

COUNSELING MULTICULTURAL STUDENT-ATHLETES: AN EXAMINATION OF BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies some barriers to the academic and career development of multicultural student-athletes. Barriers may have an adverse effect on the academic progress and athletic performance of this population. Consequently, it is imperative that academic advisors and professionals in counseling and development become aware of the obstacles that might be encountered as student-athletes from different backgrounds seek to maximize their academic and athletic potential. These barriers are discussed, along with implications for professionals who work with this population.

COUNSELING MULTICULTURAL STUDENT-ATHLETES

Multicultural student-athletes experience many barriers to their academic and athletic performance. "Multicultural" is defined as the following populations: Black American, Hispanic American, Asian-Pacific American, and Native American. Their alternative perspectives and different experiences present a challenge to professionals providing academic, personal, and career counseling services—a challenge that can no longer be overlooked. In the athletic environment, issues of cross-cultural differences are frequently encountered; in order to deal more effectively with the academic needs of these populations, academic advisors and counseling professionals must identify and examine the major factors that hinder the academic development of multicultural student-athletes.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Brooks (1984) and Isaacson (1986) have identified multicultural clients as having special needs. However, while it is agreed that these clients face somewhat unique circumstances in preparing for their careers, specific research related to this issue is quite limited. Often, the research that is available is confounded by race and class variables. Inconsistencies are common, and much of the research is debatable (Osipow, 1983; Brooks, 1984).

But, as the issues concerning the academic success of multicultural student-athletes gain more attention, there are areas of agreement among researchers. It has been shown that preparation, aspiration, and expectations may differ by cultural groups (Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983). Therefore, early outreach becomes important when working with multicultural clients (Lourenco, 1983; Hoyt, 1989). The need to bridge the gap between school and career decision making is a priority, along with understanding the importance of family influence (Stronge, Lynch, & Smith, 1987). For example, since white students more often have parents who attended college, this may give them an advantage that many multicultural students lack (Hall & Post-Kammer, 1987).

Additionally, multicultural student-athletes frequently demonstrate an insufficient knowledge of available academic and career options, and the need to broaden the knowledge base of multicultural clients in this area is recognized (Dunn & Veltman, 1989; Hall & Post-Kammer, 1987). Most ethnic minorities are under-represented in engineering and science programs (Smith, 1980), while Asian-Pacific Americans have been under-represented in the social sciences (Sue, 1975).

However, career information and planning alone will not solve the academic problems faced by multicultural student-athletes. Hoyt (1989) presents sobering statistics in regard to the limited educational equity of minorities. His recommendations include renewed attention to Sinick's (1977) suggestions that counseling professionals be actively involved in producing and using new knowledge to reduce bias and stereotyping. Hoyt (1989) also promotes massive social service efforts that include comprehensive educational reform from pre-school years through adulthood. Cheatham (1990), while presenting a culture-specific model of career development for African-Americans, suggests that society is best served by models that incorporate the experiences of all its co-cultures. However, there is agreement that issues related to the academic and career development of multicultural populations are unique. Counseling models that recognize cultural differences as well as the psychological stress experienced by minority student-athletes are needed.

BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY MULTICULTURAL STUDENT-ATHLETES

Student-athletes often encounter barriers to their academic, career, and athletic development (Coleman & Barker, 1991), and multicultural student-athletes will perhaps experience an even greater number of barriers. Coleman

(1989) has identified a number of barriers and categorized them as internal or external. Internal barriers are related to the self, while external barriers tend to focus on the environment. Some of the barriers encountered by multicultural student-athletes are listed below.

- Internal barriers:
- Low self-esteem
 - Unrealistic attitudes, aspirations, and expectations
 - Verbal and nonverbal communication problems
 - Low self-confidence
 - Internal vs. external locus of control
 - Fear of failure and/or success
 - Low level of career maturity
 - Limited previous work experience
 - Lack of information (personal, academic, and career)
- External barriers:
- Poor adjustment to the college environment
 - Time and schedule restrictions
 - Few role models
 - Mentors, tutors, and counselors not trained in cross-cultural relations
 - Unfavorable stereotypes
 - Racism and discrimination
 - High family and public expectations
 - Low socioeconomic status
 - Inadequate educational preparation
 - Limited career/vocational guidance
 - Different ethnic or cultural background of counselor
 - Different or inadequate conceptualization of work ethic
 - Intense peer pressure to adapt to a particular norm

DISCUSSION OF BARRIERS

In an examination of the aforementioned barriers to the academic and athletic development of multicultural student-athletes, it must be recognized that values differ significantly from one culture to another. For example, the American concept of success includes individualism, hard work, and perseverance. Some multicultural student-athletes may have difficulty fitting into this "winner" stereotype. Indeed, such values may be antagonistic to the values of their own cultures, especially those valuing cooperation and teamwork over individuals. Class-bound values, including adherence to time schedules and establishing goals, can cause real conflict in multicultural student-athletes' academic success as well as their athletic performance. Further, it has been shown that student-athletes, especially

football and basketball players, have lower career maturity than the general student population (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). For multicultural student-athletes, culturally influenced perceptions of career success such as those promoting group progress rather than individual success may present additional barriers to career maturity.

One of the primary barriers is self-esteem. Sometimes multicultural student-athletes, as a result of political, economic, educational, and other factors, exhibit lower levels of self-esteem than the majority student-athletes. If multicultural student-athletes do not feel good about themselves, it probably will be more difficult for them to focus on their performance in the classroom or in the athletic arena.

Multicultural students often perceive themselves as having little control over their environments (Dean, 1984); consequently, students who have this external locus of control need to feel empowered (de Charmes, 1972). Counseling that promotes movement from an external to an internal locus of control can enhance self-esteem and enable multicultural student-athletes to become more goal-oriented.

Additionally, language barriers may often exist. This can be a serious handicap if neither the student-athlete nor the counselor is bilingual (Everett, Proctor, & Cartmell, 1983). Even non-verbal communication such as proxemics, eye contact, and use of silence may be quite different for multicultural student-athletes.

The unrealistic expectations and aspirations of many multicultural student-athletes have increased phenomenally as the financial rewards of superstar status are projected by the media into their lives on a daily basis (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Despite the odds, minority student-athletes frequently believe that they will be drafted by a professional team and thereby significantly improve their economic situation. Counseling professionals must intervene and help these student-athletes better assess their career options.

Adjustment to the college/university environment poses probably one of the greatest threats to the academic and athletic success of multicultural student-athletes. A sense of social isolation is a common complaint among multicultural students (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1986). For many of these students, their arrival on campus may be their first exposure to a culturally diverse or predominantly white population. In many instances, the multicultural student-athlete is part of a very small minority within a vast array of cultural differences. Oftentimes there are few if any multicultural administrators, faculty, staff, students, or other role models to support or interact with these students. Many multicultural students perceive insensitive attitudes and unfair grading among faculty (Edmunds, 1984). In addition, the community in which the college or university is located may not include a significant number of minorities and may be less than receptive to the issues and concerns of multicultural populations. These factors may combine to cause psychological distress and frustration for young multicultural student-athletes.

Certainly some of the differences seen in multicultural student-athletes may be attributed to experiences encountered in an oppressive environment rather than to culture alone (Jones, 1982; Sue, 1981). Individuals usually acquire confidence based on previous life experiences. Consequently, academic advisors and other counseling professionals must carefully examine the history of these groups within the United States in order to gain a better understanding of the social milieu in which multicultural student-athletes' identities and behaviors originate and also of the relationship between these factors and academic progress.

IMPLICATIONS

Academic advisors and other counseling professionals have a responsibility to identify and understand the barriers that affect the academic performance of multicultural student-athletes. For professionals to facilitate the success of such students, an awareness of these barriers is essential. Implications related to counseling, training, research, program development, and policy are discussed below.

Counseling

Academic advisors and counseling professionals must be aware of the special needs and concerns of multicultural student-athletes with respect to their academic progress. Traditional counseling theories and techniques may not be appropriate for certain races, ethnic groups, and cultures. Academic advisors should also assess their own cultural identities to determine how those might influence the counseling and advising process.

Training

Higher education must establish and implement academic counseling and development programs that will train individuals to address the varying learning styles and needs of multicultural student-athletes. Curricular revision and expansion should include not only the traditional courses in counseling and psychology, but also anthropology, history, sociology, political science, and other disciplines in reference to a given culture or group. Ideally, cross-cultural information related to these subjects should be infused in all courses. Faculty from multicultural backgrounds are needed in order to foster a more diverse educational environment.

Research

There are tremendous opportunities for academic advisors and educators to conduct research on issues related to multicultural student-athletes. An in-depth investigation of internal and external barriers, developmental problems, effects of support services, and cross-cultural training are only some of the areas that require analysis.

Program Development

The literature suggests that programs related to the academic development issues of multicultural student-athletes can have a significant impact on their academic and athletic success. Such program development and the design of specifically targeted instructional materials will facilitate the success of this population on campus. Counseling and development professionals must carefully examine their role in designing academic support programs for multicultural student-athletes.

Policy

Advocacy for the educational success of multicultural student-athletes is a role that academic counseling professionals are equipped to assume. Institutional, state, regional, national, and international policies are being established in order to facilitate the academic success of all student-athletes.

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