

Student-Athletes: How Do They Cope?

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ABSTRACT

The ways student-athletes cope with academic and athletic situations on campus will be discussed in this paper. The authors examine four models for helping and coping that have direct application to working with student-athletes. They also present a goal-setting model and discuss implications for athletic academic advisors.

INTRODUCTION

As athletics departments continue their efforts to offer academic and personal support to students, it is helpful to consider the overall model they try to implement. Such a model should provide the overall structure and philosophy governing the actions of support staff on campus. Ferrante, Etzel and Pinkney (1991) noted that institutions could take one of two directions in developing their programs by either using: (1) personnel from outside the institution and outside of the athletics department or (2) providing services from someone within the institution or within the athletics department. In their paper, they have listed services such as education, counseling, assessment, consultation and referral as components of a viable program for student-athletes. In examining their paper and papers by such authorities as Brooks, Etzel, & Ostrow (1987), Chartrand & Lent (1987), Pearson & Petipas (1990), the authors have not found an overriding model for a program's philosophy. In this paper, we present an overview based on a paper by Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohn and Kidder (1982) addressing approaches for helping and coping which we believe can help athletic advising personnel examine the overriding philosophy they may use in their programs

Who is responsible?

Many academic advisors see their role as helping students deal with the maze of issues they face when they are on our campuses. As advisors, many individuals stress the need for the student-athletes to learn to take responsibility for their academic, athletic, and personal lives on campus. Oftentimes we hear of immature athletes who do not take responsibility, and consequently we spend vast amounts of time trying to help them develop a sense of responsibility.

The Models

According to Brickman et al., (1982) there are four basic models used by helping professionals as they work with individuals. All of the models they present provide some way to attribute the responsibility of the problem and the manner in which the problem is addressed by helpers. The authors note that blame is placed on people when we believe they are responsible for the creation of their problem. We also give others control when we make them responsible for changing events in their lives.

The moral model is the first model presented by Brickman et al., (1982). The basic premise is that individuals are seen as responsible for both the creation and the solution of their problems. When this model is in place, the student-athlete may be seen as lazy and not being willing to take the effort to follow through on his or her responsibilities. A good example of this is the individual who does not attend classes and rapidly falls behind in the course work. Often athletic advisors try to influence the individual by reminding student-athletes that their fate on campus is in their own hands, and it is up to the students to get involved in both learning and assignments. A positive point in using this approach is that we can compel student-athletes to recognize their part in the total picture of their academic success and appreciate the responsibility they have for this. However, there is a downside to this, as they may believe that by simply taking responsibility they can eventually develop a mastery of all things in their lives. This is unrealistic as one may have the desire but not the tools to achieve such overall mastery. Brickman et al. (1982) caution that the use of the moral model can lead to a sense of loneliness based on the belief that when one does not gain success, it was because he or she was not in the proper frame of mind, was not responsible and thus failed. Such attributions may lead to loneliness and feelings of isolation.

The compensatory model is the second developed by Brickman et al., (1982). Through this approach, the individual is not blamed for the problem but held responsible for its solution. When applying this line of thinking, the individual is expected to overcome the obstacles in life, either through one's own strategies or with the cooperation of others. Student-athletes who have learning disabilities may fall into this model. They are seen as not being responsible for the learning disability but are expected to put forth efforts to cope and compensate for their situation. Special meetings with tutors who deal with learning disabilities, having extended test times, and getting assistance from note takers or books on tape are all strategies used in the compensatory model. A positive aspect of this model is that it provides individuals with strategies outside of themselves that can help them find success. Since they are not blamed for their problem, they can often rely on the assistance of others to help them compensate. A negative perspective of this model is that individuals may feel pressured to find ways to compensate, while from the student's perspective, others seem to have been dealt a better hand and do not have to get the extra help.

A model familiar with individuals who work with student-athletes is the medical model. From the Brickman et al., (1982) paper, this is the model where the individual is not held responsible for the creation of one's problem or for its solution. Sometimes student-athletes have situations happen that are totally out of their control and need assistance from others to remedy the situation. The student-athlete who gets injured in practice or during a game is a prime example of this model. He or she must rely on the medical staff to treat the specific situation. Athletic advisors can work with

these individuals to assist them with scheduling and tutoring adjustments while they are in the rehabilitation process. The positive perspective of this model is that the individual is neither blamed nor held totally responsible for the solution of the problem. From the negative side, if not careful, one can begin to rely too heavily on others and thus develop a dependency. The athletic advisor must monitor the situation to be sure that the student-athlete is moving toward a sense of independence when recovering from an injury and may wish to meet with medical personnel to get a perspective on how much he or she needs to support the student-athlete without promoting a dependency relationship.

Lastly, the enlightenment model places the responsibility for creating the problem on the person, while not stressing his or her responsibility for the solution of the problem (Brickman, et al., 1982). The model emphasizes that the person may not perceive having control over his/her experiences. An example of this model is when a student-athlete tests positive for substance abuse and admits to the staff that he or she has developed a substance abuse problem. Obviously, one of the solutions used is to get the individual into a treatment program in order to understand and deal with the problem. Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous provide the structure for individuals seeking help for their drinking problems. Brickman et al., (1982) indicate that a negative outcome of such treatment may be that people reconstruct their entire lives around coping with their dependency problems. Consequently, they become so focused on their addiction problems that they miss opportunities to participate in other rewarding activities.

Implications

In discussing these models, it is important to keep in mind that student-athletes seek out individuals who they see as genuinely caring for them to assist them. They also seek individuals who provide clear communication to them and assist them in dealing with the logical consequences of their behavior. This idea of genuineness reflects what Rogers, (1980) wrote about when he noted, "The more the therapist is himself or herself in the relationship . . . the greater is the likelihood that the client will change and grow in a constructive manner", (p. 115).

Advisors all know that student-athletes have great opportunities on their campuses to stretch themselves and grow in ways that would not be possible in some of their home communities. By being a caring and genuine person, the athletic advisor can assist in this process.

Coupled with this is the need to communicate clearly with student-athletes. This requires that the athletic advisor know policies, procedures and can accurately communicate them to the student-athlete. This does not mean that one acts as a message board, but that an effort is put forth to give the student-athlete a clear, accurate picture of his or her dilemma without glossing over the situations that may present problems later on in the student-athlete's life on campus.

Having to live with being a responsible citizen on campus requires student-athletes to be prepared to deal with the logical consequences of their behavior. When advisors work with them, they must help them see the logical outcomes of their behaviors. It is always helpful when speaking with an individual about a situation to ask him or her, "What do you want to get out of this situation for yourself," and, "Are you

ready to deal with the consequences of the choices you are making at this time?" It is very helpful to have consequences in writing in order to avoid the development of any conflict about what matters and what does not matter.

How do staff members see themselves working with these four models? We believe it is important for academic advisors to have an understanding of how they use these models when they work with the student-athletes on their campuses. We also believe it is important to understand how student-athletes view their issues and what they expect from us when trying to resolve problems.

Perhaps the first thing advisors need to do is assess their listening skills and be sure that what they hear as the problem is what the student-athlete says is the problem. How do advisors do this? The first step is to quiet one's own thinking and emotions and to relax so that one can hear what is being said and how it is being conveyed. Many advisors see themselves as "doers" and believe that things must be moving along for progress to take place. In fact, one of the best things advisors can accomplish is to become quiet and focus on what is being said by students. Ivey and Ivey (2003) have conceptualized the skills of listening as consisting of three V's +B. They indicate that they must demonstrate visual contact with the person to whom they are trying to listen. In addition, the vocal qualities of one's voice and how an individual verbally tracks someone's conversation all play a role in how well the listener is attending to the talker. Lastly, the authors recognize that body language plays a major role in the attending process. Good listeners learn to be quiet, look at the person, use a voice tone that is pleasing, not blaming or condescending, and stay on track with the student-athlete, as he or she explains the situation. The listener's body should lean toward the person, and one should demonstrate an interest in the individual. Through this listening process, advisors can gain an understanding of how the student-athlete frames his or her particular problem. Using the four models described by Brickman, et al (1982), advisors must ask, "Who is taking responsibility here for the cause of this individual's problem?" With the student-athlete advisors can explore this issue and discuss how he or she understands the factors relating to the cause of the situation. Advisors can then ask a similar question, "Who is taking responsibility for the solution of this situation?". Here is where the advisor can discuss with the student-athlete the options available for seeking a reasonable solution. The four models presented above will help athletics advisors to conceptualize how to assist the student-athlete in seeking a resolution for the situation.

Goal Setting

For those student-athletes who wish to take responsibility for the solution of their situation, it is important for the advisor to assist them in setting some realistic goals for themselves. Some individuals have difficulty in transferring their goal-setting skills for their sport into a strategy for dealing with other life issues. The senior author has developed the SPORT goal setting approach (Diagram 1) to help when individuals are having trouble developing ways to resolve issues. The short goal setting exercise presented in Diagram 1 can be an effective tool in helping one focus on what a person wants to occur in a given situation. At the **S** point, a clear and thorough definition can help one analyze the clarity of a goal. At the **P** point, one determines the performance required to achieve the goal. This may include what the individual does daily and/or weekly to progress toward meeting the goal. Once this is clear, at the **O**

point, the individual needs to determine what materials and resources are needed to move ahead. By determining these, one develops a knowledge base and tools for use in meeting the goal. Next, it is time for a reality check. At the **R** point one must evaluate how realistic the plan is. If one can check the "YES I can," line, it is time to move ahead into the action plan. However, if one checks the "NO I can't," line, it is time to re-evaluate the plan by going back to the **S** point and starting anew. It is here where the advisor and the student develop a sense of how the student plans and reconsiders what s/he really does want to have happen. With the help of the athletic advisor, the student-athlete can restructure the plan so that the "YES I can," check can be made. It is important that the plan has a timetable; thus, at point **T**, the athletic advisor can help the student-athlete forecast a timetable for completing the tasks to achieve the goal. It helps solidify the commitment of the student-athlete to the plan by having him/her sign the **SPORT** form. The advisor can also sign off on it, give a copy to the student-athlete and keep a copy for his/her advising file. Repetition of this process with a variety of goals can assist the student-athlete in developing a systematic way of planning for success.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to introduce four models used in the helping and coping processes of individuals. The four models were explained with suggested examples appropriate to working with student-athletes. Athletic advisors have the opportunity to begin to examine the issues presented to them by student-athletes within the framework of the four models so that a common language can be used to examine issues and so that advisors can help student-athletes plan to deal with their issues. The **SPORT** model for goal setting can be one approach useful in helping student-athletes as they seek to make positive changes for themselves.

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DIAGRAM 1

The SPORT Model

SPORT

State what you want to have happen:

Performance expected of you to accomplish this:

Organize yourself for success by doing:

Reality Check(Circle one): ☐ Yes, I can ☐ No, I can not (Try again)

Time table for completing your goal:

Student-Athlete: _____

Advisor: _____

Date: _____

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