

## **The Success Model: A Student Athlete Educational Model Designed to Improve Academic Performance Through the Utilization of Athletic Transferable Skills**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Success Model has been developed to assist educators and counselors improve the way they prepare student athletes for academic, athletic, and future career success. The Success Model is made up of four interrelating components: (a) Self-management, (b) Note-taking, (c) Test-taking, and (d) Career Resources. This article will explore why the Success Model is needed and how athletic transferable skills can be used as the building blocks for teaching student athletes how to succeed in classroom as well as all areas of life.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although some student athletes take advantage of all the opportunities afforded to them in college, many do not. Mandatory study halls set up by athletic departments to help coaches and academic counselors keep track of student athletes, but may not be enough to prepare them for their future. The proposed Success Model has been designed to assist student athletes by giving them the training needed to excel in the classroom as well as after graduation. The four-part model presented in this article has been designed to prepare student athletes for life by incorporating athletic transferable skills as a learning tool.

With such an enormous emphasis on intercollegiate sports today, many people are wondering if today's college athletes should be called "athlete-students" instead of "student-athletes." The harsh reality is that although some student athletes view sport participation as secondary to an education, many do not and instead focus on participating in sports at the next level (i.e., professional or Olympic level). Murry Sperber (1999), a professor of English and American studies at Indiana University stated that, "Juries will discard the NCAA's student-athlete label and find that the players in college sports are, in fact, full-time athletes who happen to attend school as a secondary pastime." Although the responsibility for an education essentially relies on the student athlete, educators can assist by incorporating the proposed model into the existing system.

During the past several years a significant amount of research has suggested that special academic counseling interventions are necessary for the intercollegiate

student athlete population (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Gabbard & Halischak, 1993; Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Jordan & Denson, 1990). The Triad Assisting, Advising, and Assessment Model is a multifaceted approach designed to meet the needs of intercollegiate student athletes who are placed in the dual roles of college student and athlete (Stier, 1992). The model emphasizes the importance of athletic departments taking a proactive approach in assisting student athletes in the areas of academic, personal, social, and athletic dimensions of college life.

A second intervention some athletic departments have implemented is peer mentoring programs. The HENS Peer Mentoring Program developed at The University of Delaware reported success in assisting first-year student athletes encountering academic, athletic, social, and emotional transition issues (Morrissey & Helfrich, 1996). The idea behind HENS is to use third through fifth year student athletes as peer mentors to lend support to freshman student athletes.

The Life Development Intervention (LDI) psychoeducation model has been designed to enhance personal competence by teaching life skills to athletes (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). The LDI focuses on teaching life skills such as communicating with others, becoming self-reliant, and seeking and utilizing available resources. The program has better prepared student athletes adjusting to the transition to college. The central strategy of this program is teaching goal setting as a means of empowerment.

The Success Model has been built upon the aforementioned programs and is attractive to student athletes because of its uniqueness of using athletic transferable skills as the building blocks to teach student athletes how to become successful in the classroom, the playing field, and life after sports. Athletic transferable skills (Meeker, Stankovich, & Kays, 1999) are defined as the shifting of an athletic skill from sport to another area of life (i.e., academic, career, relationships). Athletic transferable skills can be used as a teaching tool (i.e., building rapport by speaking their own language), to increase self-confidence (i.e., showing student athletes how valuable their athletic skills are to future employers), and to expand social support (i.e., using athletic transferable skills as a starting point for helping student athletes cope with a career ending loss or sport retirement).

The model described in this article can be easily adapted to already existing mandatory study halls, or can be used primarily with at-risk student athletes. The four components described here (Self-Management, Note-Taking, Test-Taking, and Career Resources) can be used as part of annual educational workshops or can be used as a program offered throughout the school year.

## **THE SUCCESS MODEL**

### **Component 1: Self-Management**

Perhaps the cornerstone of a student athletes' success on and off the playing field is self-management. It is critical that student-athletes develop basic skills as early as possible in their college career to better manage athletic, academic and personal responsibilities. Undoubtedly, student-athletes schedules are extremely demanding with their athletic requirements (practice, meetings, competition, travel) and academic responsibilities (class attendance, exams, study table, maintaining

eligibility standards), not to mention their personal life, which includes the social interaction of a typical college student.

In order for a student-athlete to succeed in the aforementioned areas of college, it is vital that they manage their time appropriately. Time management is one skill that can increase a student-athletes success in college. The approach that student athletes take toward their athletic responsibilities must transcend to their academic areas if success is to be achieved in both. For example, the structured schedule of a student-athlete requires a lot of discipline. And typically, student-athletes make certain not to miss any of their athletic responsibilities such as practices, meetings, and travel for competition. Discipline is also an athletic transferable skill. If this same disciplined approach is used in the academic domain, such as attending class, studying, and meeting with tutors and advisors, there may be less concern for ineligibility or poor academic performance.

Student athletes feel they have little or no time to be productive in areas outside of athletics. Skills to improve self-management can be taught beginning their freshman year in order to be successful in both the classroom and their sport. Proper goal setting is another skill that can be taught to assist in this development. This too is an athletic transferable skill that student athletes are familiar with through their sport participation (i.e., lettering as a freshman, earning a starting position, making all conference, etc.) The basic idea behind goal setting is that individual's behaviors are guided primarily by their intentions (Locke, 1968). Goals serve a number of functions necessary for self-management. Not only do goals mobilize and sustain behavior, they also provide direction and help with maintaining commitment. For example, having an athletic goal such as earning a starting position provides direction, keeps athletes focused with training and skill acquisition, and inevitably gives them a target to reach.

The problem with goals, however, is that if they are not set effectively, they will often never be fulfilled. Most student-athletes and people in general, want to set goals that lead to success, but simply do not know how. In order to set effective goals, student athletes must first become familiar with what they want to achieve. Student athletes must understand their personal priorities before they can begin to effectively set goals. If participating in college athletics is a top priority, then the student athlete must be able to maintain the minimum academic standards to be able to do this. Having a priority such as majoring in eligibility with hopes of a professional career can lead to challenging times for athletes and academic counselors alike. According to Meyer and Gellatly, (1988), setting difficult, challenging goals lead to higher performance norms and therefore greater effort. Setting "easy" goals that are not challenging may actually impede progress toward success in college and life. If a student athlete's goal is maintaining eligibility, then he/she may only put in enough effort to reach that goal. This minimal effort allows the student-athlete causes the student-athlete to not pursue higher grades that could be attained with more challenging goals such as making progress toward graduation.

Weekly meetings with an academic counselor to assist in the training of self-management skills are a necessity. A written contract at the beginning of the semester to improve academic performance signed by the student-athlete, counselor, and coach will help in this process. This contract should clearly state the student's goals for academic performance for the semester. To assist in ownership and teach



responsibility, let the student-athlete help in setting these particular goals. Maintaining written goals on paper, similar to athletic team goals is a good start. Improving academic performance through setting goals that are measurable is extremely important. Goals can be measured by keeping recording logs (class attendance, hours spent studying, meeting with tutors). Maintaining written logs and a weekly schedule of events as well as an academic planner for the semester is critical. Concentrating on short-term goals such as talking once a week with instructors and attending all study table sessions are very important in this process.

In sport, athletes set weekly and even daily goals for practice to improve their performance for competition. The same approach is encouraged here. Simple weekly goals such as attending all classes, speaking to instructors, attending a study session, meeting with an academic advisor/counselor will prove beneficial in this process. The important thing here is to reward the student-athlete when an academic goal is accomplished. Perhaps calling a parent with a good report or being recognized by a coach for academic accomplishment. Maybe reducing some time on the weekly academic schedule when a goal is achieved can be a reward. Something more tangible such as an Academic Achievement Certificate can be given to the student-athlete after semester's end.

Goal setting is an athletic transferable skill that will not only help student-athletes with self-management, but also allow them to succeed in all areas of life, including school, career and personal relationships. Student-athletes should not underestimate how useful goal setting skills are inside and outside of sports. The same focus and discipline used to achieve athletic goals can help you become successful off the playing surface as well.

## **Component 2: Note-Taking**

Although it may be surprising at first, note taking is actually an athletic transferable skill that will serve student athletes in the classroom as well as on the field. By learning how to effectively take and organize notes, student athletes can more clearly focus on important points and details (both in the classroom and in their sport). Often how well we remember is dependent on how we process information. Student athletes must take a self-inventory and closely examine their own learning patterns, including whether they are visual, auditory, or kinesthetic processors, and whether they are left- or right-brain dominant (Matte & Henderson, 1995).

Researchers have discovered that people typically learn information as (a) visual, (b) auditory, and (c) kinesthetic processors (Brook, 1989). Visual processors tend to be fast thinkers, use visual descriptions, and find charts, pictures, and diagrams most useful when learning new information. Auditory processors are better at listening and find lectures, discussions, and group study to be most advantageous when acquiring information. Kinesthetic processors are more feeling and touch oriented, and find hands-on projects that apply to real-life situations as their best way to learn.

As student athletes better understand with their particular learning style, they can begin to employ a personal note taking strategy that will best suit their needs. For example, a common right-brain note taking style is developing spidergrams, idea maps, or concept maps (Matte & Henderson, 1995; Longman & Atkinson, 1991; McWhorter, 1992). These methods use pictures to show relationships among concepts

and can be used to organize text chapters, lecture notes, and play books. On the other hand, a student athlete who is more left-brained may want to incorporate a more traditional looking outline note taking method such as the Cornell or Modified outline methods (Ellis, 1994; Matte & Henderson, 1995). This method is more structured in that student athletes organize their notes in an outline-format leaving ample room for questions and lecture summaries.

By learning brain dominance and processor style, student athletes can develop their own learning styles that will best serve them in the classroom as well as in their sport. In the classroom, student athletes will be able to better organize and understand their notes and inevitably perform better on examinations. On the field, student athletes will benefit by being able to better understand plays and strategies that will lead to improved performance. In both cases, student athletes will be able to “work smarter, not harder” and will have more time to themselves while becoming more productive as a student and athlete.

### **Component 3: Test-Taking**

The third component of the Success Model is test taking. Preparing for an athletic competition is very similar to preparing for a test- both require knowledge and/or skill acquisition and arousal control. Athletic pre-game preparation is actually an athletic transferable skill that can be used when preparing to take an examination. We have already discussed several ways in which people organize and process information in the Note taking section, and would now like to introduce methods in which student athletes can relax and control their nerves before examinations and athletic competitions.

Many student athletes believe they have to “pump up” as much as they can to perform their best on a test or in a game. No longer do scientists support this method of improving performance. Instead, there seems to be an optimal arousal zone that is somewhere in the middle between low and high arousal. The Inverted-U Hypothesis (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) states that there is an optimal level of arousal for every behavior, with values above and below likely to create poor performance. Many student athletes refer to this optimal arousal zone as “the zone,” or being in the “flow” state of mind (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) when talking about an above average performance in sports. Student athletes can be trained to perform at their optimal arousal zone in the classroom and on the field by learning simple anxiety-reducing techniques.

There are numerous ways in which a student athlete can reduce anxiety before an examination or athletic event, including progressive relaxation, breath control, and cognitive-affective stress management training. Although there are many variations of progressive relaxation (Weinberg & Gould, 1995), the basic premise behind the procedure is to sequentially tighten and relax muscle groups in the body. The purpose of this is exercise to help people learn to feel tension in their muscles and then be able to let go of this tension. With practice, student athletes can learn how to relax their bodies in only a few moments by learning cue words such as “calm” that will lead to a more relaxed state.

A second method of arousal control is breath control (Nideffer, 1985). When people breath in a smooth and deep manner, they are much more apt to perform in

their optimal arousal zone. Conversely, it is almost impossible to achieve peak performance when breathing is short and irregular. Student athletes can learn how to improve their breathing by focusing on their diaphragm and not the chest. Weinberg and Gould (1995) provide a thorough description of how to incorporate an effective breathing technique before an event.

A third way to deal with excess anxiety is to learn cognitive-affective stress-management training (SMT), developed by Ron Smith (1980). SMT is a skills program designed to teach a person an integrated way of coping with stress by using relaxation and cognitive components (i.e., self-talk, cognitive restructuring). Student athletes can learn how to combine breathing and relaxation techniques with rational cognitive statements (i.e., failing this one particular exam will *not* be the end of the world!) to lead to maximum performance.

In addition to the physical and mental arousal control methods of training offered here, student athletes can also learn basic test taking strategies to help with essay, true-false, matching, and multiple choice questions (Ellis, 1994; Matte & Henderson, 1995). Perhaps the most appealing notion about teaching student athletes the test taking anxiety-reducing methods described above is the fact that they are athletic transferable skills. Not only can student athletes improve performance in the classroom, but on the field as well!

#### **Component 4: Career Resources**

The last component of the Success Model is career training. In order for student-athletes to achieve academic success, it is important to utilize the career resources available to them in college. Unfortunately, student-athletes and students in general do not always take advantage of these services. Some simply do not know how to go about this process, whereas other feel it is a waste of time or don't feel it is important at this time in their lives. According to Hoyt & Lester, (1995), approximately 25% of college students *never* used any career resources or information while pursuing an education. With so much time spent focusing on their sport, many student-athletes do not even think about career training until they are at the end of their college career. Student-athletes must understand that career training is in no way meant to interfere or challenge their possible desire to pursue a professional or Olympic athletic career. In fact, the career training is meant to help these student-athletes with their career, no matter what career they are thinking about pursuing. Regardless of the occupation a student-athlete may choose, it is important to know about the career development process. And again, this process should start as soon as one enters college.

Career assessment instruments, particularly computer programs such as SIGI PLUS and Discover (Sampson & Johnson, 1993), are very helpful when student-athletes are exploring their personality traits, skills, values, interests, and aptitudes relating to career decision making. These programs are usually free to college students and available in most career offices on campus.

It is also important to explore and know realities of the current job market, including becoming a pro athlete, future trends, and gain accurate information about careers. The amount of information on the Internet today is almost endless. With technology increasing at a rapid speed, expect to find an abundance of information on the web with more appearing everyday. It is critical that student-athletes activate

an e-mail account and learn to use the Internet to help in their career search.

Learning how to network is another skill that should be incorporated in a student-athlete's daily life. A student-athlete's career network is endless, but they must first learn how to utilize this in their career process. Networking is considered the single most important aspect of job hunting. Student-athletes should be encouraged to conduct informational interviews throughout their college career to explore occupations interesting to them. Since their work experience is typically limited due to their year round commitment to sport, recommending athletes to volunteer in activities outside of their sport will prove beneficial in their career planning and preparation.

Providing career workshops for student-athletes or simply having them attend ones offered by the university such as Career Days and Resume Writing Seminars will also aid in their development. In addition, student-athletes should learn how to dress and prepare for job interviews and practice these skills by participating in mock interviews. Student athletes can also increase their confidence with potential employers by learning the value of assertiveness and identifying their athletic transferable skills and applying these during interviewing.

Utilizing alumni is also a tremendous resource in the career development process. Most colleges and athletic departments have directories or databases of alumni that are willing to assist current student-athletes in their career process. Since these individuals volunteer their time and services, they are accommodating to the student-athletes. Many Athletic Academic Support Services now have Life Skills Counselors or Career Counselors to work with their student-athletes.

It is extremely important to know how to use career resources in a practical manner such as learning how to write an appropriate resume, conduct informational and job interviews and network effectively. All of these skills will help student-athletes get internships or summer jobs during their years as a student-athlete and will eventually be a great asset when graduating and preparing for the next stage in their life regardless of what career opportunity they pursue. More institutions need to implement career assistance programs that teach student-athletes about their unique identity, how to utilize athletic transferable skills, and how to train them to get into the career game (Meeker, Stankovich, and Kays, 1999).

## **SUMMARY**

The Success Model is a proactive approach to working with today's college student-athletes. The purpose of this model is to improve the academic performance and overall well-being of college student-athletes. Emphasis is placed on incorporating athletic transferable skills into the academic domain that will ultimately lead to life success. The model is comprehensive and reflects the changing times that are occurring in the world of intercollegiate athletics.

The Success Model is easy to implement and is designed to be "menu-driven." Since every university differs with respect to academic setting (i.e. semesters, quarters), athletic department resources, and requirements, The Success Model can be used according to the specific need of each school. For example, some schools may want to implement this model into their freshman orientation as a quarter or

semester-long program, while others may want to utilize it as a modification to study table or possibly as a weeklong workshop when working with at-risk student athletes. Furthermore, The Success Model can be modified and easily implemented into an existing course or educational workshops/seminars for student-athletes. The Success Model offers athletic departments a way to provide personalized programs that will help student-athletes succeed in college, and more importantly, succeed in all areas of life.



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