

ASSISTING STUDENT ATHLETES IN UNDERSTANDING AND IDENTIFYING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

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Abstract

The concept of transferable skills is defined and an instrument to help student athletes understand and identify their transferable skills is presented. Suggestions for utilization of the instrument for individuals or groups are outlined.

As the field of athletic counseling has evolved, the role of the athletic counselor has expanded. Once primarily involved with only academic-related issues, athletic counselors may now be providing a variety of services including personal counseling, social skills training, values exploration, and self-awareness training (Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978). Another area where athletic counselors are assuming greater responsibility is career development (Mand & Fletcher, 1986).

Research has shown that student athletes, most specifically football and male basketball players, have lower career maturity than the general student population (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Sowa and Gressard (1983) suggest that student athletes have difficulty formulating clear educational goals and therefore may not derive much personal satisfaction from classroom experiences. Others have suggested that student athletes may not engage in the exploratory behavior necessary for career and personal development because their sport provides them with an identify (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). If these observations are accurate, it would appear that athletes might accrue considerable academic and personal benefits from a career counseling experience. Nelson (1982) and McFarland (1976) found this to be the case with their student athletes, who showed significant academic improvement after a career counseling program.

This article describes how the concept of transferable skills can be utilized to help student athletes gain confidence in their abilities to engage in educational and career planning. More specifically, the concept of transferable skills is examined. A workshop instrument to help athletes identify transferable skills is presented, and suggestions for utilizing the instrument in group settings are provided.

Transferable Skills

Those people who promote athletics as positive and beneficial often claim that sport experiences help athletes develop intangibles that not only contribute to athletic achievement, but are also important for success outside of athletics. Characteristics discussed in this manner include desire, determination and perseverance. Some have labeled these characteristics as transferable skills. Transferable skills have been defined as skills that "are transferable to any field/career that you choose, regardless of where you first picked them up" (Bolles, 1988, p. 52).

Although the concept of transferable skills has been suggested for career development programs for student athletes, a description of how to utilize the concept has not appeared in the literature. Based on the evaluations of the Career Assessment Program for Athletes (United States Olympic Committee), the Planning Career Goals Program (Ladies Professional Golf Association), and the Advisory Resource Center for Athletics (intercollegiate athletes), identifying and understanding transferable skills is critical in developing the belief and confidence that one can successfully perform a given task, namely career development. This notion has been labeled "self efficacy" and has been shown to be an important link to academic achievement, persistence and career development (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984, 1987).

Athlete's Guide to Understanding and Identifying Transferable Skills

Athletes who have devoted so much of their lives to their sports may feel that they have few skills or attributes that relate to the world of work. The Athlete's Guide to Understanding and Identifying Transferable Skills (Schwartz, 1988) was developed to assist athletes in discovering more about the skills and attributes that they possess and how those skills and attributes may generally apply in other settings.

Figure 1.

Athlete's Guide to Understanding and Identifying Transferable Skills

Part 1

1. What personal qualities and characteristics do you think coaches and teammates look for in athletes?

2. What other personal qualities and characteristics do you think are important for athletic achievement?
3. What personal qualities and strengths have helped you succeed in sports?
4. What have you learned from sports successes?
5. What have you learned from sports disappointments?
6. What have you learned from your extensive pre-competition practice experience?
7. What have you learned from competitive situations?

Part 2.

- 1B. Review your responses for questions one and two. Now describe how this may be similar to and different from what employers look for in prospective employees.
- 2B. Again review your responses to questions one and two. How will these qualities and characteristics be important for career development and/or life decisions?
- 3B. Review your response to question three. How will these qualities and strengths be important for your career development and/or life decisions?
- 4B. Review your responses to questions four, five, six and seven. How can you apply what you have discovered to areas of your life outside of sports?
- 5B. How do you think teamwork applies to a work setting?

Strategies for Group Facilitators

Although the Guide was originally developed for use with individual athletes, it has proven to be an effective tool for group work. After the athletes have completed the Guide, they are divided into groups of six to eight. In a few cases, a group of athletes may include a few individuals who are verbal and have work experiences to share with the group. In these infrequent cases the group leader assumes more of a participant/observer role. When athletes are hesitant to self-disclose or feel uncertain as to how their skills might transfer to a work setting, a more active and direct leader role is required. In the latter situation it has proven helpful to direct the discussion around three questions which are discussed below:

1. What kinds of personal characteristics and skills have you developed through sports that might be equally valuable in a work setting?

In groups where the student athletes lack confidence in participating in this kind of discussion or lack knowledge of the work environment, the leader may need to provide more structure to encourage involvement. This can be accomplished by: 1) validating the feelings of doubt or confusion that people often experience when exploring new career issues; 2) modeling self-disclosure by sharing personal experiences; 3) providing further clarification of the question; 4) utilizing the experiences of athlete role models such as alumni athletes who might volunteer to participate in the workshops; and 5) reviewing participants' responses to the stimulus questions in Part 1 of the instrument and "translating" these traits into job-related skills (e.g. perseverance can be reframed as learning from mistakes, or desire can be translated as seeks feedback to improve). As the student athletes become more comfortable with self-disclosure and discussion, the facilitator may serve as "gate keeper", insuring that each person in the group has an opportunity to contribute if he/she chooses to, while at the same time preventing the more verbal participants from dominating the group discussion.

2. What skills have you developed through sports participation that will help you succeed in your job search and career?

Typically, group members are more likely to identify personal characteristics and traits than skills. In an attempt to help them feel more confident about their abilities to engage in career development, it may be helpful to first acknowledge that by participating in the transferable skills workshop, they have already taken the first step in career exploration. Next it is important to help them identify specific skills they may have developed. For example, many athletes will identify hard work and dedication as transferable skills. It should be explained that these are characteristic traits that they possess. The transferable skills are their abilities to seek information, set goals and self-evaluate. Athletes typically know how to get the information and training necessary to develop or strengthen their skills because they have used these strategies often to improve their athletic skills. These are clearly important life skills that are crucial to academic and career development.

The facilitator might also relate these skills to their current career development processes. These student athletes have identified as skill deficit, namely their lack of knowledge about career development. They sought "coaching" by attending the workshop and utilizing the expertise of the presentors and other participants. They know how to acquire new skills through goal setting and practice, and they know that feedback is necessary to polish these skills, to build on strengths, and to improve weaknesses. Thus, they know how to learn and how to identify and utilize resources. The hard work and dedication are the traits that allow them to accomplish these tasks.

3. What are the costs and benefits of your personal style and how do they relate to various work environments?

It is often helpful to consider how personal traits may fit with other workers' personalities in various employment settings. For example, individual sport athletes who are accustomed to independent, self-pacing and autonomy may feel frustrated in a work environment that requires interdependence of job functions and people. Other athletes who are accustomed to a highly structured environment may have difficulty in a setting where there is little supervision or clear direction.

In addition, some athletes may have developed a self-image that necessitates a work environment that has "status". In other situations, athletes might be surrounded by some co-workers who look up to them because of their athletic status. In these cases, co-workers may be hesitant to offer constructive feedback because they might over estimate the athletes' job knowledge. At the same time, other co-workers might resent them because they feel that they were only given the job because they were athletes. These discussions often lead to more immediate concerns of how student athletes are perceived and treated on campus by various groups of students, staff and faculty.

Conclusion

The concept of transferable skills has the potential to offer numerous opportunities to assist student athletes in gaining confidence about their abilities to engage in personal, academic, and career development. It has been suggested that career development should be introduced as early as possible in the educational process of the intercollegiate athlete (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Helping student athletes understand and identify transferable skills can be an effective first step in introducing them to career development and establishing the interrelationship between athletic and academic endeavors and their future life/work plans. Gains in self-efficacy often translate into higher academic and athletic performance.

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