BUILDING RAPPORT WITH STUDENT-ATHLETES: A SURVEY OF COUNSELOR STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

The importance of rapport in counseling student-athletes is commonly accepted, but the process of developing rapport has received little attention. Members of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) completed a questionnaire about methods they believed were important and effective in building rapport with student-athletes. Respondents also described the ways in which they enticed student-athletes to use the services offered. Results and implications for athletic counselors are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly accepted among counselors and psychotherapists that a strong therapeutic relationship is the cornerstone of client change (Brammer, 1979; Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1980; Rogers, 1957, 1975). Rogers (1957) has identified several "necessary and sufficient" conditions that facilitate client change. One of these preconditions is empathy. Empathy can be defined as the counselor's or therapist's ability to genuinely and appropriately share in the client's experience from the client's perspective (Brammer, 1979; Rogers, 1957) and permits the development of rapport. Rapport, in turn, permits the process of change to occur. Without a strong alliance between client and therapist, facilitating change—never an easy process under the most favorable of circumstances—is made particularly difficult.

The importance of rapport is not limited to the formal relationships of counseling and psychotherapy. Less formal helping relationships, such as those engaged in by counselors with student-athletes, also benefit from the same precondition of rapport. Its necessity and value with student-athletes are well understood by counselors who work with this population. Discussions of the various support services for student-athletes on college and university campuses across the country attest to the importance of empathic relationships with student-athletes (Ferrante & Etzel, 1991; Jordan & Denson, 1990). A common characteristic that makes support programs effective is the time and effort devoted to fostering relationships with student-athletes. Other writers have addressed the barriers facing student-athletes who use—or might like to use—the services offered by counselor and psychologists (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991; Linder, Pillow, & Reno, 1989; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). The presence of a strong counselor/athlete relationship can serve to reduce the potency of these barriers.

While the importance of rapport in counseling student-athletes has been acknowledged both directly and indirectly (Coleman & Barker, 1992; Kirk & Kirk, 1992), the strategies and techniques used by athletic counselors to build rapport have not been widely discussed. In essence, while the counseling and psychotherapy literature supports the intuitive knowledge that rapport is important, the literature relevant to counseling student-athletes has not yet explored or articulated how rapport is built.

PURPOSE

The present study sought to identify the different methods that counselors use to develop rapport with student-athletes. The study examined what techniques are actually used as well as the effectiveness of these methods. A secondary purpose of this study was to discover how athletic counselors attract student-athletes to programs, workshops, and other activities sponsored by student-athlete support services. The study also sought to chronicle significant developmental experiences of counselors in building rapport, as well as seeking their advice for new counselors. The latter issues are discussed elsewhere (Denson & Green, 1993).

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were members of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A). All registered members affiliated with a college or university were contacted and asked to participate.

Procedures

The literature on counseling student-athletes did not provide a model or methods for studying the questions of interest. Therefore, it was necessary to devise an instrument to explore the ways in which rapport is developed. The Student-Athlete Rapport Survey (SARS) was developed to elicit responses from academic advisors and athletic counselors about the methods they use to build rapport. The SARS is a 38-item questionnaire; 10 items use a forced-choice, 4-point Likert scale (see appendix). Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of a method based on how effective the methods actually are for them. Five items were open-ended to acknowledge that there would be effective methods not covered in the forced-choice items. Follow-up questionnaires were sent out approximately six weeks after the initial mailing to those who failed to return their questionnaires.

Analyses

Descriptive methods were the primary means of data analysis. Cross tabulations were also run on the methods employed and the effectiveness ratings of those methods. In addition to the descriptive methods, correlations were computed for rapport-building methods to explore the relationships of the methods used. T-tests were conducted to compare method effectiveness ratings by gender.

RESULTS

Responses to SARS provided information in four general categories: (1) demographic information about the sample of respondents; (2) general information about the respondents' athletic support programs; (3) methods of rapport-building and their impact; and (4) respondents' recommendations for those interested in pursuing a career in the field. The recommendations to novices are described elsewhere (Denson & Green, 1993).

Sample Characteristics

The survey was sent to 385 members of the N4A; 213 usable surveys were returned (55%), comprising the final sample used for the data analysis. Of the respondents, 112 (53%) were female and 99 (46%) were male. The gender of two respondents could not be determined. The sample was comprised of support service personnel working with student-athletes at all three divisions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). The vast majority (84%) of respondents was affiliated with NCAA Division I institutions ($n = 178$). Eight percent ($n = 16$) were at NCAA Division II institutions, six percent ($n = 12$) were from NJCAA colleges, and approximately one percent each were from NCAA Division III ($n = 3$) and NAIA ($n = 2$) institutions. Affiliations for two respondents could not be

determined. Respondents had worked with student-athletes for periods ranging from 1 month to 30 years, with an average length of service of 7.03 years ($SD = 5.11$).

Support Program Staffing Characteristics

Respondents worked within athletic programs of various sizes, up to 1100 student-athletes ($M = 397.38$, $SD = 190.34$). Staff size for full-time support services ranged from 1 to 13 ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 2.99$); part-time staff size ranged from 1 to 16 ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 2.87$). Part-time staff included secretaries and graduate students. Neither category included tutors. With some programs, especially the smaller ones, respondents were responsible for all intercollegiate student-athletes. Other programs divided primary responsibility by teams among support service personnel.

Rapport-Building Methods

Counselor Use of Methods. Results of the survey revealed that a variety of methods was employed to build rapport. The most frequently cited method that athletic counselors used was inviting student-athletes to their offices (94%). Counselors requiring student-athletes to meet with them and counselors making their presence known at home games were both used by 85% of the respondents. A number of respondents also mentioned that they attended study hall (80%) and practice (78%), and that coaches required the student-athletes to meet with them (78%).

Survey respondents identified a variety of rapport-building techniques in addition to those suggested on the survey form. Nearly half of all respondents reported using other methods. The most frequently mentioned methods were talking to recruits, attending team meetings, and holding a freshman orientation meeting. Other methods included teaching classes, contacting family members personally, visiting student-athletes at residence or dining halls, working out in the weight room, dropping notes in lockers, meeting informally "on purpose" with student-athletes, sponsoring a student-athlete advisory board, monitoring academic progress, writing letters to student-athletes, attending awards banquets, participating in community service clubs, having phone conversations, and producing student-athlete newsletters. One respondent summed up the scope of their efforts succinctly by writing, ". . . we utilize every means possible to reach out and meet student-athletes."

Effectiveness of Methods. Ratings of the effectiveness of the different methods used to build rapport were similar, with counselors indicating that the various methods were generally quite effective. Effectiveness ratings are summarized in Table 1. Inviting students to the counselor's office was rated as very effective by the most respondents (63%). Requiring students to meet the counselor in the office was rated as very effective by 57% of the respondents, while coaches requiring student-athletes to meet with the counselor was rated as very effective by 56%. Fifty-three percent of the

respondents felt that attending study hall was very effective. Results of ANOVAs comparing ratings of method effectiveness by gender were significant only for the perceived effectiveness of the "word-of-mouth" method. Females rated that method as more effective ($\underline{F}[1,182] = 8.48$, $\underline{p} = .004$).

Table 1

Ratings of Method Effectiveness

Method	Effectiveness (%)			
	Ineffective	Slightly	Moderately	Very
Attending Practices	7.0	24.3	31.4	37.3
Attending home competitions	1.5	19.6	31.4	47.5
Attending road competitions	8.9	23.3	29.4	37.8
Inviting student-athletes to office	0.0	7.8	29.4	62.7
Requiring student-athletes to meet with you	1.5	11.6	30.2	56.8
Attending student-athlete study hall	3.8	13.8	29.2	53.0
Recommendations/ "word-of-mouth" of other student-athletes	2.7	26.5	32.4	37.8
Coaches required student-athletes to meet with you	2.1	13.9	28.4	55.7
Introduced to student-athletes by other support staff members	8.0	30.7	36.2	25.2
Introduced to student-athletes by coaches	2.8	13.0	34.5	49.7

More than half of the respondents rated each method listed as either moderately effective or very effective. Introductions by support staff received the lowest effectiveness rating, with 39% evaluating it as only slightly effective or as ineffective. This may be, however, because most programs divide staff responsibility by teams. It may be unlikely that one support staff member would know another staff member's team well enough to introduce student-athletes to the person who is responsible for that team.

Relationships of Methods Used. Pearson product moment correlations were computed by method, with a number of significant relationships emerging. Although it was not the purpose of this study to provide a factor analysis of methods, it is possible to view several sets of correlations as comprising informal clusters. Counselors who invite student-athletes into their offices appear to use virtually any means they can to enhance rapport. Inviting student-athletes to the counselor's office was significantly correlated with all other methods except for introductions by other support staff, word-of-mouth from other student-athletes, and attending study hall. The strongest correlation was counselors inviting and counselors requiring student-athletes to meet with them ($\underline{r} = .2285$, $\underline{p} = .01$).

Attending practice was significantly related to being introduced to student-athletes by the coach ($\underline{r} = .3301$, $\underline{p} = .01$), making presence known at away games ($\underline{r} = .2494$, $\underline{p} = .05$), and making presence known at home games ($\underline{r} = .1936$, $\underline{p} = .05$). One explanation of this cluster of correlations is that some counselors feel that interacting with student-athletes in their competitive environment is especially valuable. The competitive arena or playing field may foster a greater sense of comfort for student-athletes than does the office. Counselors requiring student-athletes to meet with them was significantly related to the coach requiring the student-athlete to meet with the counselor ($\underline{r} = .2459$, $\underline{p} = .01$), being introduced by the coach ($\underline{r} = .2126$, $\underline{p} = .01$), and attending study hall ($\underline{r} = .1646$, $\underline{p} = .05$). This particular pattern of correlations suggests utilization of a more coercive style and methods on the counselor's part.

Counselors making their presence known at home games was significantly related to making their presence known at away games ($\underline{r} = .4809$, $\underline{p} = .01$), being introduced by the coach ($\underline{r} = .2634$, $\underline{p} = .01$), and attending study hall ($\underline{r} = .1469$, $\underline{p} = .05$). Making their presence known at away games was significantly correlated with relying on word-of-mouth ($\underline{r} = .2556$, $\underline{p} = .01$) and being introduced to the student-athletes by the coach ($\underline{r} = .2462$, $\underline{p} = .01$).

Relying on word-of-mouth was also significantly related to coaches requiring student-athletes to meet with the counselor ($\underline{r} = .2938$, $\underline{p} = .01$), being introduced to student-athletes by the coach ($\underline{r} = .2661$, $\underline{p} = .01$), and being introduced to the student-athletes by support staff ($\underline{r} = .1838$, $\underline{p} = .01$). Coaches requiring student-athletes to meet with the counselor was significantly related to being introduced to student-athletes by the coach ($\underline{r} = .2942$, $\underline{p} = .01$) and being introduced to student-athletes by support staff ($\underline{r} = .2850$, $\underline{p} = .01$). Being introduced by support staff was also significantly related to being introduced to

the student-athlete by the coach (r = .4335, p = .01). These patterns of correlations suggest that there are some counselors who are most comfortable using a more passive approach.

Scope of Programming. As expected, respondents reported a wide range of programs and workshops that were offered by their institution's support service. Given the individual nature of each institution and its respective support services, it was difficult to determine precisely how some specialized programming was defined, especially if respondents did not provide a specific, detailed description of a particular program being offered. Despite this limitation, it was possible to identify some of the most commonly offered types of programs.

The most frequently mentioned programs and workshops offered by support services were career development programming and study/test-taking/learning skills. That career development programming was provided with greatest frequency supports Kirk's (1992) report of a recent survey of services. Career development programming—involving activities such as self-assessment of abilities, values, interests, and goals; resume writing; and interviewing skills—was cited by 51% of the respondents. Half the respondents indicated that their programs provided some type of assistance to student-athletes involving the enhancement of study skills, test-taking skills, and learning skills. This was mentioned with considerably greater frequency than reported by Kirk (1992). Also part of a cluster of academically-related services frequently cited were the provision or coordination of tutoring services, provision/coordination of a study hall for student-athletes, and participation in academic advising/counseling activities with student-athletes. A number of other academically-related services (e.g., academic monitoring, registration assistance, academic assessment) were also mentioned.

A significant proportion of respondents reported that their services provided educational programming related to health issues, such as wellness (including nutrition and sexually transmitted diseases) and substance abuse (including steroids). Interestingly, Kirk (1992) reports that none of the programs he surveyed offered programming related to drug/substance abuse. A number of respondents reported that their services sponsored or participated in an orientation for new student-athletes. Table 2 itemizes the most frequently cited programming services.

Numerous, infrequently identified but nonetheless interesting programming services were cited by the survey respondents. For example, transfer assistance was an important offering of community and junior colleges. Also noted were community outreach programs, mentoring programs, student/faculty dinners, and workshops on cultural diversity, intimate relationships (including sexual assault), injury/athletic retirement, classroom etiquette, formal dining etiquette, and financial management. Computer skills, campus safety and self-defense workshops, and freshman seminars were identified, as was programming targeted toward returning student-athletes. It is also worth noting that several respondents indicated that some services were

provided by other departments and units on campus and that their role as counselors was primarily that of a coordinator or liaison with these other units.

Table 2

Prevalence of Programming Services

Service	% Respondents Providing Service
Career Development	51
Learning/Study Skills	50
Tutoring	36
New Student Orientation	30
Study Table	21
Time Management	19
SubstanceAbuse	18
Academic Advising/Counseling	15
Health/Wellness	15
Personal Counseling	10

Note. Fifteen respondents did not respond to question on program/workshops. Percentage based on respondents (n = 198) offering programs/workshops.

Attracting Student-Athletes

Just as respondents identified many types of programming offered by their support services, a host of methods was also employed to attract student-athletes. Over half the respondents indicated that attendance at some (or all) programs was mandatory for student-athletes, often as a condition of receiving their athletic scholarships. Other popular methods included general publicity (e.g., fliers, letters, and advertisements) and notifying coaches about programs. Table 3 summarizes the most frequently used methods.

Less frequently cited methods of enticing student-athletes to attend programming included serving food, substituting program attendance for study table attendance, offering academic credit, using recommendations from administration, showing motivational films, offering T-shirts, providing guest speakers, and eliciting recommendations from alumni student-athletes. Other methods of informing student-athletes about programs included team meetings conducted by counselors as well as publicizing the programs in newsletters.

Table 3

Prevalence of Methods to Attract Student-Athletes to Services

Method	% Respondents Using Method
Mandatory Attendance	60
Notify Coaches	34
Publicity	30
Personal Contact/Invitation	15
Word-of-Mouth	13
Advisory Board	8

Note. Nineteen respondents did not respond to question on methods. Percentage based on respondents attempting to attract student-athletes to programs and workshops ($n = 194$).

Anecdotally, several respondents reported difficulties attracting student-athletes to workshops and programs in the absence of mandatory attendance regulations or strong recommendation and support from coaches. Thus, it appears that for proactive programming—particularly that which is not directly related to eligibility or academic performance—to have any chance of being successful, it is important to have the support of coaches or high-level athletic administrators before attempting to introduce such programming.

DISCUSSION

In developing rapport with student-athletes, counselors effectively employed an array of methods. No clear pattern emerged in regard to the types of methods that were employed, as most respondents used many of the methods listed. Not surprisingly, the methods most frequently endorsed as "very effective" were those in which counselor/athlete contact was either encouraged or required. Without interpersonal contact, there is, of course, no possibility of rapport. The results of this study suggest, then, that counselors and support service personnel have a variety of rapport-building methods at their disposal and that as many of these methods should be used as possible. However, particular emphasis should be given to those methods that encourage direct, spontaneous contact with student-athletes, especially those that demonstrate the counselor's interest in the student-athletes.

While rapport—which is the cornerstone of effective work in the helping professions—cannot be imposed from the outside, there is some evidence to suggest that it is possible to encourage the conditions under which rapport can flourish. Petitipas and Champagne (1988) discuss the important role that coaches play in this process by requiring student-athletes to meet with

counselors. The present study supports their conclusions. The most effective methods of developing rapport were inviting student-athletes into the counselor's office, requiring them to meet the counselor in the office, and the coaches requiring student-athletes to meet with the counselor.

While requiring student-athletes to meet with a counselor may intuitively seem detrimental to the rapport-building process, it may be a necessary first step. There are many reasons why student-athletes may be reluctant to meet with a counselor. Research suggests that athletes may be reluctant to admit weakness, desire to maintain their autonomy (Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989), and fear derogation by others (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991; Linder, Pillow, & Reno, 1989). Requiring student-athletes to meet with counselors provides an initial opportunity for a positive experience with the counselor that might not otherwise exist. Thus, it becomes a catalyst for more spontaneous contact in the future. A potentially positive side effect of this is that student-athletes may then recommend that other student-athletes work with the counselor. Although counselors may not rely on word-of-mouth and recommendations from other student-athletes, they can certainly benefit. Furthermore, personal experience of the authors suggests that student-athletes do rely on their peers for information and recommendations and that a positive recommendation from a respected student-athlete can lead to numerous referrals to the counselor. In short, the coach plays a pivotal role in the rapport-building process, both directly and indirectly.

The importance of the coach is not limited to facilitating the rapport-building process. Coaches are also vital to the success of the support program in general. Support services for student-athletes were found to offer a variety of programs to enhance the student-athlete experience, although most of the programming was focused upon academic enhancement/achievement and career development. Relatively less attention appears to be paid to more developmental and holistic programming, despite recommendations to the contrary (Denson, 1992; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Lottes, 1991; Stier, 1992). Among those support services that did provide extensive programming of any nature, attendance by student-athletes was either mandatory or strongly supported and encouraged by coaches, who were often the vehicle through which support service personnel disseminated important information. As with rapport-building, making attendance mandatory at support service functions may provide an initial opportunity for a positive experience which may lead to voluntary student-athlete attendance in the future.

The present study represents a first step in understanding the rapport-building process with student-athletes; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution. One limitation of the study is that for those questions about the types of programming and services offered, some information was lost in condensing categories of programs because complete and precise descriptions of programming were not requested or generally provided. Thus, some subtleties of programs were undoubtedly lost. Another limitation is that when the number of support services offering a given program were considered,

the numbers may be slightly inflated because of multiple respondents from a single institution. However, to maintain confidentiality, respondents were not asked to identify their institutions, nor was the number of respondents from a school limited, as the study was interested primarily in individuals rather than institutions. However, despite these limits, it should not be overlooked that certain types of programs and services predominate in the athletic academic counseling field.

As this was an initial attempt to study the process of rapport-building with student-athletes, there are a number of questions which remain to be addressed. Future research should explore whether or not the type of affiliation that counselors have with their institutions affects the methods they use when developing rapport. For instance, counselors affiliated with an academic office may depend more on methods related to academics, such as attending study hall or being introduced to student-athletes by other support staff members. Counselors affiliated with athletic departments, on the other hand, may rely more on methods such as attending practices and being introduced to student-athletes by the coaching staff at practice. It would also be helpful to explore the relationship between the amount of counselor experience and the methods used, as well as the impact of the size of the counselor's "caseload" on the methods used. More experienced counselors may use different methods than do novices. Counselors with responsibility for large numbers of student-athletes may be forced to use less personal and less intensive methods. Finally, it would be of interest to examine counselor training and background as influences on the methods used. Counselors trained as psychologists may well use different methods than do those who were trained as educators or who gained their primary experience as coaches. These three backgrounds may have very different perspectives on the individual and how to relate to the individual.

CONCLUSIONS

Because there are no guidelines on how to develop rapport with student-athletes, it is hoped that the results of this study will be especially helpful to new athletic counselors. New counselors may be able to incorporate a number of techniques described here into their own styles to be most effective in their programs. It is hoped that the results of this research will also provide seasoned athletic counselors with some new suggestions for developing rapport with student-athletes. Many athletic counselors may also have responsibilities in other facets of campus life, such as serving as an academic advisor for non-athletes or as psychologists at a counseling center, which may restrict the amount of time and energy that they can spend developing rapport with student-athletes. By providing athletic counselors with a variety of techniques and a sense of the effectiveness of those techniques, this study may help them develop even more successful and efficient ways of developing rapport with student-athletes.

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APPENDIX

Student-Athlete Rapport Survey (SARS)

Survey ID #_____

STUDENT-ATHLETE RAPPORT SURVEY (SARS)

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This survey is an attempt to identify effective techniques for developing rapport with student-athletes. It is anticipated that the results will be helpful to athletic advisors and counselors. You will be asked to describe your experiences in this questionnaire which will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

Gender (circle one) F M

Program Level (circle one)   NCAA: Div. 1   Div. 2   Div. 3
                                NAIA

1. How long have you been working with student-athletes?

2. How many individuals comprise your support staff?

3. Approximately how many student-athletes participate in intercollegiate (NCAA or NAIA sanctioned) athletics at your school?

4. Approximately how many of these individuals are you personally responsible for assisting?

5. Are there particular teams/sports you are personally responsible for? If so, which ones?

6. What types of workshops and programs does your service offer?

7. How do you attract student-athletes to your workshops and programs?

8. In your effort to develop rapport with the student-athletes with whom you work, which of the following methods did you use? Please check all that were used.

    Attending practices ____

    Making your presence known when attending home competitions ____

    Making your presence known when attending road competitions ____

    Inviting student-athletes to your office ____

    Requiring student-athletes to meet you ____

    Attending student-athlete study hall ____

    Relying upon recommendations/"word of mouth" of other student-athletes ____

Coaches required student-athletes to meet you _____

Introduced to student-athletes by other support staff members _____

Introduced to student-athletes by coaching staff at practice _____

Other (please explain)

9. Please rate the effectiveness and importance of the methods (described above) that you used. First rate the effectiveness and then the importance of each. Effectiveness ratings should be based on how effective the methods actually were for you, not on whether you believe they are effective. Importance ratings should be based on whether you believe they are important. Circle your responses.

    Attending practices

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Attending home competitions

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Attending road competitions

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Inviting student-athletes to your office

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Requiring student-athletes to meet with you

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Attending student-athlete study hall

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

    Relying upon recommendations/"word of mouth" of other student-athletes

    very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

    very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

Coaches required student-athletes to meet with you

very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

Introduced to student-athletes by other support staff members

very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

Introduced to student-athletes by coaches

very effective   moderately effective   slightly effective   ineffective

very important moderately important slightly important unimportant

10. Please use the space below to summarize the events, actions or processes that occurred that you believe helped in developing rapport with your student-athletes.

11. What advice would you give to someone just starting out as an athletic advisor?

Thank you for your time.

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