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Black Student Athletes: Why They Under-utilize Traditional Outreach Programs and Methods for Increasing Utilization of Those Programs

Shari Richardson

Mississippi State University

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Objective: To explore why comprehensive outreach programs for student athletes, particularly the Black athlete, are under-utilized and to examine methods for increasing their utilization to enhance the student athlete's overall educational experience.

A common myth in higher education and in society is that athletes receive too much attention and privilege. These athletes are perhaps more in need of counseling services than their non-athlete counterparts, precisely because of their special status. Tomlinson and Cope (1983) note that Black students attending predominantly White college campuses often under-utilize services designed to promote the emotional health of the general population. One factor contributing to this is that most Black students tend to mistrust the traditional mental health system and do not consider counseling a positive alternative for problem-solving. Additionally, for Black student-athletes, there is the difficulty of arranging time to take advantage of the range of services more readily accessible to other students.

Counselors responding to the needs of Black student-athletes must be aware of the complexity of their lifestyles. Although athletes, in general, share many of the same concerns, differences exist between the subgroups of athletes (Greendorfer & Kleiber, 1984). For example, athletes may differ in their reasons for athletic participation, in their educational maturity and career plans, (Blann, 1985), and Black and White athletes may differ in their college preparation and performance (ACT Programs and Educational Testing Service, 1984). To date, the counselor's role in athletics has been one of enhancing athletic performance and intervening with troubled athletes. Danish and Hale (1981) have recommended that this role be expanded to include facilitating the athlete as a person. Counselors in higher education settings must be aware of and sensitive to those special needs of the athletes who are to receive the optimum benefits from those services available, and to enhance knowledge of student athlete development and provide a rational basis for proactive intervention.

A comprehensive approach that conceptualizes four primary areas is needed: (1) academic monitoring; (2) consultation services within the university community; (3) outreach through workshops and special programs; and (4) personal counseling. Psychological well-being is promoted through the development of cross-situational coping skills, and so, the goal becomes prevention rather than remediation. This is a

psycho educational model in which the problems and developmental issues of athletes are addressed without labeling athletes as a symptomatic group. This model emphasizes (a) the individual's desire for acquiring skills; (b) his or her capacity to learn; (c) the counselor's role as a teacher who endeavors to assist in solving present and future problems and to enhance the athlete's satisfaction with life (Guernsey et al., 1970). Also, this orientation may promote cooperation between educators, coaches, sports counselors, and athletic and university administrators. The feature that makes this model unique is its administrative location within the Counseling Center in the Division of Student Affairs rather than in the athletic department. It eliminates pressure from coaches and other parties whose primary interest is athletic performance. Secondly, it provides a broad and university-wide perspective.

Research indicates that Black student-athletes differ in their perceptions of the university environment. For them, there are stressors that are race specific and not encountered by other students at predominantly White institutions. This may contribute to or provide explanation of why Black athletes are not utilizing the services that are freely offered and which they are encouraged to attend. This study will explore and offer effective means for enhancing development and the overall educational experience of Black student athletes on predominantly White institutions. Factors examined will include psychological barriers; lack of knowledge of how to use systems to one's advantage; limited resources that are available or accessible; using outdated delivery methods; ineffective communication by educators, counselors, and administrators; and lack of the student athlete taking responsibility for his or her growth. By investigating current trends, models and methods, the goal of this study is to provide effective measures to reduce or eliminate the problem of under-utilization of services of Black athletes attending predominantly White institutions of higher education.

PRESENTER

Shari A. Richardson has been a counselor with Mississippi State University's Counseling Center\Intercollegiate Athletics since 1994. She received a B.A. in social work from the College of St. Francis (1985), and an M.S. in guidance and counseling from the University of Wisconsin-Stout (1994). Her previous professional experiences include academic advising at the University of Wisconsin Stout and addiction counseling for the Chicago Christian Industrial League.