

Promoting Citizenship and Personal Growth: A Model for Student-Athlete Excellence

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ABSTRACT

Many institutions of higher education are searching for ways to augment specific areas of a student-athlete's life: such as study skills, fitness awareness, or disordered eating. East Stroudsburg University has developed a model that provides the additional support systems with the goal of developing not only a more competitive athlete but also a more mature and responsible member of the university community. This model includes a physical and psycho-social component. A multi-discipline staff attempts to encourage the student-athletes with the life skills and the interaction to develop these tools for their life after college.

INTRODUCTION

Oftentimes we are reminded of the negative outcomes of collegiate athletics, or of the special treatment that athletes receive—that they are coddled or removed from taking responsibility for their own education. In fact, their education and their developmental maturation might even be subordinate to the coach's goal of winning and the institution's focus on achieving prominence. Approached from another vantage point, however, the athlete's collegiate competitive athletic experience can be used for enhancing the athlete as a complete person—a time when athletes may be assisted toward developmental maturity, mastering appropriate developmental tasks.

East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania established the Student-Athlete Center for Excellence (SACE) to provide all student-athletes with the right to access guidance, counseling, and instruction necessary to successfully compete both academically and athletically. SACE makes clear to student-athletes that with this right comes the onus to be a responsible member of the university community. In other words, the student has all the tools available to be successful; however, it is the student's responsibility to access these tools as well as to attend classes, complete homework and projects on time, to study for tests, and seek out assistance when needed. East Stroudsburg University's SACE is a collaborative effort to provide the opportunity for student-athletes to successfully complete these tasks. It is comprised of a multi-disciplined staff that includes two exercise physiologists, an academic advisor for student-athletes, and a psychologist. All SACE members, with the exception of the academic advisor for student-athletes volunteer their time in addition to full-time faculty responsibilities. The SACE is funded jointly from Student Affairs and external grants. In short, it provides a challenging and supportive environment,

not under the auspices of any coaches, for students-athletes to work on those areas that they or members of the SACE team have identified.

STUDENT-ATHLETE EXCELLENCE MODEL

The mission of SACE is to encourage student-athletes to strive toward their individual potential in both academics and athletics. The steps in achieving this potential are akin to Havighurst's Developmental Tasks (1953). Havighurst defines a developmental task as those markers that:

Constitute a healthy and satisfactory growth in our society. They are those things a person must learn if he [she] is to be judged and to judge himself/ [herself] to be a reasonably happy and successful person. A developmental task is a task which arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and to success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by society, and difficulty with later tasks (cited in Thomas, 1992, p. 79).

These tasks are based on middle-class values with latitude for lower and upper class influences; however, they all consist of three main components: "(1) the biological structure and function of the individual, (2) the particular society or culture in which the individual lives, and (3) the personal values and aspirations of the individual" (Thomas, 1992, p. 81). In the biological realm, examples of these components for the college-aged student-athlete, or young adult, would be establishing healthy and life-long commitment to physical activity. This developmental task might include awareness of the long-term negative effects of performance enhancing substances or disordered eating. Regarding component two, the particular society or culture in which the individual lives, the college student-athlete functions in at least two realms and will learn those rules. Developmental tasks in this area could include acceptable behavior in the residence hall, on the practice field in relation to teammates, and in the academic arena: class attendance, participation, and interaction with the professors. In area three, the personal values and aspirations of the individual, examples of tasks could include exploring/establishing a viable personal belief and value system. Personal beliefs and values particularly come into play in regard to peer pressure around the topics of alcohol use and safe sex. It is not unusual for the tasks to overlap areas; for example, exploring and establishing personal values probably overlaps all three areas.

Physical Component

Havighurst's developmental task model (1953) identifies a biological basis for the growth and maturation of an individual. When examining the student-athlete, the influence of past physical activity experiences may impact the individual's success in achieving life-long commitment to physical activity. The scientific literature clearly demonstrates the abundance of benefits both physically and mentally from engaging in four years of required physical education activity classes on alumni attitudes and exercise habits. Alumni graduating from programs requiring four or more credits of physical education activity place significantly higher value in the health benefits of regular exercise.

Sarna and colleagues (1995) found that former world-class athletes maintained their physical fitness for a longer period of time and on a more regular basis than the general population. Does the unique experience of the collegiate athlete enhance the lifelong commitment to physical activity? Davis and colleagues (1997) demonstrated that only 65% of former collegiate athletes reported continued physical activity post-graduation activity as compared to individual-based sport athletes. Clearly the experience the student-athlete has while competing may greatly impact the decision to continue activity.

The SACE Exercise Physiologist's role is to assist the athletes in their preseason and postseason preparation. By teaching the athletes the benefits of cross training rather than overtraining, these athletes gain further appreciation for the necessity for a lifetime commitment to physical activity. In addition, the athletes are exposed to a variety of lifetime fitness activities, which will service them when structured competition has ended. Additionally, the SACE Exercise Physiologist provides the student-athletes with information that assists them in making informed decisions regarding alcohol intake, dietary choices, and performance enhancing substances all of which play into the athletes' values and, possibly, coping mechanisms.

Psycho-Social Component

For college student-athletes, we consider the paramount psycho-social components: their psychological health, academic world and their social world. These components have numerous possibilities for student-athletes, depending on what skills are less developed when they enter the university. For instance, in our case approximately 47% of entering students are first-generation college students; hence, for many of our students, coming to ESU is their first time away from home. Additionally, their experience with academia is limited and their awareness of academic protocols, such as informing the professor of any absences, is limited.

Regarding the student-athlete's psychological health and well-being, we know that the prevalence of eating disorders for athletes is the same as non-athletes. In the general population 10% of people suffer from depression. Our model provides individual and group counseling for those individuals who experience these psychological impediments to their development—not only for their performance as an athlete but particularly for their enhancement as a developing adult. Other issues that are dealt with at The Student Athlete Center for Excellence are: homesickness; unresolved loss/grief due to the death of a parent, sibling or friend; unhealthy boundaries with romantic or family relationships, such as an emotionally abusive boy/girl friend or controlling parent; or alcohol abuse issues. The Student-Athlete Center for Excellence attempts, at the student-athletes' request, to offer those mental health services that enhance the student's values and aspirations. It is not uncommon for other SACE Team members, faculty, or administration to recommend that a student-athlete consult a SACE Team member.

From an academic standpoint, we meet with all incoming freshmen or "at-risk" student-athletes identified by the coaches or the admissions office. We discuss not only the importance of, but how to manage time. We consider the importance of study skills and prioritizing of tasks-academics, athletics, and socialization. Some of the tasks that we have taught or reviewed with student-athletes are class registration, career considerations and planning, and creating a daily schedule. Although some of

the tasks are second-nature to us, to many of our students they are underdeveloped skills. We encourage our students to interact regularly with the faculty, especially with respect to assignments and absences (due to illness or athletic competition) to promote effective and responsible communication skills.

PERSONAL VALUES COMPONENT

Regarding the third component, as outlined by Havighurst, the personal values and aspirations component, the SACE counselor attempts to make contact with all athletic teams during the course of the academic year. During this introduction, the athletes are familiarized not only with the person but the place where they can access assistance. Numerous students realize that they must find ways to cope with a depressed or eating disordered roommate—these athletes do not want to “abandon” the friend, but realize their own goals are being effected. Other facets of personal aspirations and values that the SACE counselor addresses are individuating from parents; clarifying boundaries with family, friends, and romantic relationships; and discussing ways to integrate healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with anger or sadness.

As with all of the other components, this one does not stand alone, but often effects and is affected by the other components of the biological base and the psychosocial, or cultural milieu, in which the students operate. The goal of the Student Athlete Center for Excellence is to continue to define and refine what is effective for the students in accomplishing their personal, athletic, and academic aspirations.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

At East Stroudsburg University's Student-Athlete Center for Excellence, our model is used not only to assist the athletes in their transition through the developmental tasks but also to assist them in establishing life-long habits that allow them to achieve their potential in the mental, physical, and intellectual realms after graduation when they depart from the university environment. SACE provides a comfortable, non-threatening place where they can come and discuss issues with assured confidentiality. The student-athletes know that their information will not be used by the coach to effect status or playing time; hence, they can work on what they consider are their tasks without the repercussions of parent, coaches, or professors.

From a practical standpoint, the SACE model provides us with unlimited potential for use in a variety of applications. In it's most basic form, the SACE is a beneficial resource for assisting those student-athletes identified as “at risk.” However, in pushing the envelope in developing applications, the SACE can be utilized to benefit all student-athletes, the general student population and high school students preparing to make the transition to college.

In order to reach a greater percentage of student-athletes, the NCAA CHAMPS/ Life Skills program can be coordinated through the SACE. What better way to provide programming for student-athletes in areas such as personal health and nutrition issues, academics, and athletic performance, than through a model consisting of an exercise physiologist, psychologist, academic coordinator, sports psychologists and faculty members? By utilizing the SACE model, the expertise of all of these individuals can be drawn upon to enrich and enhance the education and development of the student-

athlete. In order to provide the greatest service possible to the university, we plan on providing these programming opportunities for all students, not just student-athletes.

In order to emphasize the importance of preparing for the transition to college life, the model can be utilized as an outreach tool for local high school students and their parents or guardians. By emphasizing the importance of dealing with developmental issues before student-athletes arrive for their freshman year, we can draw attention to the areas that are most crucial to success of the student-athlete. Clinics for high school student-athletes, a highly developed presentation for recruited student-athletes and a general resource for the local community are all examples of ways in which the model can be used as an outreach tool within the framework of the university and local communities.

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