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A Niche and a Need:

A Summary of the Need for Sport Psychology Consultants in Collegiate Sports

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to specifically determine the need for and types of services that athletic directors of university athletic departments would like sport psychology professionals to provide. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I-, II-, and III-athletic directors were sent a survey on the use and need for sport psychology consultants. A total of 286 athletic directors completed the survey. Results of the study found that 24% of the athletic departments surveyed used the services of a sport psychology consultant. Also, it was reported that most consultants worked at the Division-I level. However, sport psychology consultants also provided services to NCAA Division-II and Division-III schools as well. Results will be discussed in terms of how more job opportunities can be created for sport psychology consultants and why sport psychology consultants are needed at the collegiate level.

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According to the *Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology* (Burke, Sachs, & Smisson, 2004) 105 programs offer master's and doctoral training in applied sport psychology. As more individuals receive sport psychology training, many have wondered where students are obtaining employment after they complete graduate training (Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Waite & Pettit, 1993). Possible employment opportunities for sport psychology consultants exist in a variety of settings. For example, sport psychology consultants may locate employment in university athletic departments (Leffingwell, Wiechman, Smith, Smoll, & Christensen, 2001), university counseling centers (Flowers, 2003), private training facilities (King, 2002; Young, 2002), golf clubs (Zuckerman, 2001), cardiac rehabilitation centers (Taylor, 1991), Olympic training centers (Murphy, 1996), sports medicine clinics (Petitpas, 1998), professional sports organizations (Dunlap, 1999; Gardner, 2001), health and wellness settings (Smith et al., 2002), or other performance related arenas (Williams & Scherzer, 2003), or as employees for sport agents (Berardino, 2003). Although individuals are providing sport psychology consultation in these settings, little is known regarding the specifics of this practice or the future need for professionals in these settings.

With more students entering the field of sport psychology and potential opportunities emerging, researchers have been interested in determining if sport psychology consultants are obtaining employment and how much money they are earning through consultation (Meyers, Coleman, Whelan, & Mehlenbeck, 2001). Waite and Pettit (1993) were the first researchers to investigate the types of jobs graduates of sport psychology programs obtain. They interviewed doctoral-level graduates who completed school between the years of 1984–1989. They found that most doctoral graduates held academic teaching appointments rather than sport psychology consulting positions. Similarly, Andersen et al. (1997) surveyed both master's and doctoral graduates who completed academic training between the years of 1989–1993. They found that most (59%) had jobs in kinesiology departments, worked in psychology/counseling departments (13%), or were employed in research positions (9%). Few graduates reported employment in sports medicine clinics, university athletic departments, or private training facilities.

Recently, Williams and Scherzer (2003) surveyed graduates (1994–1998) from advanced sport psychology degree programs. They analyzed the types of job opportunities master's and doctoral graduates obtained. Similar to the results of the Andersen et al. 1997 study, 73% of doctoral-level graduates were employed in an educational instruction position in a university or college academic department. Interestingly, 5% of master's level graduates found employment in sport psychology consulting or performance consulting positions. Specifically, those employed as consultants worked for sport organizations or sports medicine clinics, were in private practice, or were employed as consultants to musicians or insurance companies.

Williams and Scherzer (2003) also found an increase in the number of doctoral-level graduates who obtained positions in sport psychology consulting. Twelve percent of doctoral-level graduates held positions in sport psychology consulting. Six graduates were providing services for a sport organization, three were in private practice, and three individuals consulted with athletes in

medical settings. They also found that one doctoral-level graduate provided performance enhancement services to a business organization. Williams and Scherzer also found that many doctoral graduates who obtained positions in sport psychology consulting were also asked to take on other job responsibilities in addition to sport psychology consulting. Thus, a difference between the Andersen et al. (1997) study and the Williams and Scherzer study was that more full-time consulting positions for doctoral-level graduates were reported. Although employment opportunities for sport psychology consultants were reported to be increasing, Williams and Scherzer concluded that full-time sport psychology consulting opportunities still are limited.

While graduate tracking research indicates that few sport psychology graduates are obtaining primary employment in applied settings, consulting opportunities do exist (Williams & Scherzer, 2003). One area in which part-time or full-time consulting opportunities exist is within university athletic departments. For example, many university-based sport psychology practitioners have described their work and the services they provide (e.g., Maniar et al., 2001). Sport psychology services at colleges and universities are often provided by consultants who are employed in university counseling centers or university athletic departments (Maniar et al.).

Leffingwell et al. (2001) have recently provided a description of the type of services provided to university athletic departments. They explained that formal paid service provision with an athletic department was begun after the athletic director surveyed the 23 NCAA Division-I varsity teams at their university and found great interest in sport psychology among the coaches and athletes. Subsequently, two paid graduate assistant positions were created for clinical psychology graduate students who were employed 20 hours a week to provide sport psychology consultation (Leffingwell et al.).

Along with explaining the development of the sport psychology consultant positions, Leffingwell et al. (2001) discussed the services provided to the athletic department. These services included consult-

ing with coaches, providing psychological skills training to athletic teams, performance enhancement services for individual athletes, mental health services, and leadership consulting. Other services provided to the athletic department included creating a performance enhancement newsletter and being part of the recruiting process for student-athletes (Leffingwell et al.).

Finally, Leffingwell et al. (2001) explained the importance of marketing sport psychology services to coaches and athletic directors. Specifically, they delineated three important points they felt helped create a consulting relationship with the athletic department. First, they explained to the athletic department staff how performance enhancement consulting could help athletes improve athletic performance. Second, they showed how the skills they teach are general life skills that can help student-athletes obtain success in all areas of life. Third, they explained to the athletic department staff that providing mental health services may aid in the health and wellness of the student-athlete. The importance of marketing the positive benefits of sport psychology services to athletic directors was also highlighted by Voight and Callaghan (2001). These researchers found that some athletic department personnel did not feel that using a sport psychology consultant was beneficial.

Although literature has begun to address sport psychology service provision to university athletic departments, little research has analyzed the use of these services. One study that has begun to address this important research area was conducted by Voight and Callaghan (2001). These researchers analyzed the use of sport psychology services in Division-I athletic departments. Ten Division-I athletic conferences consisting of 115 universities were surveyed. Over half the athletic departments (53% of the 96 athletic departments) reported the use of a sport psychology consultant. Of the 53%, 7 athletic departments utilized full-time sport psychology consultants, while 29 departments had part-time consultants hired directly by the athletic department or an individual coach. Another important finding was that 5 athletic departments were planning to hire a sport psychology



consultant, 6 universities were discussing hiring a consultant, and 9 universities were probably going to hire a sport psychology consultant in the near future. Thus, Voight and Callaghan found that the services of sport psychology consultants were being used in Division-I athletic departments. They also found that even those universities not currently using sport psychology consultants appear to be interested in employing them.

While research has assessed the use of sport psychology consultants in the largest Division-I conferences, there is a lack of literature analyzing the use and need for sport psychology consultants in other NCAA Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III university athletic departments. Also, research has not been conducted to determine what services athletic directors believe sport psychology consultants should provide and what potential barriers may exist to hiring a sport psychology consultant. Thus, the three specific purposes of this study were 1.) to determine if Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III university athletic departments use the services of a sport psychology consultant on a full-time, part-time, or consultant basis; 2.) to determine the services that athletic directors believe sport psychology consultants should provide; and 3.) to determine if athletic directors believe there is a need to hire a sport psychology consultant and what might be potential barriers to hiring a consultant.

Methods

Participants

Survey packets were mailed to athletic directors from NCAA Division-I, -II, and -III universities and colleges. Each athletic director was sent a cover letter that described the purpose of the study, the survey, and a postage-paid envelope in which to return the survey. A total of 1,032 surveys were sent to Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III athletic directors. The response rate was 27.7%.

Measures

The survey used in this study was developed specifically for the present investigation. The survey developed by Voight and Callaghan (2001) was used as a guide to develop the questions for the survey used in the present study. The first section of the survey consisted of questions relating to the use of a sport psychology consultant by the athletic department. The second part of the survey consisted of three open-ended questions related to service provision and the need for an athletic department to hire a sport psychology consultant. Question 1 asked what NCAA Division the athletic department competed in. Questions 2–7 assessed if the athletic department currently employed a sport psychology consultant and, if they did, how many were employed, status of employment (full-time, part-time, consultant basis), how many years consultants have been employed, and the esti-

Table 1. Qualifications and Common Services Provided by Sport Psychology Consultants

Qualifications of sport psychology consultants providing services in college and university athletic departments	
Licensed counselors	n = 16
Licensed psychologists	n = 28
Licensed social workers	n = 3
AAASP certified consultant	n = 13
Common services provided by sport psychology consultants	
Helping enhance performance	n = 44
Helping athletes with psychosocial issues not directly related to improving athletic performance	n = 35
Helping improve coach-athlete communication	n = 34
Helping improve team cohesion	n = 33

mated salary of the consultant. Question 8 asked what type of license or certification the sport psychology consultants held. Question 9 assessed the primary duties of the sport psychology consultant. Questions 10–12 were open-ended and asked the following:

- “Do you feel there is a need for an athletic department to hire sport psychology consultants?”
- “What do you feel should be the primary duties of a sport psychology consultant?”
- “What issues would relate to whether an athletic department would hire a sport psychology consultant?”

Results

Frequency Data for the Use of Sport Psychology Consultant Services

Participants included 95 NCAA Division-I, 72 Division-II, and 118 Division-III athletic directors. In terms of the number of universities utilizing the services of sport psychology consultants, 49 out of 286 athletic directors reported employing a sport psychology consultant. However, 18 more athletic directors reported in an open-ended response that they used the services of a sport psychology consultant. Common open-ended responses for the use of services were “graduate students completing practicums” (n = 4), “utilization of other university resources” (n = 5), “sport psychologist gives presentation to the coaches” (n = 1), “volunteer consultant” (n = 3), “consultants used as needed” (n = 2), “coaches use a sport psychologist”

(n=1), “athletic department hires a sport psychologist through individual team fundraising” (n = 1), and “use of a consultant periodically for team development” (n = 1). Forty-six Division-I athletic directors, 8 Division-II athletic directors, and 13 Division-III athletic directors reported using sport psychology consultation.

Athletic directors were also asked about the number of sport psychology consultants they employ, the employment status of those consultants, and the length of time that sport psychology consultants have been employed. Twenty-nine athletic directors reported employing 1 consultant, 10 athletic directors reported employing 2 consultants, 5 athletic directors employed 3 consultants, and 1 athletic director employed 4 or more consultants. In relationship to employment status, 4 athletic directors reported the employment of full-time consultants on staff. All 4 schools that reported employing sport psychology consultants were Division-IA athletic departments. Eleven athletic directors reported the employment of part-time sport psychology consultants, while 36 athletic directors reported the employment of a consultant-basis sport psychology consultant. Most sport psychology consultants had been employed for 1–2 years (n = 10) and 3–4 years (n = 17). However, many athletic departments have had sport psychology service provision for 5–6 years (n = 6) or over 6 years (n = 13).

The athletic directors were also asked which department employed the sport

psychology consultant and the estimated salary of the sport psychology consultant. Athletic directors reported that sport psychology consultants most often were employed by athletic departments (n = 26) or college counseling centers (n = 10). Sport psychology consultants were also employed by other campus departments, such as the sport and exercise science department (n = 9), the college of education (n = 1), the psychology department (n = 1), the athletic training department, and student services (n = 3). Interestingly, 3 of the full-time consultants were employed by the athletic department and made more than \$40,000 per year. Ten athletic directors reported not compensating a sport psychology consultant, and 2 athletic directors reported that the consultant made more than \$40,000 but were employed in a sport and exercise science department. Twenty-two athletic directors reported that the salary for sport psychology consultants on a part-time or consulting basis was less than \$10,000. Three athletic directors reported a salary between \$10,000 to \$19,000 for sport psychology consultants who were employed on a part-time or consultant basis, and 2 athletic directors reported a salary between \$20,000 to \$29,000 for a sport psychology consultant who was employed on a part-time or consultant basis. Finally, 1 athletic director reported a salary between \$30,000 to \$39,000 for a sport psychology consultant who was employed on a consulting basis. A salary of more than \$40,000 was reported by 4 athletic directors for individuals who were employed part time or as consultants. However, athletic directors reported that these individuals were employed in college counseling centers or other student service departments. Also, 1 full-time consultant was employed by the college counseling center and made between \$30,000 to \$39,000 per year.

Athletic directors were also asked about the qualifications of the sport psychology consultants they employed and the type of services consultants provided. See Table 1 for a listing of the responses athletic directors provided for these questions.

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

Three open-ended questions were asked in the present study. The first question asked if the athletic director felt there was a need for athletic departments to hire sport psychology consultants. Table 2 provides the results of the responses to this question. The second question asked athletic directors what they thought should be the primary duties of a sport psychology consultant, and the final open-ended question surveyed athletic directors to determine what issues would relate to whether an athletic department would hire a sport psychology consultant. The most common response to this question was related to financial issues such as money or the budget. See Table 3 for a listing of the various common themes and sample responses provided by athletic directors for this question. Additionally, question 11 asked athletic directors what types of services they felt sport psychology consultants should provide. Table 4 provides a variety of themes that were discussed by the athletic directors in response to this question.

Discussion

The results of the current study revealed that athletic departments are using the services of sport psychology consultants. This finding replicates previous research by Voight and Callaghan (2001), who also found that NCAA Division-I athletic departments use the services of sport psychology consultants. In the current study, NCAA Division-I schools were the most likely to use the services of sport psychology consultants. However, sport psychology consultants were also employed at the NCAA Division-II and Division-III level. Thus, this finding extends previous research by providing data showing that sport psychology consultants are used at the Division-II and the Division-III level as well.

Of the athletic departments that used the services of a sport psychology consultant, most seemed to have only one on staff. Previous literature has suggested that sport psychology consultants from other departments often provide sport psychology services to the athletic department. The

Table 2. Responses from Athletic Directors About the Need to Hire a Sport Psychology Consultant

Division-I athletic directors' responses to the question of whether there is a need to hire a sport psychology consultant

Yes = 32 athletic directors

No = 11 athletic directors

On a consulting (not full-time) basis = 16 athletic directors

Division-II athletic directors' responses to the question of whether there is a need to hire a sport psychology consultant

Yes = 18 athletic directors

No = 29 athletic directors

Division-III athletic directors' responses to the question of whether there is a need to hire a sport psychology consultant

Yes = 26 athletic directors

No = 48 athletic directors

Sample responses from athletic directors who support the need to hire a sport psychology consultant

- "Just as important as strength and conditioning and nutrition."
- "Yes. The sport psychology consultant could assist our department with social/behavior problems that some athletes have."
- "Yes. Athletics has such a strong mental component, especially when talent levels are more equal."
- "Yes, because much of what we do is affected by emotion that can be properly controlled and directed."
- "Yes—we think it is an important element of the development of an athlete."
- "I believe it is beneficial to have this resource available. They are a great resource for student athlete welfare issues and concerns and can prove to be an asset to many individuals on a case by case basis."

Table 3. Issues Related to Hiring a Sport Psychology Consultant

Common themes

- Financial issues related to the departmental budget
- The need for a sport psychology consultant to take on other responsibilities within the athletic department
- Does the athletic department believe there is a need, and is this need a priority?
- Do the athletes and coaches believe there is a need for a sport psychology consultant?
- Are qualified consultants available?
- Is enough office space available for the sport psychology consultant?

Sample responses from athletic directors on the type of services they felt consultants should provide

- "Yes, we have a full-time person only because he takes on additional duties not directly related to sport psychology. If not for that we would hire consultants from the outside."
- "There are a lot of unqualified consultants in the market that do not know much about psychology or sports."

present study found that many consultants provided services from other departments on campus. Having individuals on campus who provide services from other departments, however, may make it less likely

that the athletic department will directly hire their own sport psychology consultant. For example, athletic directors stated the following:

- "We use university resource[s] to meet

Table 4. Types of Services Athletic Directors Felt Sport Psychology Consultants Should Provide

Common themes

- Deal with pressure in both life and performance situations
- Help athletes improve performance
- Help student-athletes with various psychosocial issues such as injury rehabilitation, drug and alcohol issues, and eating disorders
- To train and educate coaches
- Help improve the student-athlete experience
- Provide services to help athletic teams build team cohesion

Sample responses from athletic directors on the type of services they felt consultants should provide

- "To work with individual athletes to deal with the pressures of competition—both the highs and lows. Also, they should help them deal with pressures outside competition . . . that affect their practice and competition and performance situations."
- "To provide an opportunity for someone in an unbiased position to listen, learn, and understand the situation, and then recommend, prescribe, and follow through with treatment."

these needs."

- "University medical staff can provide."
- "Although there is somewhat of a need for a specialist, our department does have access to the personal counseling office on campus that does an excellent job for our teams."

The creation of positions in which sport psychology consultants are directly hired by athletic departments seems to be increasing. For example, most of the athletic departments that hired consultants (n=27) had the service for between 1–4 years. Thus, it may be that more athletic directors are starting to see the benefits of having a sport psychology consultant work with the athletic department.

The qualifications of consultants and the services that they provided were analyzed in the present study. In general, this study found that most athletic departments used individuals to provide services who were either licensed psychologists or licensed counselors. Also, 13 athletic directors reported the use of consultants certified by the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP). Based on the services that athletic directors use consultants for, it would seem that multidisciplinary training may be beneficial for the sport psychology consultant (See Kornspan and Lerner, 2005, for a discussion of multidisciplinary training in sport psychology).

In general it seems that the qualitative

data support the belief that sport psychology consultants are needed in collegiate sports because many athletic directors indicated that there is a need for athletic departments to provide this service. Also, college athletic directors would like a wide variety of services provided by sport psychology consultants, including services related to performance enhancement, dealing with psychosocial development, coaching education, and the building of team chemistry. However, one of the main issues that seems to relate to the hiring of more sport psychology consultants is the problem of not having enough money to be able to support the position. As a result, some athletic directors who did not report hiring a consultant directly mentioned that they had faculty or students who volunteered or provided sport psychology services while completing internships or practicum experiences. Also, if the athletic directors did not have anyone working with them, they often stated that they could see sport psychology services being beneficial. As more volunteers and students complete internships and more athletic directors at all levels see the services of sport psychology consultants as beneficial, over time it may be possible that more sport psychology consulting positions will be created in athletic departments. Thus, we would recommend that individuals hoping to create opportunities in applied sport psychology follow advice given by Leffingwell et al. (2001) in marketing sport psychology

services to athletic directors. Leffingwell et al. mentioned that one of the first things the athletic director did when determining if the department should hire consultants was survey the coaches and athletes. A common theme from the analysis of the open-ended questions suggested that the athletic directors would want to know if the coaches and athletes wanted sport psychology services to be provided.

Previous research has indicated that the main reason given by athletic directors for not hiring a sport psychology consultant was that they felt it was not beneficial. In asking similar questions about what other issues would relate to the hiring of a sport psychology consultant, very few athletic directors in the present study reported that they felt the services provided by sport psychology consultants were not beneficial. Thus, the acceptance of sport psychology by athletic administrators seems to be changing. For example, Schell, Hunt, and Lloyd (1984) found that athletic administrators were doubtful of the benefits of sport psychology services. However, in the present study athletic directors at the Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III level thought that the services provided by sport psychology consultants were beneficial. Unfortunately, however, many athletic directors at the Division-II and Division-III level thought that budget was the main issue in being able to afford the services of a sport psychology consultant. For example, comments about the benefits of sport psychology included the following:

- "We do not employ a sport psychologist, but I can see them being helpful."
- "At times I feel our athletes would benefit from this type of consulting."
- "I do believe we would benefit from a sport psychologist."
- "Yes, they are a valuable resource."
- "Yes (in response to question 10). Athletics has such a strong mental component, especially when talent levels are more equal."
- "Yes (in response to questions 10), because much of what we do is affected by emotion that can be properly controlled and directed."

The results of the present investigation provide practical results for those in the

“ . . . college athletic directors would like a wide variety of services provided by sport psychology consultants, including services related to performance enhancement, dealing with psychosocial development, coaching education, and the building of team chemistry. ”

field of sport psychology. First, the findings of the present study have shown that sport psychology consultants are providing services at the NCAA Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III levels. Also, the present research shows that many athletic directors at the Division-I, Division-II, and Division-III level believe that there is a need for athletic departments to hire sport psychology consultants. Specifically, Division-I athletic directors reported the most use of sport psychology consultants. Future researchers should continue to determine if a need exists for the hiring of sport psychology consultants at all levels of college athletic departments. Also, researchers may want to determine the use of sport psychology services in other collegiate sport organizations as well as at the junior college level. Also, to gain a better understanding of how to create sport psychology consulting positions, future researchers may want to conduct a qualitative study of those individuals who currently provide sport psychology services in a university setting. For example, important questions that can be asked include how they obtained the present position, the career path that led them to the position, and the type of services they provide to student-athletes. Also, these consultants may be asked to explain what their job duties and responsibilities are and whether they take on other roles

besides directly providing sport psychology services.

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