

Aiding the Transition to College: A Peer Mentoring Program for First-Year Student-Athletes

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The use and potential effectiveness of peer mentoring programs for student-athletes is explored. Issues for first-year student-athletes are presented as they justify a need for additional support and guidance which older peers could effectively offer. This article describes one university's effort to support and increase student development in intercollegiate athletics through a peer mentoring pilot program. The program's design, implementation, and future directions are discussed.

Recent trends in the delivery of social support services on college campuses suggest that efforts are extending into many varied areas and topics, reaching specific populations of underserved or previously ignored groups (Giddon, 1988). One such subgroup receiving considerable attention is that of intercollegiate student-athletes. In addition to the normal developmental and existential concerns facing traditional college students (Chickering, 1975), these students have their own unique set of challenges and demands. Balancing new athletic and academic tasks, isolation from nonathlete peers, dealing with injury and career retirement, and facing additional interpersonal pressure from coaches, teammates, fans and media are well documented concerns (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Gabbard & Halischak, 1993; Parham, 1993; Stone & Strange, 1989; Wooten, 1994). Such issues may place student-athletes in an "at-risk" category as they may become more vulnerable to various forms of distress (Parham, 1993). Further, the limited time schedules of student-athletes reduce the opportunity and access to the campus resources that offer support. For such reasons, special counseling and academic services and interventions with this population are justified (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Gabbard & Halischak, 1993; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

When one considers the plight of the freshman student-athlete, foreseeable adjustment difficulties are illuminated. In general, today's college freshmen face increasingly significant and varied concerns in adjusting to the demands of a university environment (Schwitzer, McGovern & Robbins, 1991). These include leaving home for the first time, making new friends, encountering diversity in nearly all realms, academic-related stress and depression, new interpersonal and social dilemmas, and financial concerns. Further, research indicates that freshmen student-athletes face a particular variety of adjustments in their personal, social, academic and athletic realms (Stier, 1992). These adjustments are exacerbated by the time demands placed on them during their transition period. Handling these demands is especially important. A good start is critical for new student-athletes'

subsequent academic success (Willoughby, Willoughby, & Moses, 1991).

One method of aiding freshmen with their transition is the implementation of a peer mentoring program. A reason frequently given for utilizing peer programs in campus communities is to aid the freshman student's transition from high school to college (Giddon, 1988; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). It follows that a project that utilizes more experienced and older student-athletes may be a useful preventive intervention for meeting the task of supporting first-year student-athletes and promoting their college adjustment. Peer mentoring models imply a sharing of ideas and experiences between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced mentee. Such models integrate the concept of providing relevant information and coping strategies about particular issues with the notion of a socially supportive environment, all without strict reliance on authority figures or professionals.

Evaluative data exploring the impact of peer mentoring on first-year student-athletes' college adjustment is, to date, scarce. For the typical freshman transition, however, there are several evaluative studies examining adjustment outcomes, most of which tend to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of organized peer assistance. For example, in a quasi-experimental design, Russel and Skinkle (1990) found that a peer advising orientation program increased participants' perceived and actual involvement in the university community. Additionally, Fedor and Fedor (1992) evaluated a peer advising program with engineering students aimed at increasing awareness and easing the freshman transition. The program was found to be a very valuable and useful experience by freshmen participants as they reported feeling greater self-confidence and competence in handling their rigorous curriculum. Hill (1990) presented more evidence supporting peer helping as a means of dealing with transitional issues. Freshmen, transfer, and senior students were surveyed in regard to a pilot program that aimed to provide varied and more effective support, direction, and coping skills to its participants. One hundred percent of the peer help receivers indicated they would recommend the service to others and 93% felt their expectations of the program were fully realized. The notable strengths reported by participants were the additional support the program granted and a sense that they were not alone in facing critical life transitions.

Projects aimed at student-athlete populations are just beginning to appear in the literature so there is little data to evaluate merits and flaws. Whitner and Sanz (1988) describe a peer counseling program which was developed to promote mutual support, lowered defenses, and enhanced knowledge of the intercollegiate experience for all participating student-athletes. Student-athletes' self-reported satisfaction and enhancement, however, were not favorable. The program had a negative outcome and collapsed within a year. Identified problems included the following: (a) mentor commitment; (b) strained friendships and feelings of isolation from mentors who were being perceived by fellow student-athletes as specially treated by athletic coaching staff; (c) freshmen misconceptions of what was to be gained; and (d) freshmen doubts about peer counselors' credibility, sincerity, competency, and responsibility. The use of only six upper-class student-athletes was presented as a severe limitation to the project and its results.

In contrast, Condor (1993) describes a life skills program (CHAMPS) utilizing a peer assistance approach that appears quite successful in its efforts. This seven-week orientation program utilized discussion sessions led by fifth year post-eligible student-athletes who were experienced and open to talking about problems and conflicts, thus avoiding one of the pitfalls of the program described by Whitner and Sanz (1989). Becoming more focused, setting priorities, and helping to unify the athletic community as evidenced by mutual support at games and practices, were other benefits observed in this program. A formal evaluation of the effects, however, was not performed.

There is research to suggest that student-athletes are especially competent in particular topics for peer helping programs. Caron (1993) discusses a program that enlists student-athletes as role models and peer educators on issues of sexual assault and rape awareness. In addition, athletes have benefited from the intervention of nonathlete peers. Peer helpers and paraprofessionals in student affairs have addressed academic concerns and study habits in a short-term program with football players, resulting in improved grade-point averages and athletes' increased satisfaction with college academics (Greer, Moore, & Horton, 1986).

The literature does suggest some difficulty in distinguishing between peer support and peer counseling, and what students find most helpful. Generally, peer helpers are thought to be equally sought and competent for a variety of personal concerns for students (Carter & Janzen 1994; Giddon, 1988). However, research does indicate that for more serious concerns such as suicide, death, and pregnancy, students prefer turning to qualified professionals and that distinctions must be clear for helpers involved in peer counseling to know limitations and make appropriate referrals (Carter & Janzen, 1994). It is also evident that much of the existing literature is hindered by the limitations of survey research methods and by a focus on short-term effects. In summary, the literature suggests that student-athletes have unique needs that could well be addressed through a peer mentoring program.

In response to the need for special interventions for first-year student-athletes, the Student Services for Athletes (SSA) program of the University of Delaware, in cooperation with its Student-Athlete Advisory Board (SAAB), designed a peer mentoring program in January 1995. The Peer Mentoring Program was then implemented in the subsequent fall semester as a pilot program. Designed with the hope that older, more experienced student-athletes could share their personal views and relevant information in a supportive, friendly, and interactive environment, it was expected to create benefits to first-year student-athletes facing adjustment to college life. Following is a description of the program including its design, selection process, training, supervision, and initial implementation. The basic tasks of the program's development are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Program Development

Sequential Tasks	Description
1. Mentor Selection	Distribute application packets; evaluate responses; interview suitable candidates.
2. Mentor Training	Establish and present times and topics of mandatory training.
3. Training Evaluation	Survey mentors for feedback and reactions to training.
4. Group Formulation	Divide mentors into groups; obtain freshmen rosters and place with mentors accordingly.
5. Freshman Orientation	Inform freshmen of respective group numbers; survey freshmen regarding background and initial expectations of college; introduce freshmen to respective mentors.
6. Group Meetings	Mentors plan and host meetings.
7. Supervision	Mentors meet periodically with staff to monitor activities and freshmen receptivity, gain feedback, and make suggestions for improvement.
8. Program Improvement	Implement new ideas and changes.

Program Design and Goals

Design

In conjunction with Student Services for Athletes, four members of the Student-Athlete Advisory Board volunteered to help design the program. In general, the program design consisted of multiple small groups of first-year student-athletes led by three to four upper-class mentors. The size of these groups ranged from 10 to 15 first-year members. No group was without at least one male and one female mentor. In order to prevent any potential conflicts of interest that might exist within teams (e.g., competition for the same position, intrateam subgrouping) groups were arranged so that no mentor would lead a group with representatives from his or her team. This was also done with the thought that naturally developing mentor relationships may be fairly common within teams, and the mentoring program was to offer this type of relationship outside of one's sport.

In the design, groups met at least three times per semester. Meeting sites and topics were determined by individual mentors leading their respective groups. From the group encounters, one-on-one mentoring relationships developed as necessary.

Goals

The primary goal of the program was to enable successful junior and senior student-athletes to assist first-year student-athletes encountering academic, athletic, social, and emotional transition issues. Academically, freshmen were expected to profit from shared information concerning classes, professors, time

management, and study skills. Socially, the group environment gave freshmen student-athletes an opportunity to meet student-athletes on other teams. This arrangement also provided an atmosphere of shared concerns with which participants could identify and validate. Additionally, opportunities to reflect upon and appreciate individual similarities and differences were expected to occur. Mentors could act as sounding boards and a source of support as first-year students experimented with the new behaviors and developmental tasks associated with the freshman experience (dealing with new responsibilities and freedom, making decisions about drug/alcohol use, nutritional habits, sexual relationships, managing emotions, etc.). Athletically, the freshmen were expected to benefit from their mentors' successful modeling and experience in adjusting to the increased demands of college academics, while performing amidst new pressures from competitive athletics. Specifically, many mentors could help some freshmen with the idea of going from "the big fish in the small pond" to the "little fish in the big pond."

In addition to aiding the freshmen, there were other goals of the program. For the mentors, the program was to provide an opportunity for leadership experience and cooperative activity outside the arena of athletics, enhancing feelings of personal competence and self-esteem. Greater cultural and gender awareness, sensitivity, and understanding were anticipated. From a practical standpoint, it could promote their career development and serve as résumé-building experience. The athletic community might benefit as well, as the diversity in group design was expected to promote interest in other sport teams and an overall increase in school spirit. Also, if the program was successful, it could become a strong recruiting tool. Finally, all teams and programs should benefit competitively, in the athletic arena, with more well-adjusted freshmen.

Mentor Selection

The staff of the Student Services for Athletes program—with assistance from representatives of the Student-Athlete Advisory Board and coaches—promoted the pilot project during athletic team meetings in the spring of 1995. Applications were then sent out to current sophomores and juniors; seniors expecting to return for a fifth academic year were also invited to apply. Student-athletes on academic probation were deemed ineligible. Mailed during the first week of the spring semester, the application packet included an introductory memorandum, a program description outlining expectations and training, and an application asking for basic personal information (name, address, class, sport, etc.). Candidates also had to respond to three short essay questions. In general, these questions centered around the qualities one possessed which might enable him or her to be an effective mentor, the potential self rewards and gains from the mentoring experience, and relevant issues and concerns one might expect to encounter in working with first-year student-athletes.

Thirty-eight applications were received for the program. It should be noted that this was done after some recruiting of certain individuals for the program by the SSA staff, who hoped to obtain a population that was fairly gender-balanced.

There were 27 female and 11 male applicants. Upon review of these applications, all student-athletes with 2.5 cumulative grade point averages or higher were immediately accepted into the program. Five individuals below that mark were permitted to participate following interviews with SSA staff members, in which the athletes were cautioned that strict time management skills would be vital and that subsequent poor academic performance could call for their removal from the program. The rationale for including some student-athletes who were not as strong academically was that they could probably relate very well to some of the more academically "at-risk" freshmen student-athletes. They also possessed high enthusiasm for the project.

Mentors were notified of their acceptance into the program by both telephone and a formal letter. Written notification included the schedule for training session meetings during spring semester.

Training

There was a three-session training period for the new mentors conducted during the last 1 1/2 months of the spring semester. Each 2-hour session was offered on two separate dates to help avoid schedule conflicts. All mentors were required to attend one session for each topic. These sessions were led by members of the SSA staff and presented as round table discussions. Table 2 summarizes the activities highlighted in each session.

Table 2
Training Activities

Session	Major Activities
1. Orientation	Present program rationale, goals, format, and design; explain mentor roles and expectations; review campus resources; discuss freshmen issues and utilize case studies as a way to consider potential strategies and; consider ethical issues and present appropriate guidelines.
2. Diversity and Sensitivity	Explore stereotypes and personal biases through round table discussions.
3. Leadership	Present and interpret results of MBTI and its relevance to interpersonal relationships; explain supervision procedures, roles in freshmen orientation; evaluate training sessions.

The first session was an orientation program for the new mentors during which the project's rationale and goals were presented. Program design and format were discussed along with ethical guidelines for the mentors. Multiple case studies were presented to the group for discussion. Cases involved issues such as use of alcohol, homesickness, interpersonal relationships, lack of playing time, time

management problems, nutrition, and roommate problems. The cases also initiated discussion of other issues for freshmen student-athletes that were included in the mentors' application question responses. These included stress management, dealing with newly found freedom, eating disorders, academic stress, choosing a major, more intense athletic practices, making new friends, and a lack of time to meet people outside of the team. The handling of these issues was discussed as a group with possible alternative solutions offered by both training participants and the SSA staff leaders. The staff differentiated for the mentors which types of problems would be addressed by the mentors and which should be referred to other professional resources on campus. Available resources and services were discussed and outlined in a brief reference guide. At the end of the session, after a short explanation of its training purpose, the mentors were administered the short form of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI). The results of this inventory and its benefits were discussed in the third training session.

The second training session was a workshop on diversity and sensitivity. Stereotypes in a variety of forms were discussed and the mentors were challenged to analyze their own stereotypes and personal biases about others. They were also asked to consider potential stereotypes that may be attributed to themselves. Sensitivity and methods to improve communication and promote respect for individual differences were emphasized.

The third session focused on the results of the MBTI. The purpose of using the MBTI with this group was to help them gain further self-understanding and to enhance their potential relationships with others through a greater appreciation of their differences. Prior to giving out the results, the different characteristics of the MBTI preferences and personality types were presented. Results were then distributed and explained to the individual mentors and group exercises were done to promote understanding of the test's concepts. Each mentor was given an explanatory MBTI booklet to further explore their results and how they could be used in interpersonal helping relationships. At the end of the session, supervision and the mentors' roles in the Freshman Student-Athlete Orientation were explained.

Following the training periods, the mentors were asked to complete an evaluation survey of the training session and to obtain their mentor groupings at the SSA office. Groups were formulated by the SSA staff who considered gender, race, sport, and MBTI coding, in dividing mentors to reflect diversity in the backgrounds of these individuals. Each group was asked to make contact with respective members to develop a plan for the fall semester.

Implementation

The Peer Mentoring Program was implemented with the new student-athletes at Freshman Student-Athlete Orientation prior to the fall semester. During the summer, a list of freshman student-athletes was collected from the coaches that included a mix of scholarship student-athletes and potential "walk-ons." From this list, the first-year student-athletes were divided into numbered groups each comprised of 3 - 4 mentors and approximately 15 freshmen. These groups had to remain open to changes as many of the teams were still not set and some freshmen might be dropped or added to rosters throughout the year.

At Freshman Student-Athlete Orientation, each freshman was given his or her mentor group number and a survey to be filled out asking for basic demographic information and inquiries concerning area of study, expected study habits and academic demands, favorite activities/hobbies, and personal goals, etc. During the first half of orientation, while the freshmen were given information regarding eligibility and the services offered by Student Services for Athletes, the mentors met in a separate lecture hall to plan their initial meetings and go over supervision procedures. Also, they were instructed about the procedure for the second half of orientation and the important role they would play in getting this pilot program off the ground by stimulating the interest of the freshmen.

During the second half of orientation, the mentors were brought into the main orientation hall for introduction. The SSA staff then presented the purpose and general design of the mentoring program to the freshmen. Each mentoring group was introduced individually, and freshmen with corresponding numbers met their leaders and left with their group. Each mentor group then found a private area to casually introduce themselves and explained how they might prove useful to the freshmen. Convenient times and locations of future meetings were discussed. The mentors collected the freshmen surveys to obtain background information to aid in structuring exercises and pinpointing areas of discussion for the first official meeting. Mentors were to contact their freshmen mentees by telephone when a date, time, and location had been properly established.

In general, the orientation was used as a way to introduce the freshmen to the pilot project. Freshmen learned of this new opportunity to get to know others like themselves and were introduced to upper-class helpers who would lend them support immediately prior to the start of their first semester of college.

Supervision

The program was supervised by the coordinator of the Student Services for Athletes program. The purpose of supervision was to give the mentors a resource for feedback for their ideas and to monitor the types of activities occurring within the group meetings. Mentors were to schedule supervision meetings with the coordinator within a specified time period after each group meeting. In these supervisory meetings, they were to hand in Meeting Summary Sheets, which contained information regarding attendance, planned activities, topics discussed, and additional comments by the mentors.

Discussion

During the year, mentor groups seemed to have varying degrees of success and levels of participatory interest. A number of variables seemed to contribute to the success of the individual mentor groups. The degree of initiative and involvement shown by the mentors seemed to be a vital factor. The discrepancy between groups may have been due to the fact that mentors were not given specific requirements or guidelines as to how to structure and conduct their meetings during training. This was done in an effort to create a greater challenge for them in their new leadership position and facilitate their own personal development. Mentors

met this task with varying degrees of confidence. Those taking a more active and assertive role in encouraging their freshmen's participation seemed to have better attendance at meetings. This interest was displayed through early contact, both in person and through phone calls, with the freshmen. Outside of formal meetings, they periodically checked on the welfare of their new student-athletes and this appeared to have a greater impact on the respective freshmen. Other mentors settled for contact at meetings only and typically left messages on answering machines about the meetings without a great deal of advance notice. These groups appeared to struggle more with attendance at their meetings.

Another variable that seemed to affect the program for certain groups was attendance at Freshman Student-Athlete Orientation. Some teams had practice during this time, which affected attendance of some freshmen and mentors. For these freshmen, this had an impact in that they were not introduced to the program by the Student Services for Athletes staff and their selected mentors. They were unaware of the program and the help that their mentors could provide them early in the semester. Thus, calls from the mentors about meetings were often met with confusion and apathy. The mentors that missed orientation also affected some groups in that they did not have an opportunity to be introduced to their freshmen and share their enthusiasm for the program.

A third variable that affected the program was the fact that neither attendance nor participation was mandatory for freshmen. Without the coaches' full support, there was no means of enforcing attendance. Also, some of the mentors felt that it was better to only have people participate who possessed a sincere interest. For student-athletes required to fulfill study hall hours, however, meetings were counted towards their requirement. This, in particular, helped increase participation for team members of fall sports.

Several changes are planned for the second year of the program. A primary change will involve the organization and arrangement of Freshman Student-Athlete Orientation. The orientation program will be held in the evening when there is no conflict with practices. Also, mentor groups will have classrooms nearby to conduct their first meetings during the second hour of orientation. This will allow freshmen to be exposed to the program and have greater involvement with their mentors and fellow mentees immediately. If mentors can make known their interest in helping their freshmen succeed, and create a safe and fun atmosphere at this time, it is believed that potential benefits will be better recognized and attendance at future meetings will increase.

The number of mentors will be doubled (from 26 to 52), creating 13 groups with four members each. Additionally, the program will have a special name, the HENS (Helping Each Newcomer Succeed) program. The acronym is consistent with the University of Delaware's mascot, the Blue Hen. The rationale was that an official title might lend more identity and interest to the program.

Finally, training of mentors will be conducted with several changes. New mentors will have an orientation to the program and its responsibilities and expectations through an individual meeting with the program coordinator. This will help the coordinator become better aware of individual mentors' strengths and weaknesses, aid in grouping mentors together, and reduce or prevent a diffusion

of responsibility that a large meeting might suggest. Further, the mentors will know with whom they are working at a much earlier date and will begin more structured planning for their meetings and the new season together, during the training sessions.

Overall, the program appears to have had an impact on the student-athletes who have chosen to participate. While there was no formal instrument to measure freshman satisfaction, many freshmen participants informally communicated their positive feelings about the program and what it offered them. All mentors eligible to return to the program volunteered for a second stint, speaking highly of their experience and their interest in creating program improvements.

Summary

The stress inherent in the freshman's transition to college may be alleviated through the use of peer mentoring programs. These programs can provide direct guidance and support, normalizing perceptions of dissonance, and contributing to the overall adjustment to college and the developmental processes of these students. Such programs may also stimulate the mentors' development by placing them in different roles with new challenges, tasks, and rewards. Simultaneously, mentoring programs may impact larger communities within the university's student body. The HENS Peer Mentoring Program at the University of Delaware is one effort that may provide a model to follow in striving towards these ideals.

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