

SUPPORT SERVICES AND THE DIVISION I STUDENT-ATHLETE: EXPERIENCES, NEEDS, AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines typical support service experiences of Division I football and men's basketball players. Specifically, the paper provides insight into the types of support services generally received by Division I revenue-producing sport student-athletes, discusses perceptions of these services and the service providers, and offers opinions on how future student-athletes might be better served. Based on these findings, both long- and short-term recommendations for athletic personnel are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

One of the first articles to document the experiences of college student-athletes appeared in the popular press in 1980. Underwood (1980) focused on the educational experiences of student-athletes and in particular described how many male student-athletes often changed academic majors so they would not have to take the more difficult classes, had tutors or others complete their assignments, allowed athletic advisors to plan their every move in order to circumvent the system, and focused on professional sport careers to the exclusion of all else. Underwood came to the following conclusion: "The 'dumb jock' has now come into flower in the American educational system. He is fast becoming a national catastrophe. He is already a national disgrace. . ." (p. 40).

A decade after Underwood's consciousness-raising article, another piece (this one focusing on football and men's basketball) appeared in the popular press. According to Telander (1989), college athletes today are in no better circumstances than those who preceded them. In addition to detailing academic improprieties, Telander pointed to illegal use of professional sports

agents, rampant violation of recruiting regulations, widespread illegal inducements given to student-athletes, and numerous felonies committed by college student-athletes which are promptly covered up or summarily dismissed by coaches and universities.

These two articles were valuable because they helped to make the public more aware of what was going on in the world of big-time college sports. A lack of empirical evidence, however, may have left some people questioning the validity of Underwood's and Telander's claims. Consequently, researchers have begun to investigate various dimensions of intercollegiate athletics. The academic and career development of student-athletes has been studied (Adler & Adler, 1991; Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Meyer, 1990), as have the effects of specific counseling programs aimed at enlightening student-athletes in these particular areas (Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986; Nelson, 1982; Whitner & Myers, 1986). While these and many other studies (for an overview see Coakley, 1990) have been helpful in increasing public awareness about the types of programs available to student-athletes and the resulting effectiveness of these programs, very few researchers have talked to the student-athletes themselves in an attempt to understand and improve athletic counseling. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use in-depth interviews to examine the actual support service experiences of Division I football and men's basketball student-athletes and to explore their perceptions of individual counseling needs.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 26 letter-winning male former student-athletes who graduated from an NCAA Division I university (hereafter referred to as BDU) between 1980 and 1990. Twenty of the men had been members of the BDU football team, while six of the men had been members of the BDU basketball team. Nineteen percent of the participants were African-American; the remaining 81% were white. The sample was comprised of both scholarship and nonscholarship student-athletes, as well as men who had participated in professional athletics (27%). The distribution of graduation years was equal across the decade, with only two years yielding no graduates.

Procedure for Data Collection

After each student-athlete consented to participate in the study, appointments for interviews were made. During the interviews, developing a positive rapport was important, so each participant was given an explanation of the purpose of the interview, a description of the criteria by which he was selected, and further assurance about confidentiality (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Undergraduate athletic experiences held in common by the participant and interviewer were shared whenever appropriate.

Each interview was expected to last approximately two hours, a fact of which the participants were made aware when the appointment was made. This estimation proved fairly accurate, as the average interview lasted approximately two hours and thirty minutes.

Finally, each interview session was conducted in a relatively consistent but flexible manner. Inconsistencies inevitably arose as some participants offered answers more freely than others. Similarly, some men jumped ahead and discussed topics out of order. The variation in interview format should not have affected the results, however, since the information, not the order in which it was obtained, is most important.

Design and Instrumentation

The topics discussed during each interview focused on four areas which were expected to provide the best understanding of the student-athletes' support service experiences and their perceived counseling needs. The four areas of interest were as follows: (1) academic support; (2) career support; (3) support personnel; and (4) missing links.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic Support

Colleges and universities nationwide provide support services to their student-athletes in the hope of helping them develop good study habits and eventually enhance their achievement in the classroom. The two primary academic services available to student-athletes are study halls and tutors (Greer, Moore, & Horton, 1986; Harden & Pina-Tallmon, 1988; Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986). The student-athletes at BDU were no exception. The following section examines the study hall and tutoring processes at BDU and the student-athletes' support service experiences and perceptions, as well as their opinions of how the services could be changed to better serve future student-athletes.

Study Hall. At BDU study hall was mandatory for all first-term freshman scholarship student-athletes and for those student-athletes whose grade point averages fell below 2.00. The study hall was held for two hours each evening from Monday through Thursday. Student-athletes from all the BDU teams attended the same study hall held in a dormitory (in classrooms or large rooms with dividers). In the mid-1980s the BDU football team separated itself from the larger group and began conducting its own study hall in the football complex; football coaches cited convenience as the reason for the move.

The student-athletes were required to sign in and out of study hall; monitors were present to make sure that the required individuals were in attendance and that no one had left in the middle of a session. Similarly, it was not uncommon for assistant coaches to make an appearance at study hall to make sure that required student-athletes were present. If they were not, the absent student-athletes could expect to receive some sort of discipline: morning running (called "the breakfast club" by the football players) was a common punishment.

Tutoring. The other major component in the BDU academic support system was tutoring. Tutors were available at study hall on a "first come, first served" basis and were present primarily to help the student-athletes with their general education classes (e.g., English Composition, Introduction to Psychology, Algebra). Tutors for specialized and upper-level courses such as Differential Geometry and Immunobiology were available at the request of the student-athletes and the approval of the athletic academic advisor. Student-athletes who lived off campus or who were not required to attend study hall were also allowed to walk in and meet with tutors present at the study hall.

When participants in this study were asked about methods to improve study hall, the most common suggestion was to divide the student-athletes into smaller, more manageable groups. The student-athletes recommended small student-athlete/tutor ratios, question and answer sessions with tutors, and more study hall monitors. The participants thought that fewer people in each room would prove more conducive to actual study. They also thought that study hall would be a more positive experience if the athletic academic advisors and tutors took a genuine interest in the educational needs of the student-athletes, rather than in maintaining eligibility.

Finally, the participants questioned the days and times that the study hall was held. The student-athletes were often tired and physically sore after practice, making it almost impossible for them to concentrate from 8:00 to 10:00 every evening. They suggested different times during the day when study hall could be held, and several participants even mentioned a drop-in program. Similarly, the student-athletes wondered if it were necessary to go to study hall four nights a week; perhaps they did not have assignments due the next day or were suffering from "burnout" and just needed a break.

Overall, the study hall and tutoring programs described by BDU student-athletes were very similar to the academic support services provided at other universities (Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986; Roper & McKenzie, 1988), which are based on the premise that "student-athletes will perform better academically if their study time is structured and prearranged for them" (Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986). The reason for the popularity of this particular structure may be that it allows athletic departments to easily serve large numbers of student-athletes, thus fulfilling their obligation to provide academic support (Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986; Roper & McKenzie, 1988; Whitner & Myers, 1986). Taking individual differences as well as various developmental levels into account, as the participants in this study

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suggested, may lead to more efficient service delivery and ultimately more productive student-athletes (Petitpas, Finley, & Votter, 1989; Roper & McKenzie, 1988; Whitner & Sanz, 1988).

Career Support

It became evident from talking to the student-athletes that little had been denied them in terms of support services. The prevailing notion was that, if they asked for something, it was provided; the student-athletes had only themselves to blame if they did not ask.

Of those student-athletes who reported receiving some type of career guidance, a great number received direction from sources outside the athletic department. Student-athletes who wanted career guidance sought counsel in the same places their non-athletic peers went for advice, namely academic advisors, professors, and university placement services. One participant described the career guidance he received at BDU in the following way:

[I did not receive any services] that weren't available to anybody as far as using the Placement Services Office and that type of thing, and the College of Business and the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management has the Hospitality Association. [There was] the student organization and all that kind of stuff, so that was all there—but that was available to anyone. But as far as I know [there was] nothing athletic-specific or athletic-related.

Support Personnel

Through discussions with the participants in the sample, it was learned that BDU employed a variety of people to assist in monitoring the academic progress and eligibility of its student-athletes. The most frequently mentioned "helpers" were the athletic academic advisors and the athletic tutors, who appeared to play an important role in the lives of many student-athletes. The participants' opinions were solicited on what the roles of the athletic academic advisors and athletic tutors were and on how those roles could be modified to meet the needs of student-athletes more effectively.

Athletic Academic Advisors. Two different men, Joe Martin and Steve Hardy (pseudonyms), held the position of athletic academic advisor during the time period under study. It was not surprising, then, that the role of athletic academic advisor as perceived by the student-athletes varied according to who held the position. The participants at BDU during Joe Martin's tenure thought he was sincerely concerned about the overall well-being of student-athletes, even though his major responsibility was to keep them eligible. One participant thought that Joe was honest with the student-athletes (an uncommon occurrence in the athletic department) and that he worked to stop the exploitation of student-athletes. The participants did not look as favorably upon Steve Hardy, whom they characterized as demeaning and patronizing.

The student-athletes were asked about how the role of the athletic academic advisor could be changed to be more effective. The most commonly mentioned suggestion was that more advisors were needed. Some participants thought the athletic academic advisors would be more effective if they took a genuine interest in student-athletes as human beings and developed a more personal relationship with each individual student-athlete. Still other participants thought the athletic academic advisors could be more effective if they were given more power, e.g., as in helping decide, based on classroom performance, which student-athletes would participate in upcoming athletic contests.

Athletic Tutors. The other group of people who provided the BDU student-athletes with academic support were the tutors hired by the athletic department. The participants were asked what they perceived to be the function or role of the tutors, as well as how they thought the tutoring system could be more effective. The majority of the participants in the study thought the tutors were genuinely concerned about helping them learn the necessary material. Conversely, other participants believed that the tutors were responsible for getting the student-athletes' work done one way or another and ultimately helping keep the student-athletes eligible for competition.

In discussions with the participants about their experiences with the athletic tutors, it became apparent that there was a variety of tutor types with different views of their roles. One participant's description of the athletic tutors he came into contact with summarized the interactions of student-athletes and tutors: "Some of 'em were intrigued to be affiliated with athletes, [for] some of 'em it was a part-time job, [and] some of 'em had a genuine interest in helping someone."

Similarly, contradictions arose as the participants discussed their ideas on how to make the BDU tutoring system more effective. The most popular response was to hold the student-athletes more responsible for their own actions and grades. In this scenario, the tutor would take a less active role, asking questions and facilitating the general learning process of the student-athlete, rather than completing the work. Another popular suggestion for improving the effectiveness of the tutoring program was to provide the student-athletes with individual tutors or, at the very least, a small student-athlete/tutor ratio. Additionally, the student-athletes mentioned providing tutors at various times throughout the day, cutting down on the noise and associated distractions in study hall during the tutoring sessions, and hiring more tutors.

While all the participants had suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of BDU's tutoring program, many realized what a difficult job the tutors had trying to motivate people who did not want to attend tutoring sessions. The student-athletes were also quick to admit that they had worked better with a likeable tutor, i.e., someone who had a good personality and with whom they felt comfortable. The participants also thought a tutor should be someone with whom they could be friends, which apparently was often the case.

The final topic discussed in this section on support personnel focused on the skills and characteristics of effective athletic academic advisors and tutors. The most commonly mentioned attribute was that they have some athletic experience, preferably at the collegiate level. As mentioned throughout the interviews, the participants also thought it was important for athletic academic advisors and tutors to take a personal, genuine interest in the student-athletes.

Since most of the participants referred to the athletic academic advisors and tutors as "he," they were asked if the positions should be filled by men. The majority of the student-athletes responded that gender was not very important; several, however, did mention a preference. Those who thought the positions should be filled by women claimed that young men would be more receptive to a nurturing mother figure, particularly after being yelled at by male coaches all day. For similar reasons, other participants felt that men would be better suited to dealing with student-athletes than women. As one such person explained:

I don't want to sound like a male chauvinist—but when you're dealing with football players and hockey players, you almost have to have a guy. Because guys just don't respect females. Not when you're 18 and 19 years old, chest is blown out because you're some big . . . supposed to be some big stud football player. I think a woman could do fine, but you really have to establish yourself the first two years. I'm not saying that a woman couldn't do it, [but] it would be hard.

As noted in the discussion of academic support services above, very little research to date has examined the topic of collegiate athletic support personnel. The research which has been done has focused on the involvement of former student-athletes in the support system. Petitpas, Furley, and Vottero (1989) suggest that previous athletic participation by an athletic academic advisor may facilitate the development of a good relationship with student-athletes and coaches. At the very least, "the counselor needs to understand how skills are learned and be sensitized to the frustrations and peak experiences inherent in sports participation" (Petitpas, Furley, & Vottero, 1989, p. 6). This philosophy is consistent with the opinions of the student-athletes in this study, who felt that it would be easier to relate to someone who understood what they were experiencing.

Missing Links

Throughout the interviews the participants discussed the types of support services available to BDU student-athletes, impressions of those who provided the services, and opinions on how the services could be improved. In the final section of the study the participants addressed the types of support services which may have enhanced their college experiences, as well as such details as time and place for providing the services.

Although the student-athletes in this study received several different types of support services, a great majority thought they would have benefited from some type of career development or counseling. Specifically, the participants thought information should be available concerning particular majors, jobs, and interview skills.

Aside from career assistance, the next most frequent reply was that the student-athletes needed some type of alcohol and drug awareness programs: the participants were particularly interested in information about steroids. Finally, the participants thought that more personal contact with counselors and advisors throughout college would be helpful for future student-athletes.

After suggestions for additional services were discussed, the interviews concluded with questions concerning the logistics (i.e., where and when) of athletic support services. The participants responded with a variety of suggestions as to the geographic location for athletic support services. Approximately half of the participants wanted the services to be available in their respective athletic facilities (e.g., the football practice building or the basketball arena). Since the student-athletes spent a great deal of their time in these buildings, the locations were convenient. The remaining student-athletes thought the support services should be located in an academic environment; apparently in order to concentrate on academics or careers, they needed to get out of the athletic environment. No matter where the participants wanted to receive support services, they agreed that the area should be private so that non-athletes could not stare at them and contribute to potential feelings of inferiority.

Finally, the student-athletes in this study talked about what time of day support services ideally should be provided. The most popular response was to maintain the status quo and make the services available after practice. Although the participants admitted that they were tired after practice, they could not think of a more suitable time to take advantage of tutors, career guidance, or other services. The next most common reply was "not after practice." Their mental and physical exhaustion after practice, especially when accompanied by a big meal, made it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. Other student-athletes thought that a flexible drop-in or morning support service schedule would be most conducive to retention. A drop-in system might be preferable because it would allow student-athletes to seek help when it best fit into their schedules, while morning sessions would be productive because the student-athletes were refreshed and alert.

Research (Lanning, 1982; Petitpas, Finley, & Vottero, 1989; Whitner & Sanz, 1988) supports the participants in this study who claim that student-athletes should be provided with more than the rudimentary study hall programs they currently receive. Specifically, Whitner and Sanz (1988) suggest that traditional study skill programs alone do not adequately address the needs of student-athletes. Therefore, athletic departments may do well to provide student-athletes with additional services such as the career counseling and the alcohol and drug awareness programs suggested by the men in this study.

Career counseling for student-athletes has received much attention in the past few years, with researchers (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Lanning, 1982; McCurdy, 1983; Nelson, 1982; Whitner & Sanz, 1988; Wilkes, Davis, & Dever, 1989; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981) confirming the opinions of the participants in the study who thought that some type of career counseling would have helped them in their post-college lives. The need for such programs is supported by studies which have examined the career maturity of college student-athletes. For example, Blann (1985) found that freshman and sophomore male student-athletes in both Divisions I and III formulated less mature career plans than their non-athletic counterparts. Similarly, the football and men's basketball players in Kennedy and Dimick's (1987) sample had lower levels of career maturity than other college students; their average career maturity score resembled that of the typical ninth grader. Thus, the development of career counseling programs for high school and college student-athletes appears to be justified, as Kennedy and Dimick (1987) stated:

These findings seem to suggest that by developing the career maturity at which their athletes function, college administrators would be enhancing the athletes' perspectives in the direction of a more realistic and possibly more rewarding career choice after graduation (p. 297).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ATHLETIC PERSONNEL

The purpose of this study was to examine the actual support service experiences of the BDU student-athletes, as well as explore their perceptions of counseling needs. It was hoped that this information would assist athletic department personnel in planning future programs for student-athletes. The participants' experiences with athletic academic advisors and tutors have led to suggestions on the implications of this study for athletic personnel.

First, do the current support services provided by a particular athletic department help or hinder student-athletes? In the current study, these programs served to facilitate dependency training and an internalization of ideas. While the majority of the participants emerged from the intercollegiate athletic experience as independent individuals, a few believed the myth that someone would always be there to take care of them. Mandatory programs, along with training table, seemed to further alienate the student-athletes from the non-athletic student body, admittedly causing them to miss out on "normal" college life. Their associations with non-athletes seemed to help most of the student-athletes stay on track for graduation. Therefore, athletic departments should take care not to isolate student-athletes from the university atmosphere in general and from non-athletic students in particular.

Secondly, the requirement that student-athletes attend study hall must also be viewed as a mixed message. Specifically, the student-athletes in this study were required to study for eight hours a week, which perhaps suggested to

them that college students needed to study only that amount. The participants apparently had managed to get away with studying less than ten hours a week in high school, but college courses generally require significantly more work. The fact that 62.5% of BDU's football and men's basketball players were "special admits" in 1989 (Lederman, 1991) indicates that they may need to devote even more time to academics than the average student-athlete. If universities are going to admit such student-athletes into their institutions and allow them to participate in athletics, then the institutions should consider the time demands and intellectual challenges faced by "special admits" and design support services accordingly.

Subsequently, athletic department personnel need to be aware that they may be perceived as not giving equal value to the roles of student and athlete. Although athletics was going to be part of these student-athletes' lives for only a short time, the participants believed that the coaches and athletic academic advisors at BDU stressed athletics more than academics—consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly. While the football and men's basketball players in this study were required to study only eight hours a week, they would not have practiced only that amount: their coaches would not have allowed it.

Another suggestion for athletic department personnel would be to put the needs and the best interests of the student-athletes first, perhaps teaching student-athletes to take more responsibility for their own academic decisions and actions. Student-athletes must learn that they are ultimately responsible for their own lives, rather than allowing someone to take care of their lives for them. While the athletic department may benefit by "bailing out" student-athletes in trouble (i.e., keeping them eligible and thus using them to win games), the student-athletes are the ones who eventually suffer because other talented student-athletes are always waiting on the sidelines. The athletic department must then devote time to these new superstars, and the "old" student-athletes may be left with nothing. A "tough love" approach whereby the athletic department forces student-athletes to be independent from their freshman to senior years could help develop self-reliant and successful people. An attempt to do this has already taken place at the University of Florida (see Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981).

These four suggestions are long-term recommendations which require institutional change. There are also, however, short-term recommendations which could be implemented within the current system, enabling student-athletes to have more meaningful and successful college experiences. First, athletic support personnel should show a genuine interest in the student-athletes with whom they work. Counselors, tutors, and other support personnel would do well to learn as much about the student-athletes as possible. By taking an interest in the student-athletes' backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals, athletic support personnel would be showing the student-athletes that they care about them as human beings. This may increase the student-athletes' trust in the athletic personnel both on and off the field. An attempt to do this

has already taken place at the University of Toledo (see Whitner & Myers, 1986).

In addition, universities should implement more extensive career counseling programs for all students. While the student services and placement services at most universities provide such assistance, it is typically reserved for seniors who are about to enter the work world. All students, and student-athletes in particular as a result of their low levels of career maturity (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983), may need guidance before their fourth or fifth years of college. As the participants in this study suggested, it would have been nice to talk to someone about the "shape" of certain majors and jobs, the state of the job market in the years ahead, and the transfer of skills from the sports world to the work world. Such guidance would be a valuable asset for student-athletes and non-athletes alike. An example of such a program is located at the University of California at Los Angeles (see McCurdy, 1983).

Finally, athletic departments should examine the practice of mandatory study hall. As the comments made by the participants in the current sample illustrate, student-athletes did not gain a great deal from the study hall experience. They were tired after practice, the atmosphere was not conducive to studying, and they often resented being told that they had to study at a particular time. As a result, most of them attended only to avoid the punishment inherent in skipping. Student-athletes should be trusted and encouraged to study when they need to, and if they do not study, they should pay the consequences, including loss of eligibility or academic probation. The participants in the sample who actually accomplished something at study hall probably would have studied on their own anyway and may have achieved more in a quiet environment after taking a brief nap. If student-athletes are expected to act like responsible adults, they must be treated as such. Forcing them to study for eight hours a week only reinforces their dependency training and focuses on eligibility. Therefore, a drop-in study center as suggested by several of the student-athletes in this study may be an ideal way for athletic departments to encourage educational achievement while at the same time promoting independence.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, the participants provided insight into the types of support services typically received by Division I revenue-producing sport student-athletes, discussed perceptions of these services and the service providers, and offered suggestions on how future student-athletes might be better served. While the participants were generally satisfied with the types of support they received, greater emphasis on career development and guidance, a larger number of athletic academic advisors with whom to consult, and more concerned advisors may have enhanced the student-athletes' college experiences both on and off the field. These student-athletes did not ask for unrealistic treatment but merely for access to services available to the entire

student population. By listening to these voices, sport scientists, athletic department personnel, and policy makers may improve their understanding of the needs of this population and enhance their college and life experiences.

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