

CAREER PREPARATION AND THE COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYER

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ABSTRACT

The lives of collegiate student-athletes are filled with needs: assistance in general scheduling/managing of campus activities, academic counseling, and career preparation. While it is generally accepted that all three areas are part of the challenges for academic athletic counselors, career preparation through a sound academic program is the fulfilling purpose of student-athletes. However, the number of graduating student-athletes, particularly college football players, does not reflect this attitude. The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the college football player and information supporting the importance of strong academic athletic counseling.

INTRODUCTION

Similar to any individual's commitment to a professional career, a college student-athlete's investment of talent and time into sport is considerable. This personal investment may consist of participation in sport of ten years or more (McPherson, 1980). The hours of training and game preparation for college student-athletes demand much dedication. Add the academic challenges of college student-athletes to the pursuit of excellence in sport, and the results dictate a most consuming college experience.

Without effective personal management techniques and support, student-athletes may be subjected to increased levels of stress. This stress may place student-athletes at risk of losing the educational and career focus needed

to prepare themselves for a career after college. At-risk student-athletes, according to Jesudason (1990), are those who are not "acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become successful adults" (15). However, the stress which plagues student-athletes is found in more than their athletic and academic roles. For years the roles of student-athletes have included academicians, athletes, family members, team members, and (for some) celebrities. In essence, these roles comprise the identity of college student-athletes.

While roles help define the nature and career of student-athletes, the college career must end and, consequently, a life change is initiated in roles and preparation for a new career becomes necessary. For some student-athletes, the transition into a new career is a relief from the previous career, while for others it can result in complete despair (Ogilvie, 1987). Therefore, before student-athletes exit collegiate sport, utilizing proper academic athletic counseling for purposes of career interests is important (Hattig, 1991).

IMPORTANCE OF COUNSELING STUDENT-ATHLETES

The ideals of counseling for student-athletes transcend the playing arenas and extend into the future of each individual. Career preparation on behalf of student-athletes should reflect thought, purpose, and plan for direction to a meaningful career after college. However, this is not the case for all student-athletes. For example, college football players have shown low levels of career maturity and subsequent career development even before the end of college (Muczko, 1993). This is similar to the conclusion reached by Kennedy and Dimick (1987), who found that male basketball and football players evidence lower levels of career maturity when compared to non-athletes.

While many barriers exist to the career development of student-athletes, realistic long-range goals appear to increase significantly the career maturity of student-athletes (Muczko, 1993; Nelson, 1982). The student-athletes can benefit through the use of realistic goal-setting principles. Appropriate educational programming, self-evaluation, and skills assessment/management appear to increase the levels of career maturity in student-athletes needed for a successful entry into the work force (Coleman & Barker, 1991).

Werthner and Orlick (1986) have identified four factors which may enhance post-sport career planning. One factor is identification and acceptance of the necessity to focus on new areas involving personal career interest, and a second factor is the desire to succeed in the new area. A third factor is recognition that student-athletes have been shaped by good and bad experiences through sport and must be ready to sort them out. A final factor is identifying the need to solicit support from family and friends for the new orientation.

Student-athletes must recognize their freedom to choose among alternatives. Such choices promote increased self-awareness which helps to direct their lives. This self-awareness stems from a realization that what they are comes from a function involving the choices they make (Corey, 1985). With a renewed self-understanding, student-athletes can focus on career planning.

According to Singer (1984), student-athletes are well prepared for this challenge because they possess the ability to identify conflicts and alternative solutions.

Playing sport is often described as what student-athletes do best. However, student-athletes are unique, with many challenges in and out of their sport experiences. Among the challenges is the need for developing sound work skills for another career after college. With the amount of their commitment to sport, student-athletes may have access to campus career counseling services but lack the ability to develop the appropriate work skills needed after college. In that case, counselors working with student-athletes in a counselor-assisted program can address the issue head on. Through this type of counseling, student-athletes are able to develop a stronger sense of self-awareness and self-exploration of their career orientation, thereby using skills and aptitudes that suit them for careers in their chosen fields (Manzi, 1987).

PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL AS A CAREER

A career in professional sport is commonly perceived as a logical choice for male student-athletes playing high profile sports such as football, basketball, or baseball. However, for most college football players (as well as basketball and baseball players) the career that comes after college is not automatically one in professional sport. It has been estimated that only one percent of all student-athletes make it to any level of any professional sport (Figler & Figler, 1984).

The monetary incentives to make a career in the National Football League (NFL) are strong, with recent average yearly salaries approaching \$500,000. This is in sharp contrast to the 1981 salaries of professional football players at \$82,000 per year (Stellino, 1992). However, the NFL has illustrated the difficulty of attaining a professional career with reports of a 95% failure rate, based on a rate of 6200 college student-athletes who annually qualify (National Football League, 1992). Overall, only 2.4% of all players in college ever play football in the NFL (NCAA, 1990). For student-athletes who do qualify, the average length of a career is three to four years (Dietzel, 1983; Holtz, 1993).

Effective counseling of college football players would be lacking if it did not include a clear understanding of this statistical information germane to student-athletes. The presentation of this type of information should not be used as a means of discouraging student-athletes; rather it should be used as a means of educating them. Without all relevant information, student-athletes' academic and future career decisions are at best uninformed.

GRADUATION AND COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYERS

There is widespread concern for the relatively low number of student-athletes graduating from college. However, some encouragement can be found in the slightly rising graduation rates of student-athletes which rival the general

student body recently, but the numbers still show that much work needs to be done in strengthening the advisement and assistance in career counseling. Moreover, current NCAA regulations have added pressure on institutions and on student-athletes regarding the challenges in academic and athletic compliance. This is important to many black student-athletes as reflected by the low numbers graduating on time (Weiberg, 1993). This importance translates into a message of fostering a dominant physical stereotype and inhibiting the academic and intellectual pursuits of black student-athletes (Lederman, 1994).

Black football players, who comprise approximately 60% of the rosters of the NFL, graduate at a rate of 34%, whereas white football players graduate at a rate of 58% (Telander, 1989; Weiberg, 1993). These numbers indicate that two-thirds of players on NFL rosters are without a college degree (Telander, 1989).

Even with the rejection rate of the NFL at 95% for first-time aspirants from among college student-athletes, many still leave college without a job or degree. Their ambition of trying to make it to the pros is evident. One study of college football seniors reported that 82 draft choices left college when they were one semester or less away from graduation to try out in professional football combines (Bock, 1990).

This is not to say that a potential professional athlete would, or even should, forego a final year or semester of college for the opportunity of becoming a professional football player. However, it must be kept in mind that those selected to become professionals are but a small segment of all student-athletes (Figler & Figler, 1984). Nevertheless, contingency plans on counseling student-athletes toward a goal of degree completion in off-seasons for post-professional career opportunities is understandably important. It is essential to define, explain, and explore the benefits of the college academic experience.

CONCLUSION

Career development for college football players should begin at the onset of the college experience. The burden of the career orientation process and related academic counseling for student-athletes is a heavy load for any professional. Counseling the number of student-athletes on college campuses today is overwhelming, to say the least (Jesudason, 1990). Coaches, instructors, administration and campus resources, and the families of student-athletes themselves all have a stake in the success or failure of career development for college football players. These facilitators of the educational experience should not be overlooked in their responsibility for assisting football players during college and in their post-college careers.

The end of active sport participation is a reality for all athletes. Furthermore, the end of competition often does not come the way it was once envisioned. Still, student-athletes are faced with the responsibility of career adjustment into an uncertain future. Therefore, preparedness by student-athletes,

plus fostered support by all responsible personnel in achieving an acceptable outcome, is still at the heart of their ultimate success.

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