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Abstract

The evolution of the intercollegiate student-athlete has made great changes and progress towards becoming a whole student and complete athlete, not one or the other. The redefinition of intercollegiate athletics has taken on the primary focus of creating stronger academic and personal support services for student-athletes. Essentially, it is believed that the problems in athletics are not insurmountable, but in the future, we must create new programs of support and assistance for student athletes as well as take full advantage of those already in place. Holistic support programs that address psychosocial issues in academics and athletics can provide necessary assistance to student-athletes, through intervention and strategies that view the athlete as an individual with changing needs and skills, rather than exclusively as an athletic participant. These concepts are even more important for the student-athlete with a learning disability. However, the progress that has been made to create more holistic programs of support for student-athletes often times does not or rather cannot accommodate the needs of those students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this article is to evaluate and revise the model for Support Services for Athletes and provide recommendations on how colleges and universities can design and develop academic and personal support programs for student-athletes with disabilities.

Keywords
Learning Disability, Student Athlete, College Performance

Approximately 11% of undergraduates in 2003-2004 reported having a disability, up from 6% in 1999 (Horn & Berktold, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). Although the transition to college is difficult for many students, adjustment to college for student athletes with disabilities presents additional academic, time, and publicity dilemmas to overcome.

Problem
Students with disabilities must develop strategies to deal with the many new demands of the college environment. They must navigate the change in processes and services from the high school to college environment, tackle the increased academic demand of college courses, and deal with the lack of a school-imposed schedule on their time (Parker & Boutelle, 2007). In addition, they
may find academic support services dispersed throughout the university, requiring a student, for example, to seek writing support from the writing center, math support from the math department, course-specific support from individual professors or departments, and general strategy support from an academic help center. Research has shown that struggling to adapt to these changes often affects a student’s willingness to persist to graduation (DaPeppo, 2007).

Student athletes must develop additional strategies to meet the requirements of playing an intercollegiate sport. For example, along with university requirements for academic eligibility, the National Collegiate Athletic Association ([NCAA], 2007) adds criteria for progress toward degrees and successful completion of course hours to maintain competition eligibility. Also, to compete, student athletes are required to complete a requisite number of study hall hours, a minimum of between eight and 20 practice hours per week, competition travel and play, and community and university service obligations (NCAA, 2007). These athletes, especially from high profile sports, are also public figures at all times, even when attending class or seeking course accommodations. Given these additional demands, many universities have established student athlete academic support units to work in concert with or as supplements to support services for the general student body. These support units provide advising for NCAA eligibility purposes, study halls, tutoring, and mentoring services for student athletes.

As the number of student athletes with disabilities has increased, both the NCAA and the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletes (N4A) have taken up the issue of how to best support these students. In the past several years, academic support units of many Division 1 schools have created Learning Assistance Programs (LAP) with Learning Specialists to provide this support. In a recent survey of Learning Specialists, the N4A (2007) found that they come from many different professional backgrounds, including counseling, education, and special education, and their top four responsibilities are teaching learning strategies, time management skills, organizational skills, and working with student athletes with learning disabilities. There is much variety between universities in the services offered. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of one such LAP.

**Strategy**

Following the recommendations of its University Athletic Committee, the student athlete academic support unit of a large, Division 1 university decided to develop a LAP dedicated to working with student athletes with disabilities and those who were struggling in their first two years of college. The Committee cited several reasons for the program, including: (1) an inability for students to access Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) because of their athletic schedules, (2) the long waiting list or cumbersome procedures for assistance through support services on campus, (3) the unwillingness of some student athletes to seek help outside of athletic support services because of their highly public status, and (4) the need for progress monitoring for NCAA compliance. The LAP began in 2005 with the hiring of a former special educator as the Lead Learning Specialist. The mission of the program was to provide supplemental academic support services for student athletes with disabilities or who were struggling during the transition to college (i.e., years 1 and 2) and to work closely with SSD. The Learning Specialist developed the LAP to address the self-determination, self-management, and technology skills for these
students, skills identified as critical to college student success (Getzel, 2006).

**Working with SSD.** Initially, the Learning Specialist and Assistant Director of SSD met on several occasions to develop a documented plan for information exchange and to invite participation in orientation activities. Specifics about support services such as academic coaching were shared and, with their permission, dialogue about students and whether they were accessing or experiencing difficulties with services continued throughout the program’s existence. In addition, a partnership between the LAP and SSD’s Assistive Technology office allowed shared technology resources for all students with disabilities on campus.

**Academic support services.** The academic coordinators who were responsible for overseeing the eligibility and academic progress of student athletes referred students with disabilities or those suspected of having a disability to the LAP. These coordinators were an integral part of the LAP development process. When academic issues arose for a student after general tutoring or mentoring services were provided, the Learning Specialist met with the coordinator and the student to discuss the issues and to problem solve. If the student athlete was a student with a disability, the Learning Specialist worked as a liaison to the SSD office, explaining procedures, making appointments, and helping the student athlete understand the process. If the student athlete was suspected of having a disability, the Learning Specialist would work with the student to get more information and to provide help in securing a psychoeducational evaluation. The academic coordinators discussed all referrals with the student athlete’s coaching staff.

Once a student was admitted to the program, the Learning Specialist developed and implemented an individualized plan for support. In addition to assistance in obtaining accommodations, several levels of individual and group assistance were available. These services were similar to those offered by many different units on campus but were more readily accessible and individualized in the LAP. See Table 1 for a description of services. The goal of the Learning Specialist was to provide the initial support necessary to help the student athlete transition and then to move the student to independence from those services by the end of their second academic year.

All LAP services were scheduled around a student athlete’s course, practice, and travel schedule. The LAP staff scheduled appointments on Sundays from 4 pm to 10 pm and Mondays through Thursdays from 8 am to 10 pm. Evening meetings usually took place during mandatory study hall hours. The Learning Specialist communicated general progress and all missed sessions to the academic coordinator who then informed the coaching staff. If a student athlete missed more than three scheduled sessions in a semester, they were dismissed from their LAP services. The Beneficial Effects of Social Support Not surprisingly, research concerning the beneficial effects of social support is extensive as scholars have well documented these benefits in different contexts (Balaswamy, Richardson, & Price, 2004; Chiriboga, 2001; Xu & Burleson, 2004) and within a variety of disciplines (Goldsmith, 1994; Riegal & Carlson, 2004; Rosenfeld, Richman, Bowen, & Wynns, 2006) over the decades. Scholars have noted a positive correlation between social support received by people and their mental and physical welfare (Burleson, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994). This correlation is relevant to the present study concerning the beneficial effects of social support to student-athletes. For instance, scholars have argued that student-athletes seek social support when
they are injured as this support helps them to mentally cope with their unfortunate situation (Hobfoll & Stevens, 1990). Building on this early work, scholars have examined the way athletes’ perceived social support given to them from their coaches and teammates (Corbillon, Crossman, & Jamieson, 2006), and found that athletes felt that their teammates’ support contributed to their well-being as they recovered from an injury. Other researchers (e.g., Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001) found that athletes appreciated and benefited from emotional support provided to them from their athletic trainers as they coped with an injury. Aside from social support as it relates to athletes during injury, Petrie and Stoever (1997) discovered that freshmen student-athletes earned higher grades when they received social support as this support helped them sustain their physical and mental well-being. The aforementioned research concerning athletes, student-athletes, and social support is important as it provides evidence that social support has proven to be beneficial to this population of individuals. More specifically, social support has bolstered their mental and physical well-being. It is important to call attention to this fact, pertaining to the present study in particular, given that the mental and physical well-being of minority student-athletes may be compromised while they attend a PWI. Their mental and physical welfare may be compromised given the many challenges they face as student-athletes in general, and given the unique challenges they encounter as minority student-athletes in particular. The present study extends the intellectual discussion on social support in the athletic context by examining it in the relationship between minority student-athletes and their family.

Researchers have shed light on the positive effects of social support as it relates to minority college students, and this body of research is also relevant to the present study. For instance, Castillo and Hill (2004) investigated social support and Mexican-American female college students and found that these students experienced less distress when they perceived they were getting adequate social support from their family. The students in this study believed that the social support enabled them to contend with challenges while striving to finish college. Moreover, researchers such as Constantino, Wilton, and Caldwell (2003) explored how social support played a key part in moderating the relationship between African American and Latino college students’ psychological distress and their willingness to seek psychological assistance. It was discovered that when minority students were satisfied with their social support networks (i.e., family, friends, and faculty mentors) they were less likely to feel the need to seek psychological counseling. The implication of this study is that social support positively influenced these students in their time of need, thus benefiting them. Both of these studies (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Constantino et al., 2003) are significant as they offer proof of the benefits of social support networks to minority students, and how such networks enhance these students’ quality of life. There has been research conducted to specifically examine family support and interaction among minority college students at PWIs (Barnett, 2004). Barnett particularly examined African Americans, and in her study, she revealed that African American family support provided an emotional outlet while concomitantly enabling African American students to experience lesser amounts of distress at PWIs. Barnett reported that students received social support from their family in the form of care, love, empathy, and concern and this support positively affected their well-being. Barnett further discovered that the involvement of the family helped these students to adapt to and
survive in their environment. Students particularly received encouragement and emotional support from their family. The family represented a shelter in which these students sought refuge during stressful moments. Once again, it is clear that family serves an enormous function in the life of minority students as they attend college, and the social support provided by families has demonstrated to be significant and valuable. Although the study by Barnett did not pertain specifically to minority college student-athletes, a similar argument can be made for them as they experience stress and difficulty in college and therefore may receive and benefit from social support provided by their family.

**Observed Outcomes**

In the first semester of the program, four student athletes identified with disabilities received direct services from the Learning Specialist (three freshmen and one upperclassman). All four were able to maintain passing grades and remain eligible for competition in the next semester. Two have since graduated, one has enough credits to graduate, and one has left the university.

By the spring of 2007, 60 student athletes received either individual or small group services from two Learning Specialists. The program had expanded to include a section of a College Success Strategies course similar to that offered to all students but geared to athletes (e.g., meeting with professors to provide travel letters and how to respond during an interview) and two large study groups for Introduction to Psychology and Introduction to Theater. Sixteen of the 60 student athletes served were identified as students with disabilities. Twenty-one student athletes received individual academic coaching, 10 worked in structured study hall, 10 received individual consultations (usually two to four sessions per semester), 22 participated in course study groups, and 12 enrolled in the College Success Strategies course. Only six of the student athletes involved with the Learning Assistance Program (including only one student athlete with a disability) earned less than a 2.0 GPA for the semester.

**Results**

The goal of the study was to explore the types of social support that minority student-athletes perceived were given to them from their family while attending a PWI. Student-athletes identified and described different types of social support given to them. Some of their responses regarding support they receive both clearly and unequivocally reflected the unique challenges that they experience as minority student-athletes at a PWI. On the other hand, some of their responses mirrored the challenges and experiences of student-athletes more broadly.

The responses of social support mainly fit into five separate categories: (a) emotional support, (b) informational support, (c) tangible assistance, (d) task appreciation support, and (e) esteem support. To begin, I discuss the first category: emotional support.

**Emotional Support**

It was apparent that student-athletes benefited from emotional support (n=11) offered to them by their families. Student-athletes described that this support mainly benefited them during times of adjustment and moments of athletic defeat. For example, a football student-athlete described how emotional support from his family helped him during his first week of school as he was trying to become adjusted to being a new student-athlete at the university. Making the adjustment was an enormous obstacle for him as he intermittently experienced bouts of nostalgia. He explained:
I would say my first week here was in the summer like August I think it was. I had been here for a week and everything just wasn’t going well you know, I was away from home, missing home, and football got tough and I was injured. You know it just seemed like a whole bunch of things not working out at one time and it got rough. You know and I didn’t have anybody to go home to, I was going home to four white walls, an empty closet and a microwave and a refrigerator. It was tough, but just [my family] talking to me and encouraging me by letting me know that everything was okay. [It was] them reassuring the positive in the situation, where I was only seeing the negative. So that time right there was a time when that encouragement kind of helped me.

As this excerpt demonstrates, emotional support helped this student-athlete survive the early stages of making the difficult adjustment. The family provided this emotional support as they empathized with him and provided encouragement as he went through this tough time. The emotional support from his family made a difference in helping him notice the positive in the situation.

Not only did emotional support provided by family help student-athletes manage difficult adjustment issues, but it also helped them cope during moments of defeat in their sport. Student-athletes experience both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. The latter can be remarkably hard to accept. A track and field student-athlete described the emotional support communicated to him from his family after he lost a crucial race. The loss was compounded given that the student-athlete expected to perform better than he did. He explained:

There was a time when I was running track and I was probably one of the better hurdlers in [my conference]. I had a race and I should have done a lot better than I did. And my parents they knew I was down because when I came across the finish line the first thing that I did was take a seat down in the corner. And the first thing that they did was come down from the stands and they waited for me when I put my clothes back on cause they knew I was sad. And my dad came over and he grabbed me and said, “You know there is nothing that you need to feel bad about. I’m very proud of you of what you’ve done and how far you’ve come.” That helped when I think about it.

In this example, while losing the race devastated the student-athlete, his father played a crucial role in helping to buffer some of the anguish caused by defeat. He did this by offering emotional support that lifted the student-athlete’s spirits. His father empathized with him and provided much needed encouragement. The emotional support clearly benefited the student-athlete as it made him feel better in the midst of an unfortunate outcome. Next, I turn to the second type of social support described by student-athletes: informational support.

**Informational Support** Information (n=8) was mentioned as a type of social support communicated by families to student-athletes. The information and suggestions that families provided helped student-athletes during moments of uncertainty. Informational support came in the form of suggestions for how to behave differently in order to fit in on a predominantly White campus, and advice regarding how to handle life’s basic responsibilities. For example, regarding suggestions for how to operate on a predominantly White campus, a track and field student-athlete shared an account of when her mother told her that she has to learn to fit in or blend into her new surroundings. Fitting in sometimes meant changing the way
she spoke, depending on with whom she was speaking at the time. In this way, her language would be modified to fit her environment. She explained:

I remember being frustrated when I first got here because I never felt like white people, especially my teammates, understood me. It was strange. [My teammates] spoke their own way, wanted to party a different way and stuff like that. Me, I was somebody different cause I didn’t grow up where they did. So my mother talked to me about how to fit in with the way I spoke, wore my hair and things like that. She basically said that I couldn’t act the same with them as I did with my black friends. It really worked! I felt more comfortable when I did this cause it was like they included me more.

This excerpt captures one of the unique identity challenges that minority student-athletes contend with at a PWI. As is evident, this student-athlete benefited from the ideas that her mother gave her about how to act in her new surroundings. The informational support made a big difference as it helped the student-athlete learn how to accommodate to her new environment.

Informational support not only regarded how to behave on a predominantly White campus but, as aforementioned, it also concerned how to handle life’s basic responsibilities. For example, a basketball player shared an instance when his mother gave him suggestions about how to administer his personal financial matters. This was helpful because he was inexperienced at living on his own in college and having to manage the financial aspect of his life. He explained:

When I first got here I didn’t know how to budget my money that well. When I first came here I had never had a place by myself. I had never had a serious bank account or stuff like that. So my mom helped me set up a serious bank account and stuff like that. She helped me plan out how to pay my bills every month. She helped me calculate everything that I needed to calculate. So basically she helped me set up a whole lot of structure for my life while I was down here.

In this example, the student-athlete gained from the advice that his mother provided for him. The structure that his mother helped him establish during his college years is one that he will likely utilize and build on for the rest of his life. The financial structure provided was significant as it would likely enable him to avert making a disastrous financial mistake. I now discuss another type of social support provided for student-athletes: tangible assistance.

**Discussion**

This study centered on the types of social support communicated to minority college student-athletes from their family at a PWI. In answer to the first research question, I discovered that student-athletes described receiving many different types of social support from their family including emotional support, informational support, tangible assistance, task appreciation support, and esteem support. Emotional support included helping with the college transition, and coping with the agony of athletic defeat. Informational support included helping with the college transition, and coping with the agony of athletic defeat. Informational support included advice regarding how to fit in on a predominantly white campus and how to manage some of life’s basic responsibilities. Tangible assistance primarily came in the form of money or other concrete goods that assisted student-athletes both in the midst of an unfortunate financial situation and to help procure basic necessities. Task appreciation support included when family attended athletic competitions to cheer on student-athletes thereby recognizing their effort.
Esteem support involved family reiterating the academic capability of the student-athlete when others tried to dismantle it, and when family discredited prevailing racial stereotypes of the student-athletes. These messages from family boosted the way student-athletes felt about themselves.

After observing these findings, one can see that the types of social support identified by student-athletes relate both to the challenges they experience as student-athletes in general, and also to some of the unique challenges they contend with as minority student-athletes specifically. I argue that this apparent contrast is an important one to underscore in this particular study. This contrast supports existing literature stating that the student-athlete population, in general, experiences a specific set of challenges including, but not limited to, handling academic/athletic responsibilities and dealing with the close scrutiny of the media (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Minority student-athletes are not exempt from dealing with these challenges. At the same time, it supports literature stating that minority student-athletes contend with additional challenges which are specific to their minority status (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Harris, Altekruse, & Engels, 2003; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2006; Lapchick, 1996b; Scales, 1991). Taken together, scholars can call attention to both the similarities and the differences of minority student-athletes’ experiences and how familial social support assists while they contend with these obstacles. The familial social support they receive fundamentally helps them deal with challenges on both sides. Support for challenges on one side (e.g., experiencing the agony of defeat) neither minimizes nor negates support received while wrestling with obstacles on the other (e.g., racial stereotypes). Similarly, support received for one side is not any more important than support received for the other side. For that reason, we should not marginalize one side and instead favor the other. The present study calls attention to this fact.

In answer to the second research question, I discovered that student-athletes offered thoughtful, considerate, practical advice concerning how family should provide social support to student-athletes at a PWI. Advice student-athletes offered to family included maintaining a presence, being willing to speak about topics beyond sports, and offering needed constructive criticism. I acknowledge that this advice did not include specific ways family could help with the unique challenges that minority student-athletes contend with at a PWI. However, the advice offered is worthwhile and should be considered because it relates to the experiences that minority student-athletes have as student-athletes in general.

As previously established, though minority student-athletes do have experiences which are specific to them because of their racial minority status, they also encounter experiences that affect student-athletes more broadly. Therefore, the advice offered for social support here is useful and practical because it will directly help these minority student-athletes as they contend with some of these issues. For example, the advice that family “maintain a presence” is solid advice as it sends the message to the student-athlete that family is always available, particularly during moments of distress, to play a supportive role in the student-athlete’s life. These moments of distress may include something of the general student-athlete variety (e.g., having a tough time with a coach) or, on the other hand, may include an experience unique to minority student-athletes (e.g., feeling marginalized in a PWI
Further, the advice that family "change the topic" sends the message to student-athletes that family is concerned with meaningful aspects going on in their life that transcend the sports context. This is sound advice as it communicates to student-athletes that their family has a bona fide interest in other aspects of their identity. Family may change the topic to discuss something related to the student-athlete experience generally (e.g., finding it difficult to have enough time to devote to academic tasks), or to change the topic and discuss something directly related to the unique experience of minority student-athletes (e.g., dealing with racism). In sum, the advice in the present study focuses on the student-athlete experiences more broadly, yet in some ways pertains to race indirectly.

The findings of this study expand the current base of literature which serves as evidence that student-athletes in particular receive social support from different people, and this support helps them when they encounter various challenges (Hobfoll & Stevens, 1990; Petrie & Stoever, 1997). This particular finding is consistent with existing research that stresses the benefits of social support in interpersonal relationships (Allen, Ciambrone, & Welch, 2000; Castillo & Hill, 2004; Constantino, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003). More specifically, the results of the present study advance the primary implication that social support is important in the life of people, and minority college student-athletes at PWIs are no exception. In the present study, student-athletes acknowledged that the social support provided to them from their family was beneficial as it was offered during a time of need. The social support enabled them to withstand a difficult time during their collegiate experience, and therefore, the support made a significant difference in their life. This fact, perhaps more than anything else, indicates the salience of social support in the life of people. Social support gives people the strength to sustain their effort during turbulent moments in life.

The findings of this study also support an area of existing research that documents that people modify their way of communicating to fit into a different context. This finding is consistent with the main tenets and suppositions of Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2006). In the present study, student-athletes stated that they received informational support in the form of advice from their family regarding how to behave in a way that would help them fit in on a predominantly white campus. According to CAT, people converge their behavior to minimize the difference between their style of communication and others’ style of communication while operating in the new environment. This convergence enables student-athletes to bring their speech pattern closer to the speech pattern of others with whom they are communicating, thereby making them appear normal and even likable (Giles, 2006). A tremendous challenge for minority student-athletes is fitting in with teammates who do not share the same identity and background. This finding does not suggest that student-athletes permanently changed their modes of communication. Instead, this finding makes it evident that student-athletes learned to be flexible communicators. Being flexible meant knowing how to code switch (e.g., change one’s pattern of verbal and nonverbal communication) in various contexts. Student-athletes indicated benefitting from the informational support that called attention to the importance of this.

This study has practical significance and therefore can be applied to those families who currently have minority student-athletes in college or that one day may have them.
endorse translating research into practice as Petronio (2007) argued:

We recognize that in order to address everyday problems we need to go beyond the knowledge discovery of the basic research enterprise to interpret and apply research outcomes in an effort to develop effective practices for the betterment of everyday life.

This excerpt captures the significance of applied research and I plan to apply the present research study. For instance, given that student-athletes were found to benefit from the social support provided by families, this must be brought to the attention of families so that they are aware of the importance. This will be brought to their attention by making formal presentations to families during pre-college, on-campus visits and also during first year college orientation. During both visits and orientation, families will receive valuable information regarding which types of social support may be offered to student-athletes and how helpful this support is to the student-athletes. As the information is shared with families, I will be sure to indicate that some of the support pertains specifically to the unique challenges that minority student-athletes face, while some of the support concerns issues that are commonly experienced by student-athletes as a whole. This contrast is a significant point to note. The advice that student-athletes provided for family in the present study would likely be included as information to share during the seminars. Bringing this information to the attention of these families may translate into a more improved experience for student-athletes as the support received may mitigate some of the trauma caused by their difficult experiences. A study such as this would be especially useful to athletic/academic advisors during orientation week as they meet with their first year minority student-athletes. This study would help facilitate a spirited and robust discussion about challenges they are likely to face as student-athletes in general, and those challenges that will be unique to them as minority student-athletes. Also, these meetings should not discontinue once orientation week has concluded. Instead, meetings should be held intermittently during the academic year in order to carry on discussing these issues and finding out exactly what the student-athletes are experiencing.

Implications

Students with disabilities often struggle with the transition to postsecondary education (DaDeppo, 2007; Trammell, 2007). Student athletes with disabilities have the additional time, academic, and publicity demands related to their sports. Universities often need to provide centralized and accessible academic support services for these students. A Learning Assistance Program with a Learning Specialist who is knowledgeable about disabilities and instruction can work within these academic support offices to provide the support and progress monitoring necessary to help these students transition successfully.

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