

# **CAREER COUNSELING AND STUDENT-ATHLETES: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The self-reported personal/social needs of a random sample of college student-athletes and a general student sample were compared. Survey data revealed that both groups shared many needs. Respondents indicated that career-related concerns and various sources of stress associated with participation in athletics were of primary concern. Findings provide suggestions for the planning and delivery of helping services to student-athletes and non-athletes.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Student-athletes have been identified as having collegiate experiences that are quite different from the experiences of their non-athlete peers. There have been suggestions that they should be viewed as a special population or subculture much like minority students (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1991; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Lanning & Toye, 1993; Parham, 1993) or be

considered non-traditional students (Heyman, 1987; Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). These suggestions derive from observations that student-athletes face all of the developmental and academic tasks of college plus the demands of involvement in competitive athletics. While the literature contains speculation and recommendations about dealing with student-athletes, data-based literature on the special needs of student-athletes is less available.

Bostic (1979), using the Mooney Problem Checklist, reported that a small sample of student-athletes (38 football players) experienced a significantly greater number of academic, vocational, and personal/social problems when compared to students in general. Etzel (1989) surveyed 263 male and female student-athletes at a medium-sized NCAA Division I institution. Those student-athletes reported more stress-related concerns and stress reactions than students in general. Selby, Weinstein, and Bird (1990) studied the stress sources of 267 student-athletes at Stanford University. Respondents indicated that the threat of injury and academic concerns were their greatest sources of distress. Smallman, Sowa, and Young (1991) surveyed 53 female and male, African-American and Caucasian student-athletes about their life stress. More than a quarter of them said they experienced high levels of stress. African-American and male student-athletes indicated that the stress they experienced was more bothersome than the stress reported by others.

Sowa and Gressard (1983) observed that student-athletes formulated less well-defined career plans and reported feeling less satisfied with their educational experiences. Kennedy and Dimick (1987) surveyed male varsity football and basketball players. Participants reported having significantly less mature career attitudes than the norm. Others have found that many student-athletes have unreasonable expectations of professional sport careers and financial success (American Institutes for Research, 1988).

Given the limited amount of data-based information, it appears that the concept of student-athletes as a unique population is largely based upon the informal, shared perceptions and value judgments of coaches, administrators, sport psychologists, and counselors who provide on-campus services to student-athletes. Therefore, a systematic investigation of the nature of perceived student-athlete needs is indicated. Such data-based information would be useful in the planning and delivery of helping services to these unique students.

Two additional reasons for investigating the perceived needs of student-athletes are time constraints and the identification of accessible resources for student-athletes. A survey of 4,083 female and male NCAA Division I student-athletes conducted by the American Institutes for Research (1988) revealed that participation in organized athletics requires a significant amount of time, up to thirty hours a week for some student-athletes. Accessing support services when needed may be difficult, and help from typical sources may not be available when student-athletes have time (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Brooks, Etzel, and Ostrow (1987) surveyed counselors working in athletic departments to determine the focus of their counseling time. The

primary focus of these counselors was academic performance and maintaining eligibility for sports. While academic success is important for all students, other needs that student-athletes may have (e.g., career-related, developmental, or personal-social) should also be addressed.

The purpose of this study was to survey systematically the expressed needs of student-athletes for various counseling services. In order to understand these needs, the degree of perceived need, preferences for different delivery modes, and a comparison with general students' expressed needs were also included in the survey.

## METHOD

### Sample

The participants surveyed were 170 male and female student-athletes and 300 general students at an NCAA Division I university of approximately 9,500 full-time students, of whom 6,000 were undergraduates. The student-athlete sample was obtained by drawing every third name from a list of all student-athletes participating on one or more varsity athletic teams. The random sample of general students was drawn by computer to be stratified for undergraduate standing. A total of 201 student-athletes and general students returned usable surveys for a return rate of 46%.

### Instrument

The needs assessment survey, containing 54 Likert format self-report items, was derived with slight modifications from a needs assessment survey developed by Talley and his colleagues (Talley, 1985). Participants were asked to indicate on a scale of one ("No importance") to five ("Extreme importance") the degree to which each item was a personally important concern. Participants were also asked to indicate which of three service delivery modes (one-to-one counseling, group seminar at the counseling center, or educational presentation elsewhere) they would be most likely to use if they sought counseling or needed information about an issue. An open-ended response item then asked participants to describe any areas of concern or need that were important to them but not included on the survey.

The student-athletes were asked 13 additional items directed at their athletic competition. Of these items, 10 concerned personal issues (such as athletic burnout and the stress of sport competition) and 3 concerned sport enhancement (such as imagery and concentration control). The last item asked about their interest in feeling more comfortable using counseling services.

### Procedure

The 170 student-athletes and 300 general students were mailed a cover letter, the survey, and a stamped return envelope with no identification. Participants who had not responded after three weeks were sent another survey

and modified cover letter. The second cover letter reminded them that the survey had been sent and again requested cooperation. Informed consent was based on the voluntary return of a survey.

## Results

The means, standard deviations, and ranks for those 14 needs assessment items with means greater than 3.0 ("Of some importance") are shown in Table 1 for student-athletes and for general students. The five items rated highest by student-athletes pertained to career development. The other career development item was rated seventh by the student-athletes. A between group t-test using the means of these six items was significant ( $t = 2.55$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that student-athletes expressed more concern about career development assistance than general students.

Of the other items with means greater than 3.0, six represented social-personal concerns. A between group t-test on the means of these items was not significant ( $t = .93$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The other item, concerning time management, was "of some importance" for both groups.

The preferred delivery mode for five of the career development items was one-to-one counseling for the student-athletes (49.5%). The exception was the item on finding career information, where an educational presentation was preferred (51.5%). One-to-one counseling was also the preferred delivery mode for the personal/social items (64.1%), except for issues of communication, assertiveness, and leadership, where the respondents preferred group counseling.

These preferences were closely paralleled by the general students, with three exceptions: (1) the general student group favored educational presentations over group counseling for leadership and time management; (2) they favored one-on-one counseling over group counseling for assertiveness; and (3) they favored group counseling over one-on-one counseling for relationship enrichment.

No comparison was possible between student-athletes and general students for the items the student-athletes answered that were specific to their athletic involvement. It is noteworthy that these items all had means above 3.0 with the exception of "The amount of time and effort I must spend practicing my sport" ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = .32$ ).

## DISCUSSION

While student-athletes appear to have some specific and unique needs that distinguish them from general students, more similarities than differences may exist between the needs of these two groups of students. This possibility is not surprising since both groups are working through the same basic developmental tasks of young adulthood (Chickering, 1969; Perry, 1970). Furthermore, differences between student-athletes and the general student

Table 1

Needs Assessment Items with Means Greater than 3.00  
for Student-Athlete and General Student Samples

Item	Sample					
	Student-Athletes (n=63)			General Students (n=138)		
	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank
Understanding career-related interests	3.75	.92	2	3.40	1.32	2
Understanding career-related skills	3.75	.92	2	3.40	1.31	2
Planning my career or vocation	3.75	1.11	2	3.46	1.33	1
Understanding career-related personality	3.51	1.22	4	3.27	1.39	5
Understanding career-related values	3.41	1.16	5	3.19	1.38	7
Communicating more effectively	3.29	1.11	6	3.29	1.32	4
Finding written information about careers and educational programs	3.24	1.21	7	3.02	1.36	12
Making decisions and solving problems	3.17	1.17	8	3.14	1.34	9
Developing leadership skills	3.14	1.15	9	3.22	1.26	6
Assertively standing up for myself	3.13	1.40	10	3.09	1.36	11
Developing self-confidence and self-esteem	3.08	1.34	11	2.86	1.35	13
Coping with the stresses in my life	3.06	1.16	12	3.12	1.22	10
Enriching a relationship I have	3.00	1.33	13	2.61	1.36	20
Managing my time effectively	2.95	1.28	15	3.15	1.31	8

sample may not have been so pronounced because the institution these students attended was an academically challenging one.

While important needs are similar for student-athletes and general students, certain manifestations of needs may be more characteristic of student-athletes. For instance, career development issues were highly rated by both groups. With student-athletes, however, concern about the role of sport in future career/life planning may significantly flavor the need for career development services. A number of authors (Blann, 1985; Nelson, 1983; Pearson and Petitpas, 1990; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978; Sowa & Gressard, 1983) have described how preoccupation with professional athletics can impede personal and career development.

The possibility that student-athletes are more concerned about career development than personal/social issues was not anticipated. Career development and planning may be delayed or even ignored by student-athletes who cling to the unlikely hope of a professional athletic career. Even when

student-athletes are realistic about the improbability of a professional sports career, being an athlete may have assumed a core importance in their identities. Student-athletes may have career planning problems because they have "foreclosed" on their identities too early in their development (Nelson, 1983). The astute counselor should be sensitive to the overlapping of personal/social concerns (e.g., "retirement" from athletics or injury) with career-related concerns when working with these clients (Pinkerton, Etzel, Rockwell, Talley, & Moorman, 1990).

Etzel (1989) found that student-athletes report greater frequencies and intensities of stressors and stress reactions; this sample of student-athletes reported that the stress of competition was the area in which they most strongly felt the need for help ( $M = 4.15$  on a five-point scale). However, concern about career development and the need for assistance in career development ( $M = 3.75$ ) was close behind stress associated with competition as an expressed need.

Because of the time constraints on student-athletes, career counseling and career development resources may be difficult for them to access if such services are offered in the usual time frame of eight a.m. to five p.m. If many student-athletes feel that they have a clear career plan and goal (i.e., being a professional or elite amateur athlete), traditional career assessment may be seen as unnecessary or intrusive. Career development and counseling with student-athletes requires creative and involving strategies that are accessible when they have the opportunity to use them.

With some student-athletes, it may be important to meet them where they are—with an athletic-dominated view of career options. Rather than recommending that they approach career planning like general students, the strategy of encouraging "back-up" plans as a goal of career planning might be more productive than assuming the student-athlete will not be a professional or elite amateur athlete. Some may need to be reminded that even highly successful professional athletes need to change careers when they are injured or too "old" to compete at that level.

Another possibility would be to develop a resource about careers in sport and those careers that occur in athletic settings. A section in a career library about sport-related occupations could entice some student-athletes into using occupational information resources that they might otherwise choose not to tap. Perhaps instructors could be surveyed for ways in which their majors are related to sports and athletic settings. Sport is an industry, and numerous examples exist in a variety of careers and majors which can be practiced with an athletic component.

Pinkney (1983) suggested an approach to career counseling that does not use traditional assessment but the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Some students assume that career assessment will deliver a single, right answer by giving them career titles. This mindset can preclude their involvement or investment in the career planning process. Student-athletes might be better

served by an assessment that is based on what type of person they are and how their athletic experiences could translate into successful careers. After all, student-athletes tend to be dedicated to improvement and have learned the need to work together with diverse people and bosses (coaches).

The majority (49%) of the student-athletes and general students preferred one-on-one counseling for many of their career planning needs. A clear implication is that individual counseling should be an option in any career planning program, service, or agency. Student-athletes may be more open to exploring career development and the personal aspects of career planning, such as identity constructs, if they were seen individually. Individual counseling sessions would also address the student-athletes' response to the item on feeling more comfortable with using a counseling service.

The high need scores for wanting to feel more comfortable using counseling services would certainly suggest that individual career counseling is a necessary option in terms of the comfort level of student-athletes who seek help with their career planning. This might also help student-athletes be more accessible for counseling on some of their developmental issues. Petitpas and Champagne (1988) note that student-athletes may be behind their peers in important issues such as handling relationship and emotional maturity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present study suggest that career planning is important to student-athletes. The issues of response rate and using a single institution's student-athletes do not support broad generalizations. But the likelihood that some significant proportion of student-athletes perceive a need for career development and have some discomfort with seeking counseling suggests that more active attempts be made to reach this student group. It would also seem reasonable that counseling strategies that do not ignore student-athletes' long and demonstrable enthusiasm for sport would be more productive.

The results also support the idea of action research investigating career planning strategies that would be effective with student-athletes. The results would not support the description of student-athletes as the "privileged few" (Lanning, 1982) or the "over privileged minority" (Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978). Student-athletes have many needs in common with general students, plus some unique needs of their own. The need for career development is not one of the unique needs of student-athletes.

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