

A Sampling of Perceptions of Potential Users of the Australian Athlete Career and Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the content, quality, access, and delivery of the Australian Athlete Career and Education (ACE) Program. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, levels of usage of the program, overall satisfaction with the services provided, and athletes' suggestions for the future were assessed. Results revealed that more than 70% of eligible athletes utilized the program's services within a 12-month timeframe, and that the most used services were career planning, educational guidance, and selected professional development courses. Reasons for using the ACE Program were also found to relate to enhancing the athletes' lives both inside and outside of sport. Overall, the athletes were found to be satisfied with the quality of the services provided by the program. Specific targeting of programs based on age and sport is recommended.

There has been a growing interest in the educational and post-sporting career needs of full-time participants in sport in recent years. Calls have been made to promote the holistic development of athletes by providing academic support services and life skills counseling to this population (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). In addition, sports career transition has become an important topic among researchers and practitioners, with over 270 applied and empirical references being identified in a recent literature search (Lavallee, Sinclair, & Wylleman, 1998; Lavallee, Wylleman, & Sinclair, 1998).

During the last 15 years, a number of education and career assistance programs for athletes have been developed by governing bodies and sport institutes around the world. The Olympic Athlete Career Centre, for example, was launched in Canada in 1985 to assist their elite-level athletes in preparing for their life after sport (Olympic Athlete Career Centre, 1991). The United States Olympic Committee initiated the Career Assistance Program for Athletes in 1988 to provide support to retiring athletes during the career transition process (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvin, & Murphy, 1992). In addition, the Lifeskills for Elite Athletes Program was launched in Australia in 1989, and has since merged with the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) Program to

provide a nationally consistent career and education service for Australia's elite athletes (Australian Institute of Sport, 1996). Since 1991, the Olympic Job Opportunities Program has also been developed in Australia, South Africa, and the United States to assist athletes who are committed to developing a professional career as well as achieving their sport-related goals (Olympic Job Opportunities Program, 1996). At the present time, however, there exists a general lack of research on the quality of these programs (Wylleman, Lavalley, & Aflermann, 1999). In an attempt to address this issue, the current research sought to evaluate the content, quality, access, and delivery of the Australian ACE program. More specifically, this study sought to determine levels of usage of the program, identify athletes' perceived needs, determine overall satisfaction with the program, and identify athletes' suggestions for the future.

The Australian ACE Program: The ACE Program is coordinated by the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) to provide eligible athletes with skills, resources, and contacts needed to pursue educational goals and/or careers outside of their sport. This objective is met by offering services to eligible athletes, including Olympic-level athletes, scholarship holders, and those in development squads at the AIS and state institutes and academies. These individuals, of which there are over 3,000, range in age, education level, and sporting experience. The services of the ACE Program include career planning, educational guidance, business referrals, and a career transition program. In addition, more than 30 professional development workshops are available, each of which is structured to assist athletes in meeting their educational and career aspirations.

METHOD

A two-phase iterative research design was followed to meet the objectives of this study. Phase one was qualitative in nature, and involved six focus group interviews (n= 4-8 per interview) with key sub-groups of athletes, and one focus group interview with coaches and administrators (n=5). The athlete groups were formed to include experienced and inexperienced athletes, older and younger athletes, and both users and non-users of the ACE program. Approximately equal numbers of male and female athletes were involved in the focus groups. These interviews were used to develop an understanding of the key issues, and to identify differences that may exist between groups of athletes.

Based on the results obtained in phase one, a survey instrument for use in phase two was developed. Initially, members of the evaluation team independently identified key points from the focus groups and discussions with ACE representatives to be included in the survey. Following a team discussion on these points a draft instrument was developed and sent to the ACE managers throughout Australia. A teleconference with these managers resulted in refinement of both questions and format. A second review of the survey by ACE managers resulted in minor changes and the national manager approved the final version. To further clarify the suitability of the questionnaire an independent expert with knowledge of both evaluation and the ACE program examined the instrument and deemed that it was suitable for the objectives set and required no changes. The final instrument was five pages long and consisted primarily of closed questions focusing on such topics as where athletes

find information about the services provided by the ACE Program, how often they accessed ACE services, how satisfied they were with the services they accessed, and what factors led them to (or limited them from) accessing the ACE services. Some open-ended questions (e.g., "If relevant, think of an ACE service that you found satisfactory and state what made the service satisfactory for you") were also included to allow the athletes to expand on issues of satisfaction and future improvements in the service.

A census approach to distribution of the instrument was taken in phase two, with all 3088 athletes (across 48 sports) eligible to receive the ACE services being sent a survey packet that included the survey instrument, a cover letter, and a reply paid envelope for instrument return. The cover letter explained the purpose of the survey and assured confidentiality and anonymity. The survey packet was either posted (63%) or delivered by hand (37%) to the eligible athletes. Regardless of the mode of administration, all surveys were returned directly to the evaluation team.

During the four-week data collection period 867 (28.1%) surveys were returned. A further 54 (1.7%) were received late or returned by the postal service. Late returns were not included in the data analysis. While the evaluation was conducted at a "quiet" time in the Australian sporting calendar, one of the limitations of a census approach with this target population is that the non-return rate is inflated because, at any given time, a proportion will be abroad due to competition and training commitments. Although a response rate of 28% is within the range of common response rates for this type of survey (Neuman, 1994), the non-return rate of approximately 70% should be remembered when interpreting the results. The final sample is described in Table 1. The national manager of the ACE program confirmed that this sample description was generally representative of the athletes eligible for the ACE program.

Results and Discussion

LEVELS OF USAGE

The majority of athletes (70.7%) reported contact with the ACE program during the 12-month period prior to data collection. As shown in Table 2, the most used services were career guidance/planning, help with school or university, and professional development workshops in nutrition/cooking, time management, goal setting, and finding/establishing a job. Transition services were used by less than one percent of the athletes. This finding is similar to Sinclair and Orlick (1993) who reported that only a small proportion of athletes, in their case 27%, took advantage of the retirement services available to them. In the current study, the low use of these services was also reflected in a low importance (1.6 on a 5 point scale) being placed on career transition and retirement issues when athletes were asked about their current perceived needs. A reason for this lower usage and perceived need could be that athletes might not consider retirement to be an issue until its proximity draws near. If the career transition process of athletes is to be enhanced then it appears critical to educate athletes of the need for long-term retirement planning (Lavallee, Grove, & Gordon, 1997).

As outlined in Table 3, the most frequently cited reason for using ACE services is that "they may help my life outside sport." Other reasons included "they may help my sporting career," "they may help my sporting performance," and "a coach/administrator suggested it." Athletes also indicated that suitable program mechanics such as low costs and the availability of ACE representatives influenced their use of ACE services. The reasons related to life outside of sport and availability are in line with those identified by other researchers (e.g., Petitpas et al., 1992). The high percentage of individuals utilizing the ACE program for performance-related reasons is worthy of more research attention, however. Although Murphy (1995) provides anecdotal evidence of a relationship between planning for careers outside sport and sporting goals, to date only Morris and Anderson (1994) have provided evidence for a relationship between use of an education and career program and perceived sporting performance.

The main reasons for athletes not using the ACE program could be broadly classified as aspects of the program, lack of perceived need, and personal factors (see Table 4). Aspects of the program inhibiting usage include lack of awareness of the services offered, and unsuitable venues or timing of services. Lack of perceived need encompasses the perception by some athletes that they do not need the ACE program. Reasons for this can include having "other priorities," using alternative resources, or simply having no need for the services ACE provides. Personal factors such as "nothing," "not getting around to it," and "laziness" indicate perhaps a lack of motivation on behalf of the individual to utilize the ACE program.

The three categories of reasons for non-use of the program suggest a number of strategies to overcome them. To a degree, issues with aspects of the program can be overcome by ensuring that services are available at times (including after hours and weekends) and locations (preferably close to training sites) convenient to the athletes and increasing awareness (Petitpas & Champagne, in press). The athletes surveyed indicated that their preferred method for receiving information about ACE was by personal contact with an ACE representative or by mailouts. However, some athletes mentioned that a system to make sure athletes were receiving the mailouts would be useful. Lack of perceived need can be addressed by targeting existing services to specific groups of athletes more closely, ensuring that the benefits of services are clearly explained, and adding services to meet the specific needs of different athlete groups. Personal issues may be overcome to a large extent by the above two strategies. Greater perceived benefits and easier access may reduce the inertia experienced by athletes (Mann & Janis, 1982). However, the challenge to a program such as ACE may be to find ways of enhancing athlete's personal motivation before having the opportunity to teach them relevant skills, such as goal setting and time management. Successfully addressing this challenge may rest on creating an environment, in conjunction with coaches and parents, which promotes a balanced personal and social development (Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998).

Satisfaction with the Program

Overall, 61.2% of the athletes reported that their perceived needs were being well met by the ACE Program (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale). However, 12.2% felt their needs were not being satisfactorily met (1 or 2 on a 5-point scale), suggesting that programs such as ACE would benefit from regular reviews with athletes with respect to their perceived needs and preferred methods for meeting these needs.

The athletes were generally satisfied with the actual services and courses they had attended (mean satisfaction = 3.9 on a 5-point scale). The satisfaction with specific ACE courses (e.g., goal setting, public speaking) was enhanced when athletes felt the information was practical and relevant, that it was individualized and directed to an appropriate level, and that the course was facilitated by a good presenter. Dissatisfaction occurred when these things did not happen and also when the courses were perceived as consisting of “what to” rather than “how to” information.

Satisfaction with individual career guidance was increased with the perception of developing applied skills, identifying options rather than dictating paths, and providing support for work related issues (e.g., letters to employers thanking them for opportunities). Not surprisingly, satisfaction with this service was also enhanced where job applications were successful. The athletes identified a range of issues which created a sense of dissatisfaction with respect to career guidance, including: slow responses; being sent to interviews that had nothing to do with what the athlete wanted; getting jobs that are of no value for the future; jobs being unsuitable in terms of time commitments required; making unasked for contact with established employers that jeopardized current positions; not preparing athletes for referrals; not caring about what the athlete did; and forcing them into jobs they did not want.

Where support was sought with education and university issues, the services athletes appreciated assistance which included organizing exams and assessment, help with applications, identifying options and subject selection, liaison with schools and teachers and organizing special consideration with institutions. A lack of specific information and having only ad hoc liaisons with institutions were considered limiting factors in the program’s role in providing support with education and university.

The athletes identified several issues that related to dissatisfaction with the program in general. A perceived lack of proactivity or follow-up from ACE advisors led some athletes to suggest that the program was “simply going through the motions.” Related to this some athletes felt that the program did not do enough to keep them informed of what ACE could do for them.

What emerged in both phases of the evaluation was the delicate balance that organizations like ACE must tread between developing an athlete’s sense of self-responsibility and actually providing help. There appears to be a segment of athletes who would like ACE to simply give them everything they need, and while this may enhance short-term outcomes, this approach may not be optimal for the athlete’s longer term personal development (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995). On the other hand, forcing athletes to play too large a role in actually implementing the assistance they receive from ACE could alienate some from taking advantage of the available services at all.

ATHLETES' SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There were no clear new areas identified by athletes that could be incorporated into the ACE program. However, athletes were able to make a number of valuable suggestions on improving and expanding the current service. Of particular note, and an issue for all centralized programs, was that athletes in regional/remote areas felt left out and unable to make use of the ACE Program. Possible solutions suggested by athletes included ACE establishing regional stations that would be visited on a regular basis by ACE advisors, taking some of the courses outside of the large cities or towns, and using a wider range of delivery modes (e.g., reading material, the internet). Athletes felt that there was need for the advisors to be credible, that is, competent and qualified to do the job. Furthermore, the athletes suggested that more empathy could be shown towards their specific needs and desires (e.g., not being sent for a job they don't want to do). There was a strong feeling for ACE advisors being more proactive in initiating individualized contact with athletes. It was also suggested that ACE look at providing progressive courses, that is, courses which build on previously completed courses. Finally, the need for a balance between ensuring everyone has access to the service but not constraining people to use the service was stressed.

CONCLUSION

The Australian ACE program was founded to provide training programs and services that facilitate the development of athletes who possess the skills and resources to pursue educational goals and/or careers outside of sport (Australian Institute of Sport, 1996). It is self-evident that for this and other programs to be successful, athletes must make use of the service and be satisfied with the service they receive. From the results presented it could be argued that the current ACE program has a solid base of usage and satisfaction. However, several key points that are perhaps generic to all such programs emerged. First, career and education programs for athletes would benefit from clarifying the distinction between helping and facilitating, and ensuring that athletes understand the difference. If the models for these programs were based on developing independent self-reliant athletes then it would be beneficial to take a facilitating approach where athletes are expected to exhibit some level of self-responsibility for the outcomes.

Second, within the athlete population a number of segments exist largely based on age and sport. Examining the needs of these different segments, and then targeting and promoting the program services to these specific groups, may be more effective than providing an "all-comers" service. For example, athletes in amateur sports have clear needs to develop skills that assist them to survive financially during their sporting careers and that act as a basis for self-sufficiency after their sporting careers. Those athletes going into professional sports may have less salient needs for these skills, as their expectation may be that they will be financially secure through sport. This may make them more vulnerable to career-ending injuries, or simply not making it to the elite level (Petitpas et al., 1997). Consequently, there may be considerable value in developing strategies to take ACE services to these different groups of

athletes in different ways. In addition, athletes heading into professional or elite amateur sporting careers are tending to do so from a younger age than has previously been the case reducing the opportunity for developing other vocational skills. This has the potential to exacerbate their vulnerability to career-ending events and ensuring young athletes have opportunities to develop some of these skills is critical (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998).

Linked to this issue is the difficulty that may arise for some athletes if the service provided is centralized. Under these conditions it is important to remember that not all athletes will be located conveniently to the main offices, and athletes in regional areas may therefore feel that they are unable to access the program. Providing alternative means of access should be considered to service all athletes.

To conclude, this research examined athletes' usage and satisfaction with the Australian ACE program but did not attempt to examine the effectiveness of the service in terms of outcomes (e.g., jobs placements made) or changing behavior. Such an examination would be an essential next step in furthering our understanding on how best to help the personal development and performance of athletes through the provision of career and education services. In addition, such information will be critical for arguments of a program's accountability.

TABLE 1

Sample Description

Gender	Male	43.5%
	Female	56.5%
Age (Years)	Average	20.2
	Range	10–68
Experience (Years)	Average	9.1
	Range	1–40
Level of participation	International	51%
	National	32%
	State	16%

TABLE 2

Usage of ACE Services

Service	Usage of Service (%)
Career guidance/planning	33.1
Help with school or university	28.3
Nutrition/cooking	20.9
Time management	20.2
Goal setting	19.0
Finding/establishing a job	15.8
Resume writing	12.6
Media skills	12.6
Sponsorship issues	11.0
Public speaking	10.7
Interview skills	9.0
Motivation	7.8
Money matters	6.6
Department/grooming/hygiene	6.5
Referral to another person/place	6.0
Self-confidence	3.9
Personal issues	3.8
Career transition	0.7

TABLE 3

Reasons for using ACE Services

Reason	Percentage
They may help with my life outside of sport	60.7
They may help my sporting career	37.2
They may help my sporting performance	32.9
A coach/administrator suggested it	32.2
Low costs	27.5
ACE representative is available when necessary	27.3
I do not use the services	26.3
General interest	23.7
Positive professional relationship with ACE advisor	23.3
Venues/locations of services are suitable	22.3
I am kept well informed about what services are available	21.5
Services are conducted at suitable times	18.0
I have been made to	17.0
Good presenter	14.8
Other athletes suggested it	10.3

TABLE 4

Reasons for not using ACE Services

Reason	Percentage
I do not know about the services they offer	32.0
Other priorities	25.9
Nothing	24.3
Timing of service is not suitable	18.2
Not getting around to it	16.7
Venue/location is not suitable	15.0
Other	12.1
I do not require the services offered	12.1
Laziness	8.7
I prefer/choose to do things myself	6.3
ACE representative is not available when necessary	4.1
Course are boring	2.7
Not interested	2.7
Poor professional relationship with ACE representatives	2.2
I have had a bad experience with ACE	1.7
They do not help with my sporting performance	1.5
They do not help my life outside of sport	1.2
Bad presenter	1.0
I have been told not to	0.9
Other athletes have suggested they are not useful	0.9
They do not help my sporting career	0.9

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