

IMPLEMENTING A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

When synthesized with a fundamental academic support program, a career development program can prove to be a valuable source of information and education. Guidance about careers and academic disciplines, plus the experiential opportunities that link classroom knowledge and practical experience, have been shown to be helpful in focusing the interests and energies of young adults. The following article is a description of the Wildcat Career Development Program, which was initiated at the University of Kentucky in the fall of 1991.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Several researchers have identified some of the particular problems encountered by student-athletes in their developmental processes, specifically those related to career development. In addition to the escalating professionalization of college sports and the accompanying media demand, issues such as unrealistic career goals and the lack of self-identification and self-confidence outside of athletics can undermine the student-athletes' educational efforts (Davis, Dever, & Wilkes, 1989; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978).

Even though some student-athletes are academically prepared to handle college, others arrive on campus poorly prepared for the basic curriculum. The maximum time devoted to sport, recently limited to twenty hours per week, is unfortunately not matched by any minimum academic time standard. Academic counselors must help student-athletes build learning skills, aptitude, and confidence in what can amount to three to five hours weekly, while battling the sense of entitlement many student-athletes develop as a result of a system that overprotects and seemingly caters to their every

request (Witmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988).

Many institutions concerned with the plight of student-athletes have constructed academic support programs to assist them educationally. Although many programs consist of study halls, tutorial coordination, and academic skill instruction, others have forged ahead in providing total personal development programs.

Bachhuber (1977) showed attrition rates of college students to be unusually high and specifically cited the lack of education about careers as a contributor to the high attrition rate. It appears that too many students (and student-athletes in particular) have difficulty formulating appropriate career goals. Bachhuber suggests that career planning programs may be a solution. Pushed and pulled in many different directions, student-athletes are bombarded by time constraints and other concerns. Therefore, the implementation of programs and seminars designed to foster and enhance student-athletes' career education and development and their self-awareness has been strongly encouraged by employers and by professionals in education and career services. The literature demonstrates that short-term career counseling is beneficial to students even after an academic major has been declared (Nelson, 1982).

Oftentimes the absence of career development programs allows academically undecided student-athletes to select an academic major or career field to study for which they may neither be suited nor interested in pursuing upon graduation. Many slide toward the institutions' department which has the reputation for the lowest academic requirements in order to maintain athletic eligibility and to demonstrate progress towards a degree. Counselors can help students make realistic career goals and choices in which they have an opportunity for success and happiness (Nelson, 1982). Professionals working with student-athletes must develop and implement programs which complement the current educational experience and support system.

THE WILDCAT CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The University of Kentucky Athletics Association has created the Wildcat Career Development Program to meet the educational and developmental needs of its student-athletes. The multi-faceted program includes both educational and practical career-oriented experiences and exercises. Because coaches typically have great influence with student-athletes, it is of the utmost importance that coaches approve and encourage developmental programming of this nature (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). Coordination and cooperation between coaches and academic support professionals is vital to the credibility and ultimately to the success of the program. Support for individual components of the UK program has come from alumni, alumni letter-winners, community professionals, and local organizations.

New Student Orientation Activities

During their first semester of enrollment, UK student-athletes take a non-credit course entitled "New Student Orientation." Available in a similar format to all students, this ten-week course introduces students to study skills, note taking tips, test preparation methods, and other necessary basic instructions. Prior to registration for the following semester, Holland's Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1985) is administered. This instrument helps identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as interests. Student responses are translated into six types of career fields, and potential "matches" are listed in coded form. The instrument is self-scored and evaluated, and Holland's theories are discussed in an informative manner. Finally, individual career choices and plans are connected to academic majors and, when possible, to specific courses. This process encourages freshmen to begin considering their academic skills, interests, and goals for professional aspirations beyond their sport. Consequently, they can outline an academic pathway that will culminate in the realization of their career goals. In summary, the Self-Directed Search and related discussions initiate the fundamental concepts of career education and development and establish the relationship between academic disciplines and career fields. This type of exploratory behavior may motivate student-athletes to seek novel educational experiences, such as the next three elements of the Wildcat program.

Shadowing Program

During the following semester/year, student-athletes are encouraged to participate in the Shadowing Program. Alumni, alumni letter-winners, and community professionals who have volunteered their time as mentors allow student-athletes interested in their career fields to "shadow" them on the job. This experience provides a realistic look at a prospective career field while reinforcing beneficial exploratory behavior. Myths and stereotypes about particular fields can be confronted, and valid, current information regarding the career fields can be obtained.

Upon completion of a shadowing experience, student-athletes are required to submit a synopsis of the career field shadowed, including salary standards, future outlook for growth, typical duties and responsibilities, and relevant skills and coursework necessary to enter the field. A formal "thank-you" letter to the mentor is encouraged. These requirements provide important personal and professional skill development which student-athletes might not receive in a classroom setting. They also ensure that there has been considerable thought and research of the prospective career field and major course of study. Such prospective career research has been shown to be important in reversing the attrition rates of college students. Attrition rates are lower for students who are committed in terms of vocation and education (Bachhuber, 1977). It is this interest, the internalized commitment to their own educational goals, that provides an enduring motivation for many students to achieve.

The shadow experience is intended to help student-athletes determine if a career field is appropriate for them before extensive coursework is completed and their options to change majors diminished or eliminated. It is expected that, as student-athletes acquire career-related knowledge early in their academic careers and internalize commitment to their academic and career pursuits, their rate of graduation and amount of satisfaction with the student-athlete experience will increase dramatically.

Mentoring and Internship Programs

The state of our nation, economically speaking, is not very encouraging. The job market remains extremely limited for recent college graduates. Many experts continue to forecast the economy as having very slow growth for the next few years. Since new jobs remain scarce and the majority of positions are apparently available only through the "hidden" job market, contacts and experience have become much more important. For those reasons, once student-athletes have focused on their career fields and academic majors, participation in both the UK Mentoring and Internship Programs is strongly encouraged.

The Mentoring Program coordinates interaction between student-athletes and professionals in prospective career fields. The program's goal is to help student-athletes develop personal and professional skills, as well as contacts and a local networking base for successful entry into the field. Through this program student-athletes can obtain and develop skills and experience within a work environment. Summer employment and/or semester-long internships coordinated through the Internship Program can expose young professionals to the training grounds of their respective careers.

Seminars on Social Issues

Like most young people, student-athletes tend to be rather social, and so, to complement and accentuate the Wildcat Career Development Program, a series of seminars on current issues is presented. Topics range from saving and investing to drug-alcohol awareness. All seminars are run by local professionals with the goal of encouraging student-athletes to realize there is a large complex universe beyond the stadiums and classrooms and there are critical issues that challenge responsible citizens to maintain and improve its condition.

Along those lines, a volunteer/outreach program has been formed to match interested and willing student-athletes with organizations that benefit from volunteerism. Many student-athletes find their volunteer experiences educational and rewarding, and they encourage their peers and teammates to participate. The resulting dividends are tremendous as community ties grow stronger and student-athletes develop a sense of duty, understanding, and compassion toward their surroundings and people in need.

Job Search Strategies

The final steps of the UK Career Development Program involve focusing job search strategies and refining interviewing skills and techniques. These skills are crucial for student-athletes looking for their first jobs after college. Some student-athletes choose to extend their education to graduate or professional school immediately, so preparation for qualifying exams and assistance for completing applications are readily available. In addition, many student-athletes gain beneficial experiences by becoming peer advisors to younger student-athletes. This gives older student-athletes the opportunity to pass on to others successful habits that can prove to be the difference between struggling and achieving.

SUMMARY

Career counseling, development, and education have been shown to decrease attrition rates of college students. Programming like that at the University of Kentucky can help student-athletes develop interest, identification, and internalized commitment to their courses of study and subsequential careers. Such programming could be the bridge that, for many, links young adulthood to adulthood as well as connecting student life with professional life. Academic support professionals must try to provide comprehensive programs that deliver a total education and prepare student-athletes to be productive, responsible citizens. The Wildcat Career Development Program is a step in that direction.

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