Developing A Structured Career Orientation Program For First-Year Football Players

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Nineteen first-year football players participated in a year-long, structured career orientation program. Participants completed a series of career exploration activities, with a primary focus on self-assessment. Results showed significant gains in career decidedness, comfort level about choice of major, and knowledge about the process of selecting a major/career. The majority of the student-athletes believed that the program helped them learn more about themselves and possible majors/careers. The program received a strong endorsement from 16 participants who committed to voluntary participation in subsequent career planning activities.

Effective career orientation must provide more than occupational information and job search/interview skills; it must facilitate self-awareness and individual growth (Mosca, 1989; Muzcko & Thompson, 1994; Whitfield, 1988). To this end, career orientation programs should attempt to integrate concepts from career guidance research and developmental theory. It has been shown that student-athletes' attitudes about career planning, exploration, and knowledge regarding the world of work and decision-making principles do not differ significantly from those of students who do not participate in intercollegiate sports (Wooten, Usher, & Osborne, 1994). Undeniably, all college students need career guidance which facilitates a thorough, active exploration process, leading to informed and realistic choices of academic majors and career goals.

Student-athletes, however, face two constraints with respect to this exploratory career planning process. First, their practice and competition schedules often prevent them from participating in career orientation activities offered on campus and second, NCAA regulations, specifically the 25-50-75 rule of satisfactory progress, which narrow the window of opportunity for selecting or changing one's major. Another issue unique to career orientation for student-athletes is the need to address the topic of careers in professional sports in a realistic manner without devastating individual aspirations. It is imperative that student-athletes who entertain hopes of a professional sports career internalize the importance of identifying and pursuing a viable "Plan B" while enrolled in college. Given these specific needs of student-athletes, academic support programs must expand their traditional services to include career orientation programs which facilitate the exploration and decision-making process leading to individually appropriate and satisfying choices.

Considerations For Effective Career Orientation

A developmental approach requires that career orientation activities begin at the outset of the college experience. Particularly during the freshman year, students appear to engage in a great deal of reexamination of their values and perceptions of self in reaction to the challenges of the college environment. Erikson (1968) pointed out that the college years are a crucial time for exploration which will lead to change and increasing differentiation of identity. In young adults, the following four patterns of occupational identity resolution can be observed (Marcia, 1966, 1980): (a) "diffused" students are absolutely undecided about a major or a career goal, exhibiting neither exploration nor commitment; (b) "foreclosed" students have committed to a major/career goal, but have done so with little or no exploration of their own preferences or alternative choices (e.g., a student chooses pre-med because his parents are physicians); (c) students in "moratorium" are exploring their options, but have not yet committed to a choice; and (d) "achieved" students have explored their options extensively, chosen a major/career goal, and committed to it. Whereas most individuals progress along this continuum of identity formation during the college years, students who exhibit a chronic inability implementing decisions might remain in diffusion. Achieved occupational identity is rare among first-year college students. Structured career orientation programs during the freshman year can help individuals who are not yet identity-achieved confront this developmental task.

Effective career orientation should be multifaceted and address individual needs with respect to personality type, learning style, and cognitive level. Computer-assisted career guidance (CACG) has become popular in recent years. Four systems used frequently are DISCOVER, DISCOVER II, SIGI, and SIGI PLUS. Among the core elements of these computer programs are self-assessment of interests, values, and skills; generation of occupational alternatives; information about careers; orientation to the career decision-making process; and information about how to deal with barriers to career choice. In order to optimize the benefit of any CACG system, it should be combined with other, more traditional, career guidance methods, such as individual or group career counseling, self-directed career decision making, or curricular intervention (Garis, 1984; Pyle, 1985; Sampson, Peterson, & Reardon, 1989).

Career exploration activities should accommodate various personality types and learning styles in order to optimize students' continued involvement in the decision-making process. *Introverts* and *Feeling* types tend to prefer computer-assisted career guidance whereas *Extraverts* and *Thinking* types tend to prefer faculty advising and testing services. *Judging* types are more likely to use all kinds of career services (Lenz, Reardon, & Sampson, 1993; Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Nelson & Roberge, 1993). The concrete, sensory, visual learner is more likely to prefer computer programs whereas the abstract, reflective learner will prefer gathering information from a variety of sources. Career orientation must match learning styles by providing a spectrum of activities, from concrete experience to reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Allyn, 1989). This task is complicated by cognitive and cultural factors.

Studies have shown that some students prefer computer-assisted career guidance over traditional methods (Miller, Karriker, & Springer, 1986; Yee & Pawlovich, 1988). CACG systems provide rather concrete, passive experiences whereas interest inventories involve more concentration and higher levels of cognitive functioning. Roselle and Hummerl (1988) found that college students with advanced cognitive development scores used the DISCOVER II system more effectively than their peers with lower scores. Rather than looking to the computer program for specific answers concerning their future actions, the former group used it as just another tool in the career decision process. Not surprisingly, students who are reasoning primarily at the concrete level feel more comfortable with computer programs than inventories and worksheets which require analysis and verbal abstraction. Given that hypothetical reasoning and abstract thought may not develop or become consolidated until late adolescence or early adulthood (Piaget, 1972), career orientation programs can introduce activities which challenge students to "stretch" their cognitive functioning to this next level. A cultural phenomenon must also be considered. More and more undergraduates seem to exhibit at worst deteriorating reading skills and at best little patience for this traditional way of collecting information. After all, they are the first generation which, from early childhood, has been familiar with computer technology, its immediate feedback capacity, and its entertainment value. In order to optimize individual growth, career orientation programs must challenge students to employ a variety of information sources, including the computer, in their decision-making process.

Purpose

With these considerations in mind, North Carolina State University developed a career orientation program for first year football players. Phase I of the program was recently implemented and is described below. The objectives for this program were as follows: (a) to integrate concepts from career guidance research and developmental theory; (b) to implement a multifaceted career orientation program which addresses individual needs with respect to developmental level, personality type, and learning style; and (c) to provide structured career orientation activities in order to facilitate personal growth and the decision-making process involved in selecting an academic major and exploring career goals.

Method

Participants

Twenty-two first-year football players (18 scholarship; 4 walk-on) started in the program. During the course of the year, three participants dropped out. Thus, complete data records for the year were obtained for 19 players (17 scholarship; 2 walk-on).

Procedure

At the beginning of the fall semester, participants were assigned to one of two smaller groups in order to increase the individual attention each could receive. These group assignments remained constant throughout the year; both groups completed identical agendas in bi-weekly one-hour meetings throughout both semesters. The majority of sessions were presented in a small group, open discussion format. Sessions were conducted by the second author and another staff member of the NCSU Career Planning and Placement Center. Schedule and location were convenient for the participants. All sessions were mandatory; however, as an incentive, student-athletes received study hall credit for their attendance. The authors developed seven career orientation sessions for each semester (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Activity Schedule by Semester

Session	Topic
Fall	
1	Orientation and introductions. Preassessment (Career Analysis Worksheet I) and discussion of career goals.
2	Administration of Self-Directed Search (SDS).
3	SDS follow-up exercise and discussion of possible careers which match individuals' interests and work values.
4	Presentation by an FBI agent (large group).
5	Introduction to SIGI PLUS and discussion/analysis of individual career goals.
6	Discussion of completed SELF-ASSESSMENT and SEARCH sections of SIGI PLUS.
7	Wrap-up. Discussion of how all the pieces fit together for individuals. Mid-year assessment (Career Analysis Worksheet II).
Spring	
1	Administration of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).
2	Large group discussion of MBTI results (explanation and identification of types).
3	Small group discussion of MBTI results (how it can help an individual select an appropriate career).
4	Discussion of SIGI PLUS assignment (students had completed the INFORMATION section of SIGI PLUS on a career they had selected from the list of occupations).
5	Discussion of current career choices as they relate to MBTI, SDS, SIGI, and other career information (large group).
6	Meeting at the Career Planning & Placement Center; locate information about careers of interest and possible summer employment.
7	Final discussion of what had been learned about self and careers of interest. Discussion of which major appeared to match personal characteristics and individual career goal(s). End-of-year assessment (Career Analysis Worksheet III).

Instruments

Self-Directed Search (SDS). Holland's (1985) instrument is a vocational counseling tool which enables individuals to identify their personality type *(Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional).* The measure is based on the assumption that people prefer work environments which match their

personality style. Students first completed the assessment booklet consisting of 228 items which comprise four scales (activities, competencies, occupations, and self-estimates) and yield a three-letter summary code of the individual's personality type (e.g., SIA: a person who is Social, Investigative, and Artistic). Students then searched the 1,156 occupations of the Occupations Finder for those which matched their three-letter summary code. The fifth revision of the instrument yields improved internal consistency over previous versions, with alpha coefficients ranging from .49 to .93 for the four scales. The instrument's concurrent or predictive validity is comparable to that of other inventories of this type. As this instrument is self-administered, self-scored, and self-interpreted, the extent of an individual's exploration is self-directed. The current program used small group discussion as a follow-up exploration activity of individual SDS results.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Isabel Myers Briggs and her associates developed a classification system based on Jungian personality types (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). Table 2 presents a summary of the descriptions of the eight MBTI personality types. These eight types were combined into four scales containing opposite poles (E-I, S-N, T-F, J-P). Results are reported as four-letter codes (e.g., INFP) indicating an individual's four strongest personality type components. The instrument consists of 126 items for which participants indicated their preferences. Answers were recorded on a computer scoring sheet. For follow-up activities, each student received a report form which contained the his four-letter code, a graphic representation of his scores along the dimensions of the four scales, explanations for each of the eight types, and a chart listing the characteristics associated with each of the 16 possible codes. Internal consistency reliabilities are acceptable for five college student samples, with alpha coefficients ranging from .71 to .90 for the four scales. Test-retest correlations for college samples range from .60 to .91. The instrument's construct and predictive validity are thoroughly documented.

TABLE 2
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Personality Types

Personality type	Code	Description
Extravert	E	Focuses on the outer world of people and things.
Introvert	I	Focuses on the inner world of ideas and impressions.
Sensing	S	Focuses on present and concrete information gained from his/her senses.
Intuitive	N	Focuses on the future, with an emphasis on patterns and possibilities.
Thinking	T	Bases decisions on logic and objective analysis of cause and effect.
Feeling	F	Bases decisions on values and subjective evaluation of person-centered concerns.
Judging	J	Favors a planned and organized approach to life and prefers to have things settled.
Perceiving	P	Favors a flexible and spontaneous approach to life and prefers to keep options open.

System of Interactive Guidance and Information (SIGI PLUS). The latest version of this computer-assisted career guidance system is the result of more than three decades of research and development. Sampson and Johnson's (1993) training resource guide provides an extensive citation list of the theoretical and research base which supports the development and utility of this system. SIGI PLUS offers users nine components (see Table 3). Advantages of the microcomputer version include the interactive, user-friendly nature of the system, the user's ability to work on any part of the system at any time, and the printouts which can be used for follow-up activities.

TABLE 3
SIGI PLUS Components

Component	Description
Self-Assessment	Examination of work-related values, interests, and skills.
Search	Selection of desired and undesired features in one's work, a list of occupations that match these features, and possible college major(s) for these occupations.
Information	Details about required skills, advancement, income, employment outlook, educational requirements, and work conditions for selected occupations.
Skills	Self-rating on skills required for a particular occupation.
Preparing	Information about typical preparation paths for particular careers, including educational requirements.
Coping	Strategies for dealing with preparation issues, such as time management, financing, etc.
Deciding	Questions for the decision process to commit to a particular career choice.
Next Steps	Strategies for putting the plan into action.
Printouts	Hard copy of all selected information.

Career Analysis Worksheets. Questionnaires were developed by the authors for three assessments throughout the school year. The preassessment instrument (Career Analysis Worksheet I), administered at the beginning of the academic year, was designed to identify (1) levels of decidedness about an academic major, (2) individuals' top three career choices, (3) comfort levels regarding choice of major/career, (4) perceived need for career orientation activities, and (5) the main source of influence on students' thinking about their future careers. Career Analysis Worksheets II and III (mid-year assessment and end-of-year assessment) were designed to measure (1) changes of level of decidedness and decisions about an academic major, (2) changes of top three career choices, (3) use of SIGI PLUS, (4) perceived knowledge about and comfort level regarding the occupational decision making process, (5) perceived learning about self and majors/careers due to the current program, (6) interest in follow-up activities, and (7) suggestions for improving the program.

Results

Preassessment results indicated that the majority of student-athletes who participated in this program perceived a need for career orientation activities at the outset of the academic year (see Table 4). At the beginning of the year, nine student-athletes had chosen a major. Their average level of certainty about this choice was moderate, with a mean of 2.44 on a scale of 1 (*not very*) to 3 (*very*). Ten participants (53%) listed parent(s) and three (16%) listed teacher(s) as the main source of influence on their thinking about career choices.

TABLE 4

Summary of Responses to Preassessment Questions (N = 19)

	Responses (in %)		
Item	Yes	Maybe	No
I feel comfortable about making a career choice.	26.3	57.9	15.8
I need more career information to help me make a good choice.	73.7	15.8	10.5
I need a clearer picture of what my interests are to make a good choice.	57.9	26.3	15.8
I need to have a clearer idea of my abilities, my strengths, and my weaknesses.	68.4	21.1	10.5
I would like to find out what careers match my interests, abilities, and personality.	73.7	15.8	10.5

Difference scores of paired observations on six occupational development items were analyzed from mid-year and end-of-year assessments (see Table 5). Significant gains were found by the end of the year in career decidedness ($t = -2.97$, $p < .01$), comfort level about choice of major ($t = -2.02$, $p < .025$), and perceived knowledge about selecting a major/career ($t = -1.68$, $p < .05$). No significant differences were found for knowledge of values, knowledge of abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, and information about careers of interest.

TABLE 5

Difference Scores for Occupational Development Items

Item	Mid-year assessment	Year-end assessment	*t*
Career Decidedness	3.16 (1.21)	3.84 (0.96)	-2.97***
Comfort Level about Choice of Major	3.21 (0.92)	3.68 (0.89)	-2.02**
Knowledge about Values	4.05 (0.91)	4.05 (0.85)	0.00
Knowledge about Abilities, Strengths, & Weaknesses	3.95 (0.97)	3.84 (0.83)	0.40
Information about Careers of Interest	3.42 (0.90)	3.63 (0.90)	-0.85
Knowledge about Selecting Major/Career	3.21 (1.03)	3.58 (0.84)	-1.68*

Note. *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .025$, * $p < .05$.

By the end of the year, all 19 participants indicated that the program had helped them learn more about themselves. Specifically, learning about self as a result of the career orientation sessions was rated *very much* by six players (32%), *much* by five players (26%), and *moderate* by eight players (42%). Although no significant difference was found, a comparison of the mean ratings revealed that perceived learning about self increased throughout the year. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) for levels of perceived learning, means were 3.63 (SD = 0.90) at mid-year and 3.89 (SD = 0.88) at the end of the year. For perceived learning about majors/careers, a slight decrease was found from the mid-year to the end-of-year assessment, with means of 3.74 (SD = 0.93) and 3.63 (SD = 0.90), respectively. Means of perceived learning were compared for individuals who had used SIGI PLUS and those who had not used the system. Results showed that SIGI PLUS users had learned significantly more about themselves ($t = -3.54$, $p < .01$) as well as majors/careers ($t = -1.97$, $p < .05$) by the end of the year.

At the outset of the program, nine student-athletes (47%) indicated that they had selected a major, but two of these individuals indicated that they were considering a different major at that time. By year's end these two individuals had committed to a new major. Another two individuals abandoned their original majors and were undecided about a choice at the end of the year. The final assessment showed that 12 student-athletes (63%) had committed to a choice of major; 5 of these individuals had been undecided about a major at the beginning of the fall semester. An examination of the commitment to a major revealed that all eight patterns of individual decision making were exhibited (see Table 6). These patterns suggest ongoing developmental activity in every possible sequence within the sample population.

TABLE 6
Patterns of Change in Commitment to a Specific Academic Major

Preassessment	Mid-year assessment	Final assessment	Frequency
No	No	No	4
No	No	Yes	3
No	Yes	No	1
No	Yes	Yes	2
Yes	No	No	1
Yes	Yes	No	1
Yes	No	Yes	1
Yes	Yes	Yes	6*

Note. Yes = selected a major. No = no major selected yet. *For 2 participants, the actual choice of major had changed between assessments 1 and 3.

An examination of the specific choices of majors revealed an increase in the range of subject areas from 5 to 10 over the course of the year. Some student-athletes rejected their initial choices, either in favor of a new choice or in favor of being undecided (i.e., ready to look at new alternatives). Others identified an initial or new choice during the year, but abandoned that choice by the end of the year. Comments by several of these student-athletes revealed that fall enrollment in a course in the area of interest had led them to conclude that the subject area would be an inappropriate major for them. Finally, for several student-athletes, subject areas which they had not initially considered had emerged as the major of choice or the top consideration by the end of the year. These change patterns illustrate the dynamics of the occupational development process and reinforce the importance of exploration activities.

An examination of the top three career choices listed by participants throughout the year further supported the notion that occupational development occurs during the freshman year. Notably, the number of student-athletes who listed a professional football career as their first, second, or third career choice decreased from 8 to 3 over the course of the year. Sports-related career choices (e.g., professional agent, sports management) increased in frequency from 5 to 6 by mid-year, but decreased to 3 by the end of the year. Science and engineering decreased from 8 to 2, and communication decreased from 6 to 3. Business and accounting remained fairly constant, changing in frequency from 8 to 7 by the end of the year. The largest increases in career choice frequency occurred for education and social sciences (from 5 to 11). These patterns reflect important realizations about career choice (primarily that financial gain has to be balanced with personal satisfaction).

Given the small number of participants in this program, results from the Self-Directed Search and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator did not lend themselves to systematic analysis. Most of the possible SDS and MBTI codes yielded single-subject cells. For the SDS, the most frequently found dominant personality types were *Realistic* (6), *Social* (4), and *Investigative* (3). MBTI results yielded 6 *Introverts* and 13 *Extraverts*. Of the *Extraverts*, 4 were classified as ENTP (logical thinkers who are outspoken and resourceful with new and challenging problems), 4 as ESTJ (practical realists who have a good head for business or mechanics and tend to apply themselves in areas of their interests), and 2 as ESTP (matter-of-fact, adaptable, hands-on; like mechanical things and sports, with friends on the side; can do well in math and science when they see a need). A surface comparison suggested that most individuals had expressed career choices that were potentially compatible with their personality types. This finding supports the conclusion that this program helped student-athletes learn more about themselves. Throughout the year, discussions incorporated individual SDS and MBTI results whenever possible for reinforcement of understanding of self and career choices. Furthermore, student-athletes' interest in their SDS and MBTI results as well as their active participation in the discussions of these results suggested that these tools served as effective catalysts for increased self-awareness and active involvement in the occupational decision making process.

Throughout the year, student-athletes participated actively in and exhibited positive attitudes about the program. Numerous follow-up conversations, usually initiated by the students, took place apart from the formal sessions, indicating cognitive processing of program activities and discussions. At mid-year, 9 student-athletes (47%) indicated that they were interested in participating in a job shadowing experience during the spring break of the subsequent semester. Strong interest in and commitment to this program were supported. At the end of the year, 16 student-athletes (84%) agreed to continue to participate in the career preparation process by participating in at least two career planning programs (e.g., resume workshops, career panels, internship information sessions, etc.) per semester for their remaining years at NCSU. These student-athletes also felt that the program should be offered again for the next group of freshmen.

Discussion

The first year of this career orientation program has supported the premise that occupational development is an issue of concern for first-year student-athletes. The first-year football players who participated in this program not only expressed a need for career planning activities, they also stayed actively involved in the program throughout the year. The strong endorsement of the program at the end of the year is taken as an indication that the participants have begun to internalize the notion that career planning is an ongoing process which requires commitment to continued exploration of and preparation for future occupational roles.

Overall assessment of the first year of this program supports the conclusion that structured career orientation activities benefited the student-athletes in the decision-making process about their majors and their future career choices. The developmental focus, the multifaceted nature, and the structure of this program were well received. The majority of participants indicated that the program helped them learn more about themselves and about majors/careers. Increased self-awareness is the foundation for the developmental task of occupational identity formation and considered to be closely related to the findings of significant gains over

the course of the year in career decidedness, comfort level about choice of major, and perceived knowledge about selecting a major/career. The absence of an increase in perceived knowledge about abilities, strengths, and weaknesses can be seen as an indication that increased exposure to career development issues promotes students' willingness to admit to uncertainty because they become more aware of what they don't know or don't do well in light of the newly discovered options. The developmental approach to career orientation requires a focus on the individual. A sense of security and equilibrium about knowing oneself allows individuals to turn their attention to matters external to the self, such as an academic major and future career goals. Without a well-established sense of self, decisions about career matters will be at best ill-connected to the needs and characteristics of the individual.

Phase I of this program will be repeated with the next group of first-year football players. The collection of comparative data over several years will help improve and refine the program. Finally, Phase II of this program will be implemented during the upcoming academic year in order to provide second-year career orientation activities for the current group. The goal is to continue development of the program for the next four years until a comprehensive 5-year career orientation model is completed. This final model will reflect a cooperative effort among campus units, effective utilization of community resources, and participation of former players.

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