

## CAREER ISSUES FOR THE FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETE

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the career development needs, issues, and concerns of female student-athletes, a group which faces a variety of problems that are not encountered by male student-athletes. Implications for counseling female student-athletes are identified.

### INTRODUCTION

Female student-athletes are receiving greater attention with respect to their personal, academic, and career development. Since the implementation of Title IX and greater involvement by the NCAA in women's sports, women's participation in both team and individual sports has steadily increased. But just as the social and cultural expectations are different for men and women in the society at large, female student-athletes face unique issues that must be explored. It is recognized that female student-athletes face a variety of problems that are not encountered by male student-athletes. Issues such as pursuing a professional career after college, choosing marriage and family, and combining a number of roles may pose a dilemma for these women. Without an understanding of the whole person, as well as the institutional and societal limitations encountered by female student-athletes, coaches and administrators will be presented with formidable barriers in recruiting, retaining, and promoting the personal, academic, and social development of young female student-athletes.

As intercollegiate and professional athletics become increasingly more visible and as participation opportunities for girls and women grow, there is a greater need to become aware of those issues specific to female student-athletes. Women are challenging the old guard and beginning to achieve equity in sports; consequently, career development becomes more important in their lives.

Therefore, it is appropriate to devote attention to the examination of the specific career development needs of female student-athletes.

### SEX ROLE SOCIALIZATION

Most experts agree that by the time children reach the age of three, they are aware of themselves as being a particular sex; some experts suggest that sex role socialization begins as early as the cradle (Richmond-Abbott, 1983). Children quickly learn the roles that society expects, and prominent differences appear frequently between the attitudes and behaviors of boys and girls. During early childhood, girls surpass boys in nearly every area of learning. However, as girls enter adolescence, their intellectual functioning appears to plummet. This intellectual deterioration is seen by some to be in response to the way girls are treated socially as they mature (Harrison, 1973) and is of concern because it has been found that the consistency of a person's past behavior with gender stereotypes will affect predictions of future behavior (Berndt & Heller, 1986). Also, it has been shown that, although girls begin working in jobs with higher status, boys receive higher wages despite the status of their jobs (Meyer, 1987). This type of information may be extremely frustrating and may adversely influence young girls in pursuit of career aspirations.

Teenage girls quickly recognize that being smart can easily threaten the self-esteem of teenage boys. For example, almost twenty years ago, Kundsén (1974) suggested that girls exhibiting their intelligence may conflict with their own well-learned concepts of what is feminine. The female adolescent may find that the socializing influence of parents and peers also affects her involvement in sports (Brown, 1989; Kane, 1988). Consequently, girls' commitment to athletic career goals tends to lessen, while their interest in marrying and having children increases.

The female student-athlete usually does not have the career options for professional sports that are presented to males. Despite her athletic prowess, she may receive pressure from society to adhere to the traditional roles of wife and mother, and she will inevitably encounter few role models, discrimination, stereotypes, and a host of other pressures from society. Female role models in leadership positions are limited (Acosta & Carpenter, 1985). For example, there is a steady decline in the number of women who coach girls' interscholastic athletic teams (Hasbrook, 1987), and collegiate athletic programs reveal very low percentages of female administrators (Farrell, 1985).

### BARRIERS

Career development and educational barriers are erected as early as the initiation of sex role socialization. Lack of encouragement toward independent behavior, differences in social expectations at home and school, sex discrimination, lack of role models, and an unfriendly campus climate, as well as devaluation of those areas mastered by females, all contribute to the career

and educational barriers women encounter (Harrison, 1983; Association of American Colleges, 1985; Hall & Sandler, 1984). Being a female student-athlete only exacerbates this situation. Coleman and Barker (1991, 1992) have previously identified barriers to the career development of student-athletes; these barriers assume greater significance for the female student-athlete. Internal barriers for female student-athletes include, but are not limited to, lack of information, fear of failure and/or success, and limited work experience in sports, while external barriers include those of few mentors and role models, family and public expectations, discrimination, and lack of opportunities in the profession.

Certainly, when it comes to preparing for a career, a young woman must approach her decision from a much different perspective than her male peer because of society's expectation of the wife/mother role. Women's ability to achieve their career goals may, still today, depend on such varying factors as whom they choose as a husband, the location of his job, his earnings, and the number of children in her care.

Despite recent attempts to provide an equal education for every citizen who qualifies, colleges and universities are still struggling to achieve equity for all students. Higher education, with its costs, procedures, and rigid schedules, may be especially problematic for female student-athletes. Aside from the now well-known gender bias in areas such as textbooks, staffing, and athletic programs, discrimination has been observed and documented in the attitudes of faculty and administration at all levels. This may be particularly apparent in athletic departments. Such attitudes tend to create a more hostile environment for female student-athletes and may greatly reduce their opportunities for success.

Although the academy or the athletic departments cannot be expected to resolve what are, in many cases, normal developmental crises for women, educational institutions can work toward creating an environment in which women can manage their unique conflicts with more support from the school system. For example, academic counselors who are knowledgeable regarding the special needs of female student-athletes can facilitate the recruitment process, as well as increase retention. Accordingly, personal, academic, and career development will be enhanced and athletic performance improved.

### **CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETES**

There is a dearth of research on female student-athletes and specifically on their career development; the research that exists does not follow a common theme. The NCAA and other organizations have indicated that female student-athletes graduate at a much higher rate than male student-athletes. Marsh and Jackson (1984) found that female student-athletes have substantially higher scores in masculinity as compared to non-athlete females, while femininity scores did not differ. In more recent studies, female student-

athletes indicate more positive feelings toward their bodies than non-athletic women (Brylinsky, 1990). More research is critical to understanding how such variables relate to the personal, academic, and professional lives of female student-athletes.

Clearly, career development models used by males must contain components that will accommodate the special needs and concerns of female student-athletes. For example, in order to be able to identify specific career objectives, two areas which must be given in-depth exploration are self-assessment and decision-making.

Self-assessment, in terms of the female student-athlete's values, interests, abilities, and personality, is a significant factor to consider when counseling this population. Are her values congruent with those of female professional athletes? Will home and family assume a role in her life, and if so, when? Can the university she selects be sensitive to her unique needs as a female student-athlete and to her long-term career goals?

Decision-making is a skill that can be learned. How the female student-athlete makes decisions will determine the direction and quality of her life, be it in athletics, another career area, or more traditional roles. As a woman, the complexity of such decisions may require her to seek special training in the decision-making process. Helping young female student-athletes identify their decision-making strategies and styles can facilitate more positive choices.

Another area in which girls and women have fallen behind is gathering information about educational, occupational, and community information. Oftentimes, access to information and resources is limited; for example, female student-athletes frequently are not provided appropriate career counseling that would facilitate their exploration of non-traditional roles and positions like those available in athletics. Therefore, gaining occupational information may be more of a challenge for women seeking opportunities in the athletic arena. While males predominate in all levels of this field, career positions for women are frequently restricted.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

If it is true that female student-athletes will usually have different issues and concerns than male student-athletes, there are a number of implications for the counselors, academic advisors, or other professionals involved in the lives of these young women.

Those interested in the career development of female student-athletes must be aware of the specific needs of this special population. An understanding of sex role socialization and its societal effects is necessary for the delivery of comprehensive educational services for female student-athletes. Young women and girls must also be informed of the unlimited career options available to them. Self-management skills related to self-assessment,

assertiveness, decision-making, time management, and other necessary social skills should be integral components of any career development program for female student-athletes.

In addition, professionals will need specific training in a variety of areas in order to better understand the varying academic, psychological, and physical responses of women in sports. As women develop more aggressiveness on the playing fields and enter new sports, trainers, coaches, and administrators must learn to deal with increases in certain injuries (Poters, 1986). Injuries and reproductive or sex-related issues, as well as successful entry into the work force, must be discussed in terms of the extent of insitutional responsibility (Evans, 1986). Personnel who work with female student-athletes must expand their knowledge base to include the specific dimensions of the student-athletes' psychological, medical, legal, and ethical concerns.

Research on female student-athletes should add to the current literature by examining such issues as the effects of interpersonal relationships on female student-athletes, the impact of race on women's sports, the influence of sex equity on athletics, and the newly apparent training needs of those involved with female student-athletes.

### SUMMARY

This article addressed some of the career development issues encountered by female student-athletes. As this population attempts to gain more equity in the sports arena, it is imperative that counselors, academic advisors, coaches, administrators, and educators identify the many forces that may impinge upon the success of this group. Implications for professionals were also discussed.

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