groups, low and high priority teams, and low financial aid and high financial aid teams.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of the Survey of Career Development  
Raw Test Scores of Sport Independent Variables

| Variables     | Mean  | SD   |
|---------------|-------|------|
| Gender        |       |      |
| Male (n=65)   | 2.346 | .595 |
| Female (n=62) | 2.213 | .508 |
| Priority      |       |      |
| Low (n=91)    | 2.275 | .505 |
| High (n=36)   | 2.285 | .671 |

Table 1 Concluded

| Variables                   | Mean  | SD   |
|-----------------------------|-------|------|
| Financial Aid               |       |      |
| Low (n=70)                  | 2.332 | .571 |
| High (n=57)                 | 2.212 | .531 |
| Father's Education          |       |      |
| High School or Lower (n=30) | 2.327 | .576 |
| College or Higher (n=97)    | 2.119 | .448 |
| Mother's Education          |       |      |
| High School or Lower (n=45) | 2.124 | .446 |
| College or Higher (n=82)    | 2.363 | .591 |
| Predicted Non-Science GPA   |       |      |
| Lower than 2.5 (n=77)       | 2.316 | .533 |
| Higher than 2.5 (n=50)      | 2.221 | .586 |

Comparisons were then made using the five survey subgroups, individual survey items, and total scores to determine the amount of growth from fall semester to spring semester. The scores for each subgroup are found in Table 2. Significant differences were found in these three comparisons. Subgroup scores of 21 or lower indicate a need for intervention and assistance in that specific area.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Test Mean Scores for Each Question and the Total Score  
of the Five Subscales of the Survey of Career Development

| Subscale           | Question | Pre-   | Post-   |
|--------------------|----------|--------|---------|
| 1: About Myself I  | 01       | 4.504  | 4.496   |
|                    | 02       | 4.276  | 4.205   |
|                    | 03       | 4.173  | 4.118   |
|                    | 04       | 3.260  | 3.787   |
|                    | 05       | 3.756  | 3.906   |
|                    | 06       | 3.740  | 3.913   |
|                    | GR1      | 23.709 | 24.425  |
| 2: About Myself II | 07       | 4.134  | 4.102   |
|                    | 08       | 3.748  | 3.874   |
|                    | 09       | 3.197  | 3.638   |
|                    | 10       | 3.165  | 3.583   |
|                    | 11       | 3.268  | 3.591   |
|                    | 12       | 4.244  | 4.205   |
|                    | GR2      | 21.756 | 22.993* |

Table 2 Concluded

| Subscale                 | Question | Pre-   | Post-    |
|--------------------------|----------|--------|----------|
| 3: About Occupations     | 13       | 2.906  | 3.457    |
|                          | 14       | 2.677  | 3.449    |
|                          | 15       | 2.984  | 3.535    |
|                          | 16       | 2.992  | 3.402    |
|                          | 17       | 2.449  | 2.937    |
|                          | 18       | 2.575  | 3.268    |
|                          | GR3      | 16.583 | 20.048** |
| 4: About Decision Making | 19       | 3.835  | 4.110    |
|                          | 20       | 3.717  | 4.165    |
|                          | 21       | 3.480  | 4.024    |
|                          | 22       | 3.402  | 3.929    |
|                          | 23       | 3.079  | 3.724    |
|                          | 24       | 3.535  | 3.827    |
|                          | GR4      | 21.048 | 23.779** |
| 5: About Career Planning | 25       | 3.087  | 3.551    |
|                          | 26       | 3.205  | 3.543    |
|                          | 27       | 2.953  | 3.449    |
|                          | 28       | 2.866  | 3.441    |
|                          | 29       | 2.709  | 3.150    |
|                          | 30       | 2.173  | 2.858    |
|                          | GR5      | 16.993 | 19.992** |

\* $p > .05$ \*\* $p < .001$ 

For freshmen taking the Survey of Career Development, higher scores would be expected in subgroup 1 (Statements About Myself--Clarification of Values); in subgroup 2 (Statements About Myself--Understanding Interests and Competence); and perhaps in subgroup 3 (Statements About Occupations). The two remaining subgroups, 4 (Statements About Decision Making) and 5 (Statements About Your Career Planning), would be expected to be slightly lower.

In comparing the pre-test results to the post-test results by matched t-tests, it was found that freshman student-athletes experienced significant growth in subgroup 2 (Statements About Myself--Understanding Interests and Competence) ( $t(127) = 3.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ); in subgroup 3 (Statements About Occupations) ( $t(127) = 7.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ); in subgroup 4 (Statements About Decision Making) ( $t(127) = 4.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ); and in subgroup 5 (Statements About Career Planning) ( $t(127) = 6.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Significant growth was not found in subgroup 1 (Statements About Myself--Clarification of Values) ( $t(127) = 1.56$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Results reported in Table 2 show intervention strategies are necessary in topics covered in subgroup 3 (Statements About Occupations) ( $M_1 = 16.583$ ,  $M_2 = 20.048$ ) and in subgroup 5 (Statements About Career Planning) ( $M_1 = 16.993$ ,  $M_2 = 19.992$ ). These results are not surprising when a freshman student population is surveyed. It is interesting to note their growth and confidence in decision making, as indicated in subgroup 4 (Statements About Decision Making) ( $M_1 = 21.048$ ,  $M_2 = 23.779$ ). The results in subgroup 1 (Clarification of Values) ( $M_1 = 23.709$ ,  $M_2 = 24.425$ ) and subgroup 2 (Understanding Interests and Competence) ( $M_1 = 21.756$ ,  $M_2 = 22.993$ ) are both acceptable and expected with this student population.

It was found that the responses in 22 of the 30 statements showed higher scores from pre-test to post-test, while the other eight statements were not different. These eight statements are found in the first two scales. Five of these statements deal with the identification of work values, while the other three deal with interests, abilities, and activities.

The final significant comparison ( $t(127) = 6.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was found between the pre-test total scores and the post-test total scores. A score of 105 or lower shows that assistance or intervention is necessary. The total mean score for the pre-test was 100.09, while the total mean score for the post-test was 111.24. The growth experienced throughout the freshman year increased the mean average to an acceptable level for all freshman student-athletes.

## Discussion

The primary factor that needs to be considered is the motivation level of the individual. The survey scores indicate the student-athlete's current areas of need, while the motivation to resolve or make decisions needs to be discussed. The counselors in the Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes were provided with individual profiles which contained demographic information, pre-admission academic information, and the results of the Survey of Career Development. This feedback informed the academic counselors about freshman student-athletes in need of additional attention in a specific career development area. The next counseling appointment might then focus on the low-scoring survey subgroup and on ways to help the individual.

Areas of assistance include counseling, advising, information gathering, decision making, and goal setting. Resources across the campus and community include college advising centers, the career development and placement center, libraries, faculty, working professionals, and alumni.

## Intervention

Specific intervention strategies include using SIGI-PLUS, with its modules to aid in self-assessment (skills, interests, and values), gathering occupational information, developing job search strategies, reviewing the decision making process, and identifying short- and long-term goals. Counseling can be easily facilitated through the use of SIGI-PLUS or another computer-assisted guidance system.

Following the initial career development assessment, the academic counselors can make referrals to counseling groups, programs, or other campus services. They can also help student-athletes develop their academic and career planning throughout their college careers. This approach helps student-athletes understand that such planning is a lifelong process which needs continual attention and evaluation.

### IMPLICATIONS

This research found significant growth in career development from the fall semester to the spring semester for freshman student-athletes enrolled in an academic and career development course. Specific areas of growth were found in the areas of self-information and decision making. The Survey of Career Development can be used as a practical assessment tool for academic counselors assisting student-athletes with academic and career planning.

Interesting information was gathered in this initial research concerning the career development of freshman student-athletes at Penn State. It would be worthwhile to conduct longitudinal research with this group of student-athletes and to compare their survey results to those of non-athletes.

The issue of student-athletes' lack of involvement and motivation in career planning and development presents developmental concerns to academic counselors. It is important that counselors develop an understanding of these issues and assist student-athletes in realizing the importance of continual processing of information, decision making, and identification of goals. The education gained through academics, athletics, and personal development on the collegiate level provides tremendous preparation for student-athletes to continue to achieve their identified goals throughout their lifetimes.

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