

# **ACADEMIC COUNSELING FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES: A MODEL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Counseling for student-athletes is gaining national prominence as new regulations, guidelines, institutional requirements, and public concern focus on academic performance. Big-time athletics has presented colleges and universities with new challenges for educating and graduating student-athletes. While academic counseling is often provided for this population, comprehensive programs that address personal, academic, social, and athletic needs are limited. This article describes an academic counseling model for student-athletes that can enhance their academic performance. The model consists of the following components: (1) individual assessment and evaluation; (2) study table; (3) academic support and monitoring; (4) staff development; and (5) information dissemination, research, and evaluation.

## **ACADEMIC COUNSELING FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES: A MODEL**

The challenge to colleges and universities to provide appropriate academic support services for student-athletes is becoming more difficult as pressures and demands on student-athletes increase. While educational institutions struggle to find an appropriate balance between academics and athletics, comprehensive counseling models that address the personal, academic, social, and athletic needs and concerns of student-athletes are essential in order to ensure academic integrity.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Although the life of an athlete can be exciting, sports careers are short, and few athletes play beyond the age of forty (Lerch, 1981). However, by the time many student-athletes realize that most of their working years will not be spent playing professionally, they may be too far behind academically to initiate a second career.

Today's student-athletes are confronted with pressures and expectations to a degree unheard of a generation ago (House Hearings, 1989). The educational success of college athletes has become a major national concern, and the need for universities to provide special academic support for marginally prepared student-athletes is seen as a reasonable solution (Whitner & Myers, 1987).

The necessity for early intervention to maximize the student-athlete's potential for academic success is becoming increasingly more apparent. This intervention must include educating student-athletes toward a new, more realistic understanding of other career opportunities, as well as institutional accountability on the part of athletic directors, coaches, faculty, athletic academic counselors, and the NCAA (Underwood, 1984).

Proposition 48 and higher institutional standards now required of entering college student-athletes have created the need for a comprehensive program that fuses athletics and academics (Thompson, 1986) while addressing the special needs of ethnic minority group student-athletes in general, and black student-athletes in particular (Henderson, 1986). Many of these athletes enter college with optimism, only to become progressively more detached from academics and resigned to inferior academic performance in response to negative athletic, social, and classroom experiences (Adler & Adler, 1985). Even those who graduate often find themselves lacking the skills needed to function in the simplest working environment (Nikow & Dinardo, 1985). The extent to which student-athletes are adversely affected by barriers to their career development must be determined early in the college experience by counselors and other professionals who work with them (Coleman & Barker, 1991).

Consequently, there is a serious need for the design and implementation of academic counseling programs, since these support services provide an opportunity to enhance the success of student-athletes.

## **ACADEMIC COUNSELING MODEL**

A comprehensive academic counseling model that will facilitate the academic performance and career success of student-athletes consists of the following components: (1) individual assessment and evaluation; (2) study table; (3) academic support and monitoring; (4) staff development; and (5) information dissemination, research, and evaluation.



## Individual Assessment and Evaluation

Individual assessment and evaluation consists of a critical examination of a number of variables that influence the academic performance of student-athletes. These variables include values, interests, abilities, personality, decision making strategies and styles, and academic performance. All variables can be correlated to determine an individual academic schedule for each student-athlete. Each variable is discussed briefly below.

**Values.** Values are those areas that are important to an individual, such as family, education, financial security, and athletics. Values are important because choosing a course of study also means selecting a value system and a lifestyle. Individual values and academic values must be congruent to facilitate academic and career success.

**Interests.** Likes and dislikes are significant with respect to academic performance. Vocational and avocational interests, or what a person likes to do for fun, are important in terms of selecting an appropriate major. Oftentimes an interest, with proper cultivation, may lead to success in a particular discipline.

**Abilities.** Identification of the student-athlete's abilities, achievements, and accomplishments, as well as weaknesses, will enhance the potential for improved academic performance.

**Personality.** Individual idiosyncrasies, nuances, and preferences are what make each person unique. The closer an individual can match personality type with academic, athletic, and career goals, the more likely that person is to be successful.

**Decision Making Strategies and Styles.** Decision making is a skill that can be learned, and the student-athlete's decision making strategies and styles are important with respect to issues such as the selection of a major, the scheduling of classes, time management, and interpersonal relationships.

**Academic Performance.** The level of academic performance will highly depend on the identification and remediation of academic deficiencies. Reading level and comprehension, limited preparation in mathematics and science, and inadequate study skills should be carefully assessed to determine what influence these might have on academic progress.

## Study Table

Study tables have long been used as the anchor for academic support of student-athletes. However, such remedial services have been found to be less effective for black students than for white. Speculation is that faculty expectations may be that blacks would perform poorly, based on their previous high school records. Edmunds (1984) found that black students have low expectations for themselves, along with perceptions of unfair grading and insensitive attitudes among faculty members. These perceptions are often extended to include academic support staff as well as study table supervisors.

Also, it has been found that minority student academic performance is more variable than that of their white peers (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1986). This finding indicates that careful attention to the needs of these students is required. For example, in literature related to the academic performance of black students, orality has been associated with their learning and with the transmission of their cultural values (Boykin, 1983; Gay, 1975). This emphasis on oral communication is in direct contrast to the literary culture of schools and may indicate a need to help black student-athletes develop skills for handling written discourse. Dunn and Veltman (1989) suggest that these differences in students' perceptual strengths require instructors to approach the presentation of new material through each student's strongest modality and to reinforce learning through their second modality.

While study tables are limited in their ability to address all of these concerns, attention to the following recommendations should benefit multicultural and white student-athletes alike.

- (1) Study table should be required for all student-athletes with less than a "B" average, or those experiencing academic difficulty in a particular term or course.
- (2) Study table should be structured, with supervision by faculty and/or professional staff. The staff should reflect the specific ethnic groups represented by the student-athletes.
- (3) Study table should include the integration of academic, athletic, and career issues and concerns.
- (4) Study table should be scheduled a minimum of three times per week for a minimum of two hours.
- (5) Additional study time should be scheduled individually as needed.
- (6) Tutorial services should be scheduled separately from study table.
- (7) Mentoring programs should be scheduled separately from study table.

### **Academic Support and Monitoring**

The provision of academic support services and the monitoring of such services is probably one of the most critical endeavors of the academic counseling model. The components identified below should be considered when an academic support and monitoring program is designed:

- (1) Weekly evaluation of grades
- (2) Supervised tutorial services
- (3) Regularly scheduled individual and group academic, personal, and career counseling
- (4) Career development workshops and seminars related to academics
- (5) Mentoring

### **Staff Development**

The ultimate success of an academic counseling program is highly contingent on the abilities, skills, and talents of the staff. Any staff member (including counselors, tutors, and mentors) participating in an academic program for student-athletes must receive specialized training in areas such as communication skills, study skills, tutoring, interviewing, counseling, and mentoring. Issues such as cultural diversity and race awareness training are of the utmost importance since many of the student-athletes are from various ethnic backgrounds and have different experiences. Factors such as racial homogeneity of mentors can have real validity in mentoring relationships (Stenberg, 1990).

Finally, monthly evaluation of all staff is recommended to ensure that individual and programmatic goals and objectives are being addressed. Regular feedback provides an opportunity to modify and change approaches so that student-athletes receive the highest quality of service.

### **Information Dissemination, Research, and Evaluation**

The dissemination of information related to an academic counseling model will allow the institution to provide the public with data concerning the status of the program. Reporting mechanisms which include longitudinal studies can address issues and concerns that arise as institutions are required to be more accountable to student-athletes and to the public. Research on topics such as self-esteem, vocational maturity, decision making, and academic success should be an integral component of an on-going program evaluation.

### **SUMMARY**

It is apparent that much of the academic success experienced by student-athletes depends upon the variety of support services provided for this special population. Academic support services and monitoring are critical components of student success. The willingness of individuals involved in the provision of academic support services to expand cross-cultural communication skills and awareness can be important to the success of such programs. As



institutions acknowledge their responsibility for facilitating the academic success of student-athletes, new paradigms are evolving. Documentation of such models will aid professionals who are attempting to develop programs for their own institutions.

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