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EMPOWERING STUDENT-ATHLETES: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO MENTORSHIP

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Abstract: Coppin State University, supported by an NCAA grant, has made significant strides in improving the academic success and graduation rates of its intercollegiate athletes. This initiative has resulted in a commendable 75% graduation rate, a notable achievement considering the historical challenges faced by athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

In addition to academic success, the university's Health and Health Education faculty have taken a holistic approach to mentor selected intercollegiate athletes, particularly those in their first and second years. This initiative focuses on enhancing the athletes' overall well-being, recognizing that the demands on them often surpass those of their non-athletic peers.

One such challenge involves countering the pervasive "dumb jock" stereotype, which can lead to negative perceptions from faculty, staff, and fellow students. This comprehensive approach aims to empower intercollegiate athletes to effectively manage the unique pressures they face during their college careers.

Keywords: NCAA grant, intercollegiate athletes, academic success, graduation rates, holistic mentorship, "dumb jock" stereotype

Introduction

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) awarded Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland a grant to accelerate academic success within the university's athletic program. The grant was awarded in 2012 and totals $900,000 over three years. Although the graduation rates of intercollegiate athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been as low as 49% (Hosick, 2013; Sander, 2007; and Melendez, 2006), the current intercollegiate athlete graduation rate at Coppin State University has climbed to 75% thanks to a philosophy that emphasizes graduating over remaining eligible and graduating in four years.

Building on the academic successes of the Coppin State University Athletic Department, Coppin State University Health and Health Education faculty developed an initiative with selected intercollegiate athletes to holistically mentor them by focusing on aspects of their overall health and well-being, with a primary focus on first and second year intercollegiate athletes.

According to Stone (2012), far more demands are placed on intercollegiate athletes than are placed on their non athletic counterparts. Developing a comprehensive understanding of these demands and how they play out in the

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college classroom and then developing the means for intercollegiate athletes to effectively manage these demands will determine the success or failure of the intercollegiate athlete over the course of their college careers. Stone states that one such demand with which many intercollegiate athletes must contend is the negativity of faculty, staff, and other students toward them that is characterized in the "dumb jock" stereotype.

There is a very strong belief by students, faculty, and staff on college campuses that intercollegiate athletes are placed in majors that are "undemanding" and that they are placed in courses that are "dumbed down" and easy. Stone suggests that intercollegiate athletes at HBCUs are especially stigmatized and honestly believe the "dumb jock" label is applied to them even more so than to white intercollegiate athletes. Stone cites research conducted in the 1960s in which it was revealed that these labels can result in negative relationships between intercollegiate athletes and professors and impair the intercollegiate athlete's ability to perform well in the classroom setting. Stone suggests that these types of behaviors toward intercollegiate athletes are very much reminiscent of the "stereotype threat." The "stereotype threat" (Steele and Aronson, 1995), simply stated, is the anxiety one feels when they believe others have a negative opinion of them. Steele and Aronson suggest that this belief and the anxiety it can create can make one feel so anxious about their performance in the classroom and even the athletic arena that they will begin to perform poorly in both areas.

In preparing students for the rigors of college life, Gabriel (2008) cites the philosophy and teaching principles of Chickering and Gamson (1987). Those principles include "encouraging contacts between students and faculty, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, and communicating high expectations." Gabriel also emphasizes the need to promote "deep learning" and rigor. This is particularly important for intercollegiate athletes at HBCUs. Gray (2008) conducted a research study on grade inflation to find "solutions to lapses in rigor" on college campuses and found that since the 1960s grades have continued to increase while student understanding of college level subject matter has decreased. For example, Gray cites Denton and Henson (1979) who posit that the percentage of A's increased from 16% to 34% from the 1960s to the 1970s while the number of C grades was cut in half raising a C+ to a B. Gray suggests that professors inflate grades for any number of reasons including keeping intercollegiate athletes eligible. When coupled with the fact that many intercollegiate athletes, especially at HBCUs, are already unprepared for college, Gabriel suggests that they lack even the basic resources to succeed in the college classroom and this lack creates a climate of stress.

Pfister (2004) posits that faculty mentoring programs that focus on first year intercollegiate athletes reduce the perceived stress level of the intercollegiate athlete and contribute positively to their social support systems.

Coppin State's Health and Health Education faculty began mentoring selected first and second year intercollegiate athletes in weekly sessions where a variety of concerns and issues are discussed. According to Pfister, programs such as these are of great benefit to students who are attempting to transition to college life and go a long way to building and maintaining success in the classroom. Pfister found that intercollegiate athletes who were mentored by faculty felt they experienced more social support than from other non-faculty sources. According to Pfister, the NCAA actually encourages its member institutions to participate in its "Challenging Athlete's Minds for Personal Success" (CHAMPS) program. One of the major components of the CHAMPS program is to reduce the

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"transitional stress" that many intercollegiate athletes experience as they transition from high school to college life.

In the weekly mentoring sessions, Coppin State University athletes are encouraged to create and foster better relationships with non-athletes and with athletes in different sports. This is primarily accomplished through the development of study partners. Sherbume (2009) states that "little research has been conducted concerning how intercollegiate athlete's participation in athletics affects their social development." According to Sherbume, intercollegiate athletes spend more time socializing with their teammates than with other athletes or with non-athletes and when surveyed a significant number (86.4%) of the surveyed intercollegiate athletes stated that personal relationships affected their athletic performance either negatively or positively depending on the negativity or positivity of the relationship. Sherbume also noted that in classroom environments, first year intercollegiate athletes almost always sat among their teammates rather than choosing seating arrangements that foster the development of expanded social interactions.

Al-Qaisy (2010) conducted a research study to ascertain the effects of gender and adjustment to college life among first year college students and found that while many students are excited about leaving home and attending college, they are quickly disappointed by all of the demands placed on them. Many first and second year college students find that they must make many adult decisions that they are not prepared to make. Al-Qaisy cites a study by the National Center for Educational Statistics that found that a third of first year college students leave college after their first year, but Al-Qaisy also found that first year female college students tended to adjust better to college life than did first year male college students.

Pfister (2004) suggests that "transitional stress" can be experienced by intercollegiate athletes when transitioning from high school to college life and this stress can sometimes lead to depression. Weigard, Cohen, and Merenstein (2013) found significantly high levels of depression among current intercollegiate athletes when compared to former intercollegiate athletes. In their surveys, Weigard et al. found that about 17% of the surveyed intercollegiate athletes exhibited many symptoms of depression. Weigard et al. suggest that the added pressure of competition, training, and college level coursework can contribute to collegiate level athletic depression.

Another major topic of the weekly mentoring sessions focuses on sleep and sleep deprivation. Dormitory and on-campus college life is not always conducive to establishing and maintaining healthy sleep patterns. A link was found between depression, stress, and sleep patterns by Lund, Reider, Whiting, and Prichard (2010) who state that between 20% to nearly 70% of the college students surveyed were kept awake all night at least once per week as a result of stress. It was further reported that 12% of these poor sleepers miss class or fall asleep in class as many as three times per month. Wells and Vaughn (2012) state that the solution to sleep deprivation problems should begin by promoting education and awareness of the problem on the part of educators and educational institutions. According to Maas & Davis (2013), although most individuals presume they are getting adequate amounts of sleep, brain wave studies suggest that nearly 70% of the population does not get the recommended daily requirement of sleep. Keating (2012) postulates that just as a lack of sleep can make an intercollegiate athlete perform worst, more sleep (not just adequate sleep) can actually make an intercollegiate athlete perform better.

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Keating cites research that was conducted over the course of three seasons that found that after increasing their daily rates of sleep to 10 hours per night, intercollegiate athletes in a wide variety of sports dramatically improved their athletic performance.

Trockel, Barnes, and Egget (2000) conducted a survey of college students to determine what health behaviors and variables affected grade point averages (GPA) and found that later wake-up times translated into lower GPAs suggesting the benefit of earlier bedtimes. Murdock (2013) reports that there is a direct link between texting and poor sleep habits. Murdock states that these findings are particularly valuable given the sleep problems that first year college students already experience and according to Murdock these findings also support previous research on the association of cell phone use and sleep problems.

Mitru, Millrood, and Mateika (2002) posit that although the need for quality sleep increases as one continues to age, many adolescents and young adults are not getting nearly enough sleep and this lack of sleep is affecting their ability to process information and even form and develop positive peer relationships.

More than 800 college students participated in a study that included the Sleep Quality Index and the National College Health Risk Survey (Centers for Disease Control) and it was found that the risk of suicide, smoking and alcohol use, and fighting are linked to poor sleep habits (Vail-Smith, Felts, and Becker, 2009). According to Wells and Vaughn (2012), the STOP-BANG questionnaire is a useful tool in screening for sleep problems. The acronym STOP-BANG is the abbreviation for Snoring, Tiredness/sleepiness/fatigue, Observed apnea, and P bp (>140-90 Rx or no). The "p" stands for pressure, meaning blood pressure. The BANG acronym stands for Body mass index, Age, Neck size, and Gender. The STOP-BANG instrument was developed by Chung, Yegneswaran, Liao, Chung, Vairavanathan, Islam Khajehdehi, and Shapiro (2008).

A third major topic of discussion in the weekly mentoring sessions pertains to nutrition, vitamins, and eating habits. Dunn, Turner, and Denny (2007) suggest that while many of the intercollegiate athletes in their study had relatively good attitudes concerning nutrition and healthy eating, their overall nutritional knowledge was low. Willis, Peterson, and Larson-Meyer (2008) posit that in intercollegiate athletes as well as in the general population, there exists a "surprisingly high prevalence of vitamin D insufficiency." Willis et al. suggest that this vitamin deficiency can negatively affect an intercollegiate athlete's sport performance. Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium and calcium is known to be an important nutrient in the development of strong bones and teeth. As a matter of fact, milk is actually fortified with vitamin D. However, at least two studies reported in the British Medical Journal (Theodoratou, E., Tzoulaki, I., Zgaga, L., and loannidis, J, 2014; Chowdhury, R., Kunutsor, S., Vitezova, A., Oliver-Williams, C., Kiefte-de-Jong, J. et al. 2014) suggest that not enough is known about vitamin D to draw any conclusions as to its beneficial qualities or lack thereof. In the first study, it was found that only about ten of the more than one hundred and thirty studies on vitamin D could conclusively link vitamin D to any healthy outcomes.

Hoch, Papanek, Szabo, Widlansky, Schimke and Gutterman (2011) in studies of female intercollegiate athletes found that most female intercollegiate athletes lack enough vitamins in their systems to safeguard them from losses of bone density and this lack could even result in the absence of menstrual periods or an increase in

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menstrual dysfunction. The relationship of poor eating habits, menstrual dysfunction, and low bone density in women is known as the "female triad." Only about 60% of all university athletic programs nationwide conduct comprehensive medical exams and full medical histories of their intercollegiate athletes and when they do, it is only among first year intercollegiate athletes according to Hoch et al.

Azagba, Langille, and Asbridge (2014) state that energy drinks, long a staple among athletes, are actually linked to poor mental health functioning and the propensity toward substance abuse. These energy drinks can also impair sleep, can cause nervousness and nausea, and can negatively affect the cardiovascular system. According to Oyebode, Gordon-Dseagu, Walker, and Mitchell (2014), eating a minimum of seven fruits and vegetables per day can reduce the risk of death by more than 40%. In a survey of more than 65,000 subjects, cancer death risks and heart disease death risks were lowered by as much as 30% as a result of a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. The study revealed that vegetables are more beneficial than fruits and fresh vegetables are more beneficial than canned or frozen. As a matter of fact, the study revealed that "canned and frozen fruit appeared to increase death rates by 17% per portion." The study further revealed that consuming salads and snacking on fresh fruits adds another benefit and can reduce death risks by an additional 15%. In the weekly mentoring sessions, the diets and eating habits of the intercollegiate athletes are constantly evaluated and the athletes are constantly encouraged to focus on developing and maintaining good nutritional habits.

In studies on subjective well-being conducted by Pressman and Cohen (2005) and Diener and Chan (2011) as well as others, it has been suggested that happier people are healthier people and healthier people are more successful and productive people. It should therefore follow that the academic/scholastic success rate of intercollegiate athletes should rise in direct correlation to increases in their overall health.

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