

Group Academic Counseling for First Year Student-Athletes

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Group counseling aimed at improving academic achievement is worthy of consideration for student-athletes. It has some advantages over classroom courses in study skills or college orientation, and also over individual counseling. Group counseling is obviously more efficient in terms of time and resources than individual counseling. It enables (indeed is most appropriate for) emotional issues to be dealt with and writers from Stevenson (1944) to Frenza (1983) have noted the link between emotional difficulties and maladaptive study habits and also study skills deficits. Group counseling also facilitates the use of peer support strategies and has a tradition of successfully dealing with emotional adjustment (Arbuckle 1944) and academic improvement (Spielberger 1962).

After a proposal to the Athletic Department a group program was initiated in January 1984. A beginning group of eight freshman football players was identified by the Athletic Advisor as having had academic difficulties in the first semester. The group met one hour per week during study table for eight weeks. The group activities had a dual focus on study skills and emotional support.

The topics covered were:

- Responsibility for learning;
- Frustrations and blocks to learning;
- Listening skills;
- Group support for academic progress;
- Assessing strengths and weaknesses;
- Characteristics of successful student-athletes;
- Goal setting;
- Academic contracting;
- Time management;
- Memorization;

- Preparing for examinations;
- Test taking techniques;
- Study tips;
- Motivation to study;
- Relationships with teachers;
- Semester planning;

Some topics were specific to one session or a part of a session and some were cumulative and built on previous sessions such as examination preparation and test taking. Many ran in some form or another through all sessions like personal responsibility, listening skills and group support. There was a continuous effort throughout the program to accept each individual in his identity as an athlete and also develop a genuine identity as a student.

Critique and Evaluation

As the group developed, the members were able to make some personal statements about themselves and others although these were mainly in response to structured exercises such as "How I see you as a student" or "You will do better this semester because...". There remained a level however, at which they became nervous about and resistant to feedback that was too honest and found difficulty working with possible failure either academic or athletic. Lanning (1982) has discussed the negative effects on relationships that the competitive environment of athletics can have.

The group members showed a great deal of sensitivity toward issues such as campus relationships, independence within their structured regime, psychological strategies of coaches and difficulties with time and sleep. Working with partners became important to them. They took pride in helping and encouraging each other and obvious elements of mutual support developed with the group. Coming together and sharing difficulties was mentioned as beneficial. Writing contracts, making predictions and giving public statements about academic intentions acted to keep academic progress and study skills in a significant position. The group members developed a list of the study behaviors of successful student-athletes against which they could compare their own academic efforts. Although the group became an important entity for them, there was a predominant sense that it was more "my" group than "their" group despite a stated aim that their agenda should take precedence as the group developed. Complete confidentiality was stressed and observed but several members obviously expected that confidentiality would be broken and material shared with coaches. Stress coping techniques and career development might be valuable topics to add to the program.

Academic progress was encouraging. Original G.P.A.'s ranged from 1.2 to 2.1 (on a 4.0 scale) with an average of 1.4. After the group program, the average G.P.A. rose by a half grade to 1.9. A pleasing feature was continued progress over the next semester without further contact. The average grade rose to 2.3 with a range from 1.8 to 3.1. A comparison group of freshman football players with the next lowest grades in the same college began with an average G.P.A. of 1.86 which dropped to 1.6 over the second semester without group counseling and rose to an average of 2.0 after the next semester.

An evaluation questionnaire was completed anonymously by group members after the program. In answer to the question "How was the group helpful (if at all) to your academic performance?", there were some interesting comments indicating the significance of the emotional and group support.

"It showed that other people suffered similar problems. Allowed me to express my problems—get it off my chest."

"It made me aware of the reason that caused me to do poorly first semester. The opinions of the other group members about me also helped."

"It told me about what other people felt about what and how I was doing. They told me things I did not recognize for myself."

"It gave me confidence."

"It helped me face my problems, which were often the same as others were having."

The group was also seen as a practical venture. In answer to the question "What practical suggestions do you have for helping student-athletes achieve academically?", some comments reflected this sentiment.

"This program should be introduced to each student-athlete the first semester."

"Have more groups at different times to improve study habits."

Recent surveys (C.F.A. 1984, Mathes and Gurney (1985) indicate an increased interest by student-athletes in the academic programs and provisions of various institutions. Mathes and Gurney claim that now,

"College athletes are more concerned with academic support services that help them succeed as students than with athletic facilities and programs that enable them to succeed as athletes." Given this trend and the continuing demands of practice, road trips, media, alumni, etc., a grouped counseling program may be an effective way of enhancing student and career identities and facilitating progress in both these important areas.

References

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