

## Sports Counseling Preparation at CACREP Institutions: An Initial Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*Interest in the field of sports counseling is growing in both mental health and athletics communities. Specialized sports counseling preparation has been emphasized in order to work efficiently with athletes. However, it is not clear whether counseling programs have the curriculum, faculty, or departmental support for those interested in becoming sports counselors. This survey of counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and other Related Educational Programs (CACREP) examines the availability of training opportunities for counseling students interested in specialization in sports counseling and the attitudes of the counseling faculty toward sports counseling. Findings reveal a lack of training opportunities in sports counseling at CACREP accredited institutions and only moderate interest by faculty in establishing such programs.*

Interest in providing support services to athletes has increased at a rapid rate over the last twenty years (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). As a result, sports counseling has emerged as a specialization within the fields of counseling and sport psychology (Petitpas, Buntrock, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1995). Petrie, Diehl, and Watkins (1995) suggested sport psychology is an "emerging domain" in the field of psychology. This specialization in counseling athletes was a result of the growing concern over developmental problems faced by many student-athletes. These developmental difficulties include academic, social, and personal issues of the athlete.

Although specialized counselor training has been emphasized for working with athletes, it has not been clear whether counseling programs have faculty or departmental support for those interested in research and training for sports counseling. LeUnes and Hayward (1990) addressed these issues in their survey of clinical psychology programs accredited by the American Psychological Association. Their results indicated that sport psychology was viewed positively, yet course offerings were sparse and plans for future classes were limited. Counseling psychology programs holding membership in the Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs (CCPTP) were surveyed by Petrie and Watkins (1994) to determine the types of training opportunities available to counseling psychology students. Their results indicated that counseling psychology programs do not generally offer, or plan to offer, a course in sport psychology. However, respondents indicated that there would be a high level of openness and acceptance to sport psychology research

and training for faculty and students. In a follow-up study, Petrie et al. (1994) indicated that counseling psychologists had received virtually no coursework or supervision in the field, yet many had worked professionally with athletes. These two surveys provided valuable information concerning training, but were limited by covering only psychology programs.

From the counseling perspective, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) first became involved with sports counseling in the Counselors of Tomorrow Project (Nejedlo, Arrendondo, & Benjamin, 1985). Athletic counseling was defined as "a process, which attempts to assist individuals in maximizing their personal, academic, and athletic potential. This is accomplished through a proactive, growth-oriented approach incorporating the principles of counseling, career development, movement science, psychology, and human development" (Nejedlo et al., 1985, p.5). According to Nejedlo et al. (1985), sports counselors would have specialized knowledge and skills beyond basic counselor preparation. Following the work of the Counselors of Tomorrow Project, Miller and Wooten (1995) proposed the development of an area of specialized studies in sports counseling which included training experiences based on the Nejedlo et al. (1985), paper and selected aspects from the certification requirements from the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) (1990).

Petitpas et al. (1995), suggested the future seems bright for those counselors interested in working with athletes. Job opportunities in counseling athletes are increasing due to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) mandate, calling on college institutions to devote more resources to the academic and personal development of student-athletes. In addition, the United States Olympic Foundation has funded a program to assist elite athletes in career planning upon retirement from active competition. A study conducted by Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, and Murphy (1992) found that 75% of the elite athletes they surveyed were interested in attending career assistance programs.

Fundamental training in counseling includes the development of a knowledge base and skill set that can be readily adapted to address specific issues in sports counseling. These include areas such as career development, alcohol and drug prevention, life skills training, and wellness. Nonetheless, questions still remain about the availability of training opportunities for students interested in sports counseling and secondly, how amenable counseling programs are to faculty or students interested in sports counseling training and research. Due to rising interest in sports counseling and increased employment opportunities for sports counselors, these authors thought it imperative to investigate the interest of sports counseling training in counselor education programs. The purpose of this study was to (a) ascertain the extent of sports counseling coursework and training for counseling students, and (b) assess the receptiveness of counseling program faculty to incorporating sports counseling into counselor training.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The 98 counseling programs sampled were accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and other Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The CACREP representatives from these programs were identified via a mailing list from CACREP headquarters and subsequently sent the following: (a) a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, (b) the survey questionnaire, and (c) a prepaid envelope in which to return the completed survey. After an initial mailing and a follow-up postcard, mailed two weeks later, a return rate of 64.28% ( $N=63$ ) was attained.

### Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire was modeled after surveys developed by LeUnes and Heyward (1990) for clinical psychology programs and after Petrie and Watkins' 1994 study of counseling psychology programs. The questionnaire developed for this study consisted of 14 questions addressing the following: (a) the current status of sports counseling in CACREP programs; (b) counseling faculty member's attitudes (as perceived by liaisons) toward teaching, training, and research in sports counseling; and (c) the identification of sports counseling as an interdisciplinary or specialty area in counselor education. Six of the questions required a yes/no response, and seven questions were scored on 7-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (not at all acceptable) to 7 (totally acceptable). A space for comments was provided at the end of the survey.

## RESULTS

At the time of the survey, none of the counselor education programs that responded offered preparation in sports counseling at the undergraduate level, Masters level, or Doctoral level. While a few undergraduate and doctoral programs did not respond to the item, 94% to 100% of all respondents reported that they did not offer such programs. In addition, no plans for future classes in sports counseling were indicated at either the undergraduate or Masters level. One doctoral program indicated plans for developing a course in sports counseling during the next two years. Respondents indicated it would be acceptable ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) for department faculty to develop and offer a course in sports counseling.

The responses indicated that 40% of the programs surveyed had a favorable perception of faculty being interested in sports counseling. It was reported that 39% of the programs have students interested in sports counseling at the Master's level and 15% reported having doctoral level students interested in the area. According to the data reported by the liaisons, it would be acceptable for faculty to pursue research in sports counseling ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). Furthermore, liaisons reported it would be acceptable for their graduate students to: (a) have interest or want to specialize in sports counseling ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), (b) propose sports counseling research for a Master's thesis ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) or doctoral dissertation ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), and (c) take classes related to sports counseling (e.g., exercise physiology) in addition to the CACREP counseling program requirements ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ).

Only 21% of the programs surveyed reported having practicum or internship sites available with a sport counseling focus. However, liaisons reported positively ( $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) toward the idea of students participating in sports counseling focused experiences.

Programs were asked whether an interdisciplinary program (i.e., counseling and exercise/sport science) or a program solely associated with counseling would offer the most comprehensive training for individuals interested in sports counseling. Of the respondents, 73% suggested that interdisciplinary programs provided the most comprehensive training in sports counseling, 25% suggested that specific counseling programs offered the best sports counseling training, and 2% of respondents indicated that they did not know which of the two programs would offer the most comprehensive training for individuals interested in sports counseling.

### DISCUSSION

The authors recognize the general limitations associated with survey research and the biases identified with surveying CACREP liaisons as opposed to entire program faculty. However, the high return rate, consistent responses, and a field tested instrument lead the authors to believe that the data may be representative of the prevailing attitudes at other counseling programs.

It appears that there are some discrepancies between the suggested need for training sports counselors and the actual training opportunities available to individuals interested in providing sports counseling. A comprehensive review of the literature on the field of sports counseling indicates an increased interest in sports counseling as a specialization within the fields of counseling and psychology. In addition, there is increased interest by the athletic community in addressing issues faced by athletes through the assistance of counselors and psychologists. However, it is suggested that many of the mental health professions that are currently providing support to athletes lack specific training in the field of sports counseling. Results of this investigation support this suggestion. None of the CACREP institutions surveyed provided specific training in sports counseling to students at either the Masters or Doctoral levels, even with expressed interest from students.

Perhaps part of the dilemma facing programs in providing such training comes from a lack of direction in terms of preparing students in sports counseling. CACREP institutions adhere to specific standards for preparing counselors in various specialty areas and may not wish to venture into the development of new specialty areas without set guidelines. Thus, the development of specific guidelines for the preparation of sports counselors (and endorsed by CACREP) may encourage CACREP accredited institutions to offer students the option of specializing in sports counseling at the Masters or Doctoral levels. As an alternative, CACREP institutions could tailor the academic preparation of their students in cooperation with other units on campus, such as the sports science faculty, resulting in academic preparation similar to that proposed by Miller and Wooten (1995).

On the positive side, there is obvious acceptance of the institutions surveyed for the development of courses on sports counseling and for research efforts regarding sports counseling. It seems possible for students in counseling who are interested

in sports counseling to tailor their training, with cooperation from sports science faculty, to develop research projects focusing on work with athletes. It also seems possible that increased visibility of the field of sports counseling within graduate programs in counseling may encourage the development of course offerings by interested faculty members. It is possible that a contributing factor to the lack of specific coursework and training in sports counseling is the relative invisibility of the topic of sports counseling during the fundamental coursework of CACREP approved counseling programs. Perhaps if sports counseling were discussed with students as a potential specialization within counseling programs, students might feel more supported in pursuing such a specialization. Such efforts could enhance the literature base of research with athletes at all levels, from elementary aged students in youth sports programs to elite and professional athletes.

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