

## **INTEGRATING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES: POSSIBLE PATHWAYS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Student Services for Athletes (SSA) is a comprehensive, integrated program of support services for student-athletes. The services and components of the SSA program are first briefly described. Then, the value of adopting an integrated approach to support services is discussed, and case examples are used to describe ways in which each component of the SSA model serves as a point of intervention, while suggesting how other components are integrated and potentially modified.

### **INTEGRATING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES: POSSIBLE PATHWAYS**

Participation in intercollegiate athletics places demands upon students that exceed those placed upon non-athletes (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Lottes, 1991; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). The Student Services for Athletes (SSA) program was initiated in response to one university's recognition of these unique demands (Jordan & Denson, 1990). It has been suggested that student-athletes are at particular risk for experiencing various forms of psychological distress and developmental crises; however, they have been found to underutilize counseling and student development services in comparison to other students (Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). One reason for this may be that academic and athletic demands limit the student-athlete's access to these services. The SSA program's original mission was to provide increased access for student-athletes to basic student development services (i.e., counseling and workshops/programs), by offering these services at times and places that were more convenient for student-athletes.

### **PHILOSOPHY OF THE PROGRAM**

Philosophically, the SSA program is grounded in a perspective recognizing that the developmental tasks of college students include becoming autonomous and competent, consolidating identity, and establishing values and career goals (Chickering, 1975). Student-athletes face similar demands (Chartrand & Lent, 1987), yet they also face many barriers that may make meeting these demands more difficult (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991). Student Services for Athletes assists student-athletes with reaching their fullest potential as students, athletes, and people.

Although the athletic environment may preclude this at times, Ferrante and Etzel (1991) have suggested it is essential that student-athletes have opportunities to assume personal responsibility for learning and for managing their lives. From the program's inception, fostering the development of personal responsibility and encouraging active learning have been fundamental to the SSA philosophy. Therefore, the staff of SSA is initially active in providing student-athletes with considerable structure. Structure typically takes the form of information, suggestions, and advice that will help them successfully navigate the university bureaucracy.

For example, SSA will direct new students, when necessary, to appropriate services and offices on campus (e.g., to the academic services center for assistance with study skills). The program undertakes special efforts to inform new students about university policies and procedures (e.g., reminders about deadlines and steps for changing registration). In both instances, upperclass student-athletes are expected to already be knowledgeable in these areas. The staff of SSA also is more active as an advocate for new student-athletes in their interactions with faculty. Over time, however, the SSA role changes; staff members discuss strategies student-athletes might use as they interact with faculty on their own behalf. In addition to disseminating this information through direct contact with student-athletes, SSA also publishes a handbook and information guide, plus a quarterly newsletter. Both are distributed to all student-athletes.

As student-athletes become more familiar with the university system, the SSA staff generally takes a less directive, more consultative role, encouraging them to utilize the skills and knowledge they have already acquired. In essence, the program maximizes student autonomy and values student competence (Chickering, 1975). However, as new developmental issues and challenges arise, the program responds in ways appropriate for the developmental stage of the individual student-athlete. For example, for student-athletes nearing the end of college ability, issues of athletic retirement and finding a job become important (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). The SSA program offers workshops addressing athletic retirement, and staff members work closely with individual student-athletes desiring assistance with developing resumes, cover letters, and interview skills, and finding ways to utilize transferable athletic skills in the world of work.

The SSA staff is also very active in educating student-athletes about—and helping them cope with—important adjustment issues. Typical adjustment

issues include coping with separation from home and family, grief and loss, and family concerns; forming healthy intimate relationships; and adapting to more rigorous academic and athletic demands.

### PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND SERVICES

Since its inception, the mission of SSA has gradually expanded to include academic monitoring services, implementation and administration of a study table program, and teaching. Commensurate with the expansion of the program's mission has been an increase in staff size from one part-time coordinator to five, including a director, programming coordinator, doctoral interns, and graduate assistants.

The SSA program consists of five major components or service areas. The consultation, counseling, and programming functions have been described more fully elsewhere (Jordan & Denson, 1990). The academic monitoring function has also been described in Jordan and Denson (1990) but has since expanded to include the development, implementation, and administration of a mandatory study table program for all first-year student-athletes.

The fifth component, teaching, was recently introduced to the program. This function is fulfilled through the SSA program's offering two sections of a two-credit, semester-long orientation course. The course, "Freshman Seminar," is offered through the Department of Physical Education and is required for all first-year scholarship student-athletes and recommended for all other first-year student-athletes. Other sections are open to all other students. To maintain academic integrity, course requirements and grading standards are rigorous and consistent across all sections. The course uses both didactic and experimental methods. SSA staff members who act as instructors present information about a variety of topics of importance to student-athletes including time management, study skills, career development, and relationships. Guest speakers from various departments and offices in the university community are invited to discuss the roles of their units.

Consistent with the program's philosophy, students in the course assume some responsibility for their own learning by keeping journals and writing reports. In their journals, students write about their adjustments and transitions, as well as writing responses to assigned readings. In addition to the opportunities for polishing writing skills and encouraging reflective thinking, the journals also provide the instructors with a chance to become more familiar with the individual student-athletes and their concerns. The journals also serve as a channel through which instructors can communicate with and respond to student-athletes about their concerns, experiences, and feelings. The written reports require students to identify a unit or service on campus (e.g., public safety, career planning and placement, women's affairs, or dean of students), conduct an interview with a representative of that unit, and write about the services offered by that unit and about their interview experience. The reports are then shared with all members of the class. This process is an efficient way of disseminating important information, since it is impossible to invite representatives from every university office to speak

in the class. Other benefits of this process include the establishment of ties with various units on campus and the development of the student-athlete's interactional skills with others outside of the athletic arena.

### INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

Because the scope of services provided by SSA is clearly broad but its resources limited, the integration of services and the efficient allocation of resources become critical. For example, interactions in the classroom with student-athletes may suggest the need for covering a new issue or topic. Where in the existing framework should the new topic be covered so that it reaches the most student-athletes in a meaningful way? Is it an idiosyncratic concern best addressed in individual counseling? Should it be offered as an extra workshop, with a specialized audience, but requiring extra staff and student-athlete time commitments? Should it be covered in class with a captive audience? Could it be addressed as part of a mandatory study table? Or should it be included in a general orientation meeting with the biggest, but most diverse, audience? It may be feasible and indeed desirable to address some new issues and topics in already existing formats, such as classes or orientation meetings, because there is no additional time requirement for the staff or student-athletes. An integrative approach to providing services for student-athletes seems uniquely suited to address these issues in an era of increasingly limited resources.

### Developmental Aspects of the Model

Aside from questions of efficiency, it is also important that the placement of new topics and issues in the model allows for discriminations to be made according to the developmental levels of the student-athletes. That is, does the placement of the topic or issue take into account that freshman student-athletes have different developmental needs from sophomores, who in turn differ from seniors? Support services must be flexible enough to meet student-athletes at their developmental stages.

Career issues provide one particularly salient example of developmental differences among student-athletes (Riffie & Alexander, 1991) and how an integrated model such as SSA responds to different developmental tasks and needs. Some freshmen, perhaps still basking in glory of their high school athletic successes, may operate on the assumption that professional sports will be their career. Therefore, they may be oblivious to the need for thoughtful career planning. Others who are more realistic and thus cognizant of the need for sound planning may be in the early stages of the career development process: self-assessment of interests, skills, and values; and gathering career information. The former group requires a different level of interaction from the latter. For the first group, considerably more energy must be devoted to impressing upon them the need for career development before the actual process can meaningfully begin.

Career concerns may also become more salient as the prospects of a career in professional sports diminish along with collegiate eligibility (Pinkerton,

Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). Thus, with time, the focus of career concerns shifts from choice to implementation of choice and then expands to emphasize skills transferable from choice to implementation of choice and then expands to emphasize skills transferable from athletics to work (Riffée & Alexander, 1991). Closely related to career concerns is the issue of athletic retirement (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). Freshmen are not typically focused on this issue. However, for student-athletes nearing the end of their competitive years, athletic retirement is an important, complex, and potentially difficult transition that must be addressed by support service providers and the athletes with whom they work. Integrated models recognize this and provide appropriate programming.

### Benefits of Integrated Models

Adopting an integrated approach to services, such as that utilized by the SSA program and described below, is useful from the standpoint of efficient allocation of such scarce resources as staff time, student-athlete time, space and facilities, and materials. This is paramount in a time of shrinking university budgets in general, and intercollegiate athletics budgets in particular. Integrated approaches incorporate information from all of their components and have the flexibility to respond to the changing developmental stages of student-athletes. Given the value of integrated approach to services, what might such a model look like and how might it work? The remainder of this paper is devoted to addressing these questions.

The guiding principle behind an integrative approach to providing support services to student-athletes is the use of feedback obtained through interactions with student-athletes, occurring within each of the components (teaching, counseling, consultation, academic monitoring, and programming) to shape and refine the remaining areas. Any of the components can be a starting point for intervention, and intervening through a specific area (e.g., academic monitoring) not only provides information about that area (academic progress), but also serves as a method of needs assessment and provides information about non-targeted domains. Changes in the targeted domain also affect non-targeted domains. The following five case examples serve as illustrations of this point. The examples demonstrate how the integrated model unfolded from a different starting point and suggest other possible networks and pathways.

## CASE EXAMPLES

### Academic Monitoring

Beginning with the academic monitoring function, the first example demonstrates the integration of the academic monitoring, teaching, consultation, programming, and counseling functions. A freshman football player was struggling academically, a problem which came to the attention of the staff through the academic monitoring process. The staff then consulted with his coaches, who revealed that he had experienced a family tragedy, which had adversely affected his

athletic performance. Classroom interactions with the student-athlete, as well as his journal writings, revealed a fuller picture of the extent of the distress. As a result of the consultations with the coaches and classroom interactions, he was then referred to the counseling center for help in dealing with his grief. This student-athlete's plight suggested that there was a need for SSA to offer workshops that address grief and loss issues.

### Consultation

In this example, the sequence of intervention began with the consultation function and integrated the counseling, teaching, and programming functions. The SSA programming coordinator was consulted by a student health service physician treating a student-athlete who was the victim of an acquaintance rape. The consultation then led to a referral for counseling for the victim. During the counseling process, it was revealed that the perpetrator was another student-athlete. This suggested that there was a critical need to educate student-athletes about healthy, respectful relationships—a need that was addressed through programs and class sessions that focused on relationships and sexual assault. Alternatively, the initial step (the consultation) could have led directly to incorporating sexual assault into the orientation course material or programs and workshops.

### Teaching

A student enrolled in the freshman orientation course expressed, in his journals and in direct interactions, feelings of confusion about career plans and being trapped in his major. A referral for career counseling was then made. The counseling referral then led to facilitating consultations between the student-athlete and his college. The counseling process could have also indicated need for more specific career development workshops, which other student-athletes in this situation could attend.

### Counseling

In this sequence, intervention initially occurred through the counseling function and integrated the consultation function. A freshman was referred directly by her coach to an SSA staff member for counseling. The initial meeting with the student-athlete revealed that she was experiencing extreme distress in reaction to her father's death. Because her athletic performance was adversely affected, it was necessary (with her prior consent, of course) to consult with the coach. The consultations were instrumental in helping the coach to deal more effectively with the student-athlete, while counseling helped the student-athlete to deal with her grief. The programming and academic monitoring functions were peripherally involved but could have easily played a much greater role in this example. Had her coach not referred the student-athlete for counseling because of concerns about her athletic performance, it is likely that the academic monitoring process would have revealed academic problems, which would have resulted in a referral to SSA.

## Workshops and Programs

A freshman runner attended the fall orientation meeting conducted by SSA. After learning about the SSA program and its connection with the counseling center, she decided to seek counseling for personal concerns, including a long-standing eating disorder. Had she persisted with counseling at that time, it is likely that consultations with her coaches and the sports medicine staff would have been necessary, given the chronicity of her eating disorder.

## CONCLUSIONS

The SSA program is a comprehensive, integrated model of support services for student-athletes. The SSA program and similar integrated models (Ferrante, Etzel, & Pinkney, 1991; Lottes, 1991) provide several advantages over models with critical, but discrete, components. Integrating the components of support services allows for greater flexibility in tailoring services to match the developmental stages student-athletes pass through. Integrated programs may also make it easier to maintain the "whole-istic" view (Lottes, 1991) of the student-athlete as an individual, student, and athlete. Conceptualizing a support service as an integrated whole parallels the recognition that the student-athlete—the consumer of the service—is also a unified, integrated being.

More efficient use of time and resources is another important benefit. Comprehensive programs that fail to integrate their components and services run the risk of duplicating some services at the expense of omitting others. Finally, as this paper has illustrated, integrated approaches capitalize on the natural interrelationships between the components. Any of the components or services may serve as the starting point for interventions with student-athletes. Intervening through any one component suggests ways that other components or services may be used to enhance the student-athlete experience. Using feedback from the various components is crucial if an integrated approach is to be used. The benefit of an integrated model to the student-athlete is the increased likelihood that his or her needs will be known, accessed, and addressed in ways that best suit that individual.

An integrated approach is clearly more than a program with many components or one that provides many services. Certainly programs that can provide a wide range of services and have many components are in an advantageous position to provide support services for student-athletes. Any support service program, no matter how limited its scope and resources, can adopt an integrated approach and is likely to be made more effective and efficient by doing so. Integrated approaches require flexible, creative thinking, and a willingness to explore the ways existing services and components may fit together.

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