

From Theory to Practice in Programming for Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This paper contends that program development for student-athletes must begin with a theoretical base if the program is to meet the psychological needs of the student-athletes and earn the respect of administrators and academicians. Theory combined with a program implementation model facilitates both the creation and evaluation of a program. A blueprint for one program developed via this method is provided.

Introduction

Today's student-athlete often finds himself playing the conflicting roles of hero and goat. A big win on Saturday results in hero status, poor performance in the classroom on Monday relegates him to goat. The NCAA expects him to be a full-time student, the demands of practice are more befitting a full-time professional athlete, and there is little time left over for social life and self.

Are student-athletes nothing more than "dumb jocks" or are these young men being wrongly maligned? There are those who have concluded that the athlete does indeed experience less success in the classroom than his non-athlete counterpart (Axthelm, 1980; Gilbert, 1974; Landers, Feltz, Obermeier, & Brouse, 1978; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978; Spady, 1970; Ward, 1961). Others have found that the student who participates in athletics is not necessarily an inferior competitor in the classroom (Cady, 1978; Schafer, Walter, & Armer, 1968; Vaughan, 1968). Finally, there are those who contend that the athlete is not an inherently poor student but that he is systematically socialized into becoming a poor student (Brislin, 1982; Shaw, 1982).

The graduation rate of the student-athlete often serves as the academic equivalent to the won/loss record, the standard against which institutions can supposedly be compared. Nationally about 46% of varsity football players do eventually complete their degrees (Sidelines, 1982). As is often the case with statistics however, the average is not nearly as descriptive as the range. Since information concerning the graduation rate of athletes need not be made public by an institution, it has not been possible to find data from identical time periods for comparison. Nevertheless, figures which are available indicate that considerable range does exist. At one large midwestern

university 67% of the football players and 81% of the basketball players who entered between 1960 and 1977 had completed their degrees (Banker, 1981). Another large public university studied the progress of their athletes over a decade and revealed that only 21% of the football players and 29% of all male athletes had completed their degrees (Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). One should keep in mind however, that considerable variation exists concerning the sample used to calculate the graduation statistic at different institutions and that the concept of quality of a degree program is not assessed, thus rendering the graduation statistic of minimal value in program evaluation, regardless of its popularity with the media.

The variation among institutions reflects the variation among institutional goals, and probably to an even greater extent, variation in the value that an individual coach places on the academic progress of his athletes. In defense of intercollegiate athletics Louis Alley concluded that "an athletic program under the direction of an intelligent coach who is sensitive to the capacities and needs of youngsters can be a potent educational influence on athletes and spectators alike" (1974, p. 113). Alley, a college professor and former coach, argues that it is not athletics which institutions need fear, rather it is the people who run the programs who may require review. The relationship between athletic advisor and coach will undoubtedly influence the success of any program designed to assist the student-athlete.

Regardless of differences in graduation rates or coach's attitude at various schools, the athletes themselves are all undergoing similar experiences. Most athletes promptly encounter the "dumb jock" stereotype and are treated accordingly by both faculty and fellow students. Spady (1970) contended that this stereotype arose because athletics are "viewed by many students as an alternative, rather than complementary to, the academic mission of the school" (p. 700). Athletics are a major avenue for young people to achieve status. Certainly the rewards which accrue to the successful athlete, the primary one being popularity with one's peers, are of greater value to a young person than those which accrue as the result of academic success. Over time these have come to be viewed as mutually exclusive categories. Spady went on to recommend that educational systems increase the rewards available for academic success, but institutions would first have to change societal values in order to equalize the value of rewards available for each endeavor. The result of this stereotype is that the athlete either learns to play his appropriate role or he spends his college career struggling to disprove it.

Some athletes do enter college with deficit academic skills (Desruisseaux, 1982; Landers, et al., 1978; Nelson, 1982) but that does not necessarily mean that they are intellectually inferior students. Many athletes come to college without the necessary survival skills because they have not been forced to develop these skills at the elementary and secondary level. According to Bruce Herron, formerly of the Chicago Bears, the pattern has been set long before the athlete goes to college. In an interview for *Newsweek*

he recounted the following:

The cheating started in elementary school. By the time I was a high school sophomore, I was taking a test and the teacher came over to my desk with the answer sheet. He leaned down and said, 'Bruce, are you having a problem?' That was the first time that I noticed that I could get everything for nothing. (Axthelm, 1980, p. 57)

Everything for nothing while in school perhaps, but it is doubtful that the world he entered after sports was so "kind" to the former athlete.

One general consensus has been that athletes often lack the education and sophistication to make the best of the opportunities to which college avails them. In response to this situation the NCAA has set new minimum academic standards for freshman eligibility, some states have instituted "no pass/no play" rules, and university athletic departments are hiring personnel trained in counseling and/or academic support skills in order to enhance the student-athletes' chances for achieving success.

Athletic departments have increasingly assumed responsibility for the academic success of their student-athletes. Programs designed to enhance the athlete's study skills, aid him to better clarify his personal, educational, and career goals, and better prepare him for the transition to life after intercollegiate athletics are becoming more common. Most programs have some sort of academic support component which includes such things as tutoring, study skills workshops, and academic/career counseling. Additional components, such as training in interview skills, job search strategies, and basic financial management techniques may also be included. While the various components described are intuitively logical for inclusion in a program for student-athletes, any formal rationale for their existence is often missing.

The field of athletic advising and/or counseling is slowly gaining respect as a unique specialty within the profession of student personnel services. At the 1986 annual convention of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics members addressed such issues as ethical standards, licensing for professional members, and coordinating with other professional organizations, such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, for their mutual benefit. If the Association and its members are to achieve professional recognition both from within their own institutions and from other nationally recognized professional organizations, then they must conduct their activities in accordance with traditional academic professional standards.

This means conducting needs assessment, a task which Whittemore (1985) concludes is being poorly conducted at many institutions, utilizing the vast body of theory available in the fields of counseling, psychology, and adolescent/college student development when developing programs, as well as engaging in research and program evaluation. While one would hardly advocate a "publish or perish" standard against which to evaluate athletic

advisors/counselors, it does not seem to be asking too much to expect the athletic advisor/counselor to engage in some of the same activities as the faculty and other staff members of the university.

Utilizing Theory in Program Development

Remer et. al. (1978) recommend that professionals starting new programs for student-athletes should proceed slowly and concern themselves with the immediate academic performance related needs of the athletes rather than concerning themselves with larger developmental issues. The athletic advisor/counselor who fails to eventually move his/her program beyond immediate needs fulfillment status however, is destined to be judged as nothing more than an "eligibility counselor." Unfortunately, program development is a time-consuming and demanding task. The counselor/advisor may find himself in a situation where adequate funding and time for needs assessment is not available, yet pressure to produce results is in ample supply. This author contends that theory can substitute for needs assessment and provide the necessary guidelines for initial program design. This was the case at Purdue. A July hire date left little time to adequately prepare before the arrival of students in August. Feeling pushed for time, initial efforts were directed toward the identification of an already successful program which would meet the needs of student-athletes at Purdue. A literature search yielded descriptions of several excellent programs already in existence, but no program package appeared to lend itself ideally to our situation. Visits to other Big 10 schools proved invaluable in terms of gathering ideas and forms but left me no closer to having a cohesive program blueprint. Although I was committed to doing more than just organizing a tutor program, I became convinced that program borrowing was not the answer.

The program at Purdue is still in its infancy, having yet to complete its second year of existence, but it is designed to meet more than immediate academic needs. It is unique in two aspects, (1) the program's creation is the result of cooperation on the part of both Athletic Department officials and members of the academic community, thus insuring greater support initially from both parties, and (2) it is a program whose development was based primarily upon theory and a program implementation model taken from the counseling literature.

A program implementation model facilitates the selection of an appropriate intervention strategy for a given situation. Morrell, Oetting, and Hurst (1974) concluded that a comprehensive intervention model was needed if counselors were to develop meaningful programs to meet the needs of society in the 1970s and beyond. They presented a cubic model whose dimensions included the target of the intervention, the purpose of the intervention, and the selected method of intervention. Table 1 further describes each of these dimensions. Each block within the cube describes a

different mode of counseling, so 36 different service delivery methods are represented. Hurst (1978) later contended that programming in the college student affairs setting could best be accomplished by combining the Morrell et. al. model with Chickering's theory of college student development. Chickering's theory identifies seven vectors or tasks which students should accomplish during this stage of human development. These tasks are outlined in Table 2. In program development the theory provides the guidelines necessary to determine *what* program goals should be, and the model for program intervention suggests *how* to accomplish those goals.

Initial needs assessment is conducted on all entering students, regardless of their pre-admission academic record. Standardized tests such as the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Brown-Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes, and the Bienvenu Interpersonal Communication Inventory are administered. The latter is utilized by the counselor to identify those students who are unlikely to communicate with the counselor should they be experiencing difficulties in academic or social situations. Several career counseling inventories are available for use once the student is ready to address the issues of major choice and career planning. Non-standardized needs assessment consists of showing a half hour videotape of a class lecture and having the athletes take notes as they would if they were in class. Since having good notes from which to study is as important as developing proper study and time management habits, the subjectively identified poor note-takers are screened early and drilled in this area before other skills are presented.

Specific program activities are selected based on the counselor's theoretical orientation. The Purdue program utilizes activities adapted from various editions of *The Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, guest presenters selected based upon their expertise in a particular area, and Gestalt-type counseling activities. Gestalt theory was selected for several reasons, the primary one being the counselor's familiarity with, and preference for, Gestalt counseling techniques. Another consideration was the fact that the underlying Gestalt premise that the purpose of counseling is to help people find their own unique way in life and accept responsibility for their statements, decisions and actions is in keeping with the underlying concepts of Chickering's theory of student development. Finally, the action-oriented techniques of Gestalt therapy force all individuals to become involved in the process and keep the student-athlete from falling asleep after a long, hard day of school and practice!

Some of the techniques used to promote group identity or to address the topic/task of the week have proven to be particularly useful. Examples include Career Cards Night and Crayon Therapy. The career cards activity consists of passing out cards with brief descriptions of various careers including the type of activities performed, salary range, potential for promotion and other information as appropriate. The students are randomly

assigned a card or "career" and discuss how it feels to be trapped in a lifestyle as the result of having had no choice in determining one's own future. Time is allotted for trading careers among each other, or with remaining unassigned career cards, during which the bargaining can become quite creative. Group process following the exercise attempts to explore the feelings of frustration that result when one relinquishes control over one's life decisions and lets others, or fate, rule one's life.

Crayon Therapy consists of providing the students with blank paper and crayons while instructing them to conceptualize Purdue as a large body of water. They are to draw themselves and the people/things which surround them. Artistic criticism is not allowed. Usually the drawings picture creatures that dwell in the depths under great pressure or those surrounded by other ominous sea creatures. In two years there has been but one student-athlete who portrayed himself as a carefree porpoise playing near the surface of the water. That young man was well-prepared for the rigors of college life and has truly enjoyed his college experience. In this example, group process concentrates on exploring the pressures which are represented in the drawings. Initially the tone is one of nervous resistance but patience and encouragement have yielded excellent results. This particular exercise is usually scheduled before mid-term examinations, after a big loss, or before a big game (in other words, a week when stress levels are likely to be higher than normal). For freshmen it is often their first opportunity to verbalize the feelings of stress which they have been experiencing and to hear that everyone else is also suffering from the same frustrations. The sessions preceding Crayon Therapy are usually lecture/guest speaker/orientation activities and this particular exercise serves to solidify group cohesion so true group counseling can begin.

While certain tools have proven useful in one program this should not be construed as a blanket endorsement of specific techniques. As Corey (1981) emphasized "techniques need to be tailored to the individuals within the group interaction. Applied mechanically, or inappropriately, the techniques become mere gimmicks that can result in increased defensiveness by the members" (p. 248). These tools have proven useful in counseling student-athletes at Purdue University but other programs might better benefit from different techniques.

Table 3 is an example of the program blueprint. Selected activities have been listed for illustrative purposes only, since program description is not my intent. The tabular format provides a visual overview as to the areas which are being adequately covered and those where programming may be lacking. For example, a perusal of the complete blueprint of the Purdue program reveals that there is only one activity, tutor training, which is directed at an associational group. The blueprint also facilitates the task of selecting specific activities for inclusion in the program by forcing the counselor to plan for a variety of presentation formats and providing a visual aid for detecting

balance or imbalance of activities in a particular area.

Conclusion

Joseph C. Mihalich, a philosophy of sports professor and former NCAA faculty delegate at LaSalle College, emphasized that colleges "need to recognize in a reasonable way the unique physical and psychological pressures and time and energy demands on student-athletes" (1984, p. 81). He went on to recommend the hiring of athletic academic advisors professionally trained in guidance and counseling who would attend to those psychological needs and serve as a link between the world of athletics and of academics. A program designed to meet psychological needs must be based in psychological theory if it is to earn the respect of academicians.

For the counselor to serve successfully as a liaison he/she must be able to "speak the lingo" of both worlds. The counselor must establish a coherent game plan with logical play selection if he/she is to earn the respect and cooperation of the athletes and coaches, and be able to defend the rationale behind the program's existence in academic circles utilizing traditional academic arguments. The combination of theory, a program implementation model, and stamina on the part of the counselor, can indeed result in the acceptance, respect, and support of both worlds.

Table 1
Morrell, Oetting, and Hurst Model for Program-Intervention

Component	Example
Target of Intervention	
Individual	The student-athlete
Primary Group	Freshmen, football team members
Associational Group	Tutors, coaches
Institution or Community	Faculty affairs committee, administration
Purpose of Intervention	
Remediation	Study skills, tutoring
Prevention	Stress management, assertiveness training
Development	Values clarification, career development
Method of Intervention	
Direct Service	Counseling, individual tutoring
Consultation and training	Tutor training
Media	Films, videotapes

Table 2

Chickering's Seven Vectors of College Student Development

1. Developing competence
 - intellectual, physical, social
2. Managing emotions
 - particular problem areas include aggression and sex
 - task is to become aware of impulses and be able to manage them
3. Developing autonomy
 - establishing emotional autonomy while recognizing one's interdependence
4. Establishing identity
 - some growth along the first 3 vectors is first required
 - interwoven with all over vectors
 - increased ability to integrate the many facets of one's experience into a stable, positive self-image
5. Freeing interpersonal relationship
 - developing increased tolerance and acceptance of differences between individuals
 - increasing capacity for mature intimate relationships
6. Developing purpose
 - assessment and clarification of interests, educational and career options and lifestyle preference
7. Developing integrity
 - humanizing values and seeking congruence between beliefs and behavior

Table 3

Program Blueprint

Activity	Target				Purpose				Method				Vector						
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3		1	2	3		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Orientation	X				X				X				X						
Tutor Training			X			X			X				X						
Tutoring	X				X				X				X						
Career cards	X					X	X											X	
Values clarification		X				X	X												X
Stress mgmt.		X				X	X							X					
Crayon Therapy		X				X	X							X					
Financial mgmt.		X				X			X				X						
Assertiveness trng.		X				X	X								X				
Planned Parenthood		X				X			X								X		

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