

Preparing Professional School Counselors to Work with Student Athletes

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Abstract

Professional school counselors play a role in helping students and families make college decisions. One student group that may have unique challenges are student athletes who wish to compete at the collegiate level. These students have additional requirements, beyond traditional admission procedures, to meet eligibility requirements. The purpose of this article is to provide professional school counselors guidance and best practices to support these students. As requirements may change, it is important that professional school counselors, especially those at the high school level, remain up to date in training and their understanding of specific policies, credit requirements, and timelines to support student athletes.

Keywords: School Counseling, NCAA, Student Athletes, College Athletics

Preparing Professional School Counselors to Work with Student Athletes

Professional school counselors are called upon to assist students and families in college decisions. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) suggested that school counseling programs contain “ongoing systemic activities designed to assist students in establishing personal goals and developing future plans” (2018, p. 4).

Professional school counselors are trained to help students in the college admission process (ASCA, 2014; Cranmore, et al., 2019; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). This task can be complicated by the numerous different admission requirements of various colleges and universities. An additional dimension of difficulty to the admission process are the additional entrance requirements that must be met, which includes the specific sequencing of courses taken in high school for future collegiate athletes.

Future collegiate athletes must consider several factors in their college search and application process. Beyond meeting college entrance requirements, these athletes go through competitive recruitment processes to meet requirements to make various teams. Due to the competitive nature of collegiate athletics and the complex admission process, it is important that school counselors be well informed in their advice and guidance to families and students. The purpose of this paper is to provide professional school counselors with an overview of the experiences of student athletes (SAs) and best practices to foster their transition into intercollegiate sports.

Understanding Student Athletes

Many high school student athletes aspire to play intercollegiate sports in post-secondary institutions, ranging from National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, II, III, National Association Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and community

college. High school figures from the 2018-2019 academic year suggests that while there are nearly eight million student athletes in high school, only 495,000 will compete as NCAA athletes within 24 different sports (NCAA, 2019). While this number only represents a small fraction of high school students who are pursuing post-secondary education, high school counselors should still provide services that meet the admission needs of student athletes as they are valuable assets to their schools and communities.

Sport participation provides a healthy outlet for students that helps manifest stronger interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and supports a direct impact upon high school completion (Lumpkin & Favor, 2012). Furthermore, athletics fosters a stronger sense of community amongst students, faculty, and staff. Events such as pep rallies and athletic sporting events allow stakeholders to come together for a common cause. Evidence further suggests that these activities can encourage disconnected, low achieving students to join a couple of activities and meet the diverse interests of all student groups (Knifsend & Graham, 2012). While sports participation does have many benefits, student athletes still face several challenges compared to their non-athletic peers. Professional school counselors can assist student athletes in navigating these challenges.

There are several challenges that student athletes face that are unique and unlike other subgroups of students on high school campuses. One of the most significant challenges this population faces includes time management. Along with attending school anywhere from 30-35 hours a week, student athletes spend anywhere from 10-25 hours a week in-season practicing, competing, and traveling to and from games. Also taken into consideration are athletes' commitments to teams outside of

school that include club sports (soccer, volleyball, basketball, swim, lacrosse, etc...) and travel ball (baseball and softball). These hours, along with preparing for exams, homework, and the like, take a toll on athletes' ability to accomplish tasks and maintain healthy levels of well-being. Oftentimes, athletes compromise other school-related obligations in order to maintain and enhance their athletic skills thus disconnecting them from academic related tasks. This often leads to an identity conflict that is well researched and acknowledged in the field of athletics (Pflum et al., 2017). The professional counselor is in a unique position to foster time management and prioritization skills amongst student athletes by offering individual and group workshops on both time management, decision-making, and prioritizing student obligations.

Much like other students, athletes start developing their own narratives about who they are based on interests, social groups, and personal victories. Given the various roles that they are presented, student athletes struggle with finding a balance between their roles as athletes and students thus leading to this population being divided in their roles of being a successful athlete or student (van Rens et al., 2018). For instance, student athletes with low academic identity often embrace an athletic identity in which they dedicate more time and energy into their athletic endeavors. Conversely, students with a high academic identity dedicate more of their efforts towards their academic obligations. Identity conflict is moderately high suggesting that many athletes face significantly more demands based on their multiple roles and increased pressures over time (Lu et al., 2018). The question regarding how to promote the identity of a scholar-athlete, one in which both roles are merged and equal importance is placed, continues to be a dilemma for those involved in athletes' lives. Professional counselors

can be a powerful resource for student athletes in developing a balanced identity that fosters personal, academic, and athletic success. School counselors help students recognize the long-term benefits of their academic endeavors in meeting their future career and personal goals.

Counselors help students develop their identity through the college selection process. There are many factors in college selection: cost, location, majors offered, acceptance rates, etc. These decisions can be overwhelming for any student, especially those that are first generation college students. Often professional school counselors will be called upon by families and students to help interpret information and provide explanations for different policies. This is no different for student athletes, who often face additional decisions and paperwork to complete, including the NCAA applications and accepting offers. Critical decision-making skills, such as those imparted through guidance lessons and individual work with students, can be applied when student athletes decide between multiple offers and multiple school choices (Meyer & Cranmore, 2020a; Meyer & Cranmore, 2020b). Thus, professional school counselors can offer a variety of services to help student athletes meet their unique college admission needs.

NCAA Eligibility Requirements

Yet another obstacle that presents a challenge for athletes includes meeting NCAA admission requirements. While high school graduation requirements vary amongst states, a consistency across the nation is required to play in DI, DII, or DIII. Students must complete more rigid entrance requirements to be considered eligible. For instance, to be considered to play at the Division I and II levels, the following

requirements must be completed: 16 core courses, ACT/SAT completion, maintain a minimum of 2.3 GPA, and create an NCAA certification page so determine qualifier status. While reviewing each one of these variables is beyond the scope of this paper, the importance of the 16 core courses cannot be over-emphasized. The 16 core courses are:

- 4 years of English
- 3 years of math (Algebra 1 or higher)
- 2 years of natural/physical science
 - 1 year must be lab science if your school offers it
- 1 additional year of English, math, or natural/physical science
- 2 years of social science
- 4 additional years of English, math, natural/physical science, social science, foreign language, comparative religion, or philosophy (Next College Student Athlete, n.d.)

The ACT/SAT sliding scales are easily accessible online.

These requirements expose the complexity that each prospective collegiate athlete needs to complete in order to play. An essential role of the professional school counselor here is to monitor these credits and develop a four-year graduation plan that meets graduation requirements while ensuring that the 16 core credits are also met. It is also important the counselor is aware of any special issues regarding certain credits offered at the campus that may not meet the approved NCAA requirements. Each new course the district offers must be submitted to the NCAA to be approved. So, while a new course may meet district graduation requirements, they may not meet the 16 core

requirements for the NCAA. This is especially true for online courses and Career and Technical Education courses. Additionally, students on Individual Education Plans (IEP's) may meet district graduation requirements, but some courses may not count correctly toward the 16 credits. Care should be used in these students' four-year plans.

Taken together, student athletes are in need of holistic services to address their needs in order to excel as both an athlete and scholar as the odds of becoming an intercollegiate athlete is slim. Depending on the sport, the percentage of high school athletes playing in the NCAA ranges from as low as men's wrestling at 3.0% to women's ice hockey 26.2%. Nonetheless, the increased pressure of this committing to play and transitioning into collegiate sports might be mitigated by a supportive high school counselor. The following section will examine the role that the high school counselor plays within the K-12 system.

Best Practices for High School Counselors

An opportunity exists for high school counselors to help admission acceptance for high school student athletes through a series of recommended best practices. While these practices may currently exist within your schools, counselors are encouraged to reevaluate their current processes and procedures to determine what enhancement could be made. The following set of best practices can be tied back to the ACA's ethical principles: Autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity (American Counseling Association, 2014). It is important to consider how the best practices relate to these ethical principles.

Before starting working with student athletes, professional school counselors must spend a considerable amount of time familiarizing themselves with the strict NCAA

requirements that student athletes must meet to play with DI, DII, and DIII institutions. The NCAA hosts a plethora of information regarding eligibility requirements, including a high school portal which contains documents such as the High School Counselors Quick TIPS guide. Furthermore, counselors benefit from joining local, state, and national listservs allowing counselors to network and build from their peers. Lastly, the NCAA publishes the High School Newsletter and the American Counseling Association as a branch dedicated to sport counseling. These aforementioned opportunities should be sought out before gaining hands-on experience with athletes.

Once counselors have a thorough understanding of NCAA requirements, it is important to develop strong collaborative relationships with coaches and athletic staff. This serves two purposes: to develop and implement practices that meet the needs of one's student athlete population as well as help coaches and staff understand NCAA eligibility. In reviewing the former, coaches and counselors can come together to develop workshops based on established NCAA timelines and educational meetings that provide an overview on topics such as physical and mental health, time management, best practices on social media, and the like. Given that each team has a distinct culture and the needs of students are diverse, it is critical that this collaborative effort is dynamic and is frequently revisited. Additionally, with the evidence of grade checks and its positive success on GPA, counselors and coaches can be allies in ensuring this overwhelming task can be tackled. In addition to this, counselors play a role in helping their colleagues understand NCAA requirements (Kitchen et al., 2020). Given that players spend a significant amount of time with their coaches, who also develop relationships with college coaches, it is in the best interests of athletes to have

well-informed coaches that can help serve as reminders to complete tasks such as NCAA certification profiles. The connections established between coaches and counselors are critical for the success of athletic programs, high schools and most important, student athletes and their families.

With an understanding of NCAA requirements and collaborative relationships built with coaches and other athletic staff members, high school counselors should consider creating exit interview workshops to ensure students are meeting established milestones. Counselors will benefit from this best practice as it takes a proactive approach to helping students' understanding and meet the requirements for NCAA eligibility (see Appendix A, B, and C). For instance, while working with freshman student athletes, students will benefit if at the end of their freshman year, they have an understanding of the NCAA core requirements and GPA along with creating their free NCAA profile account. In 10th grade, counselors should conduct exit interviews to help SAs and their families create an NCAA Certification Account, start studying for either the ACT or SAT, review transcripts to ensure SAs are on track to meet NCAA core course requirements, and start scheduling their SAT/ACT appointments. It is important to remind student athletes of the available waivers for both the SAT/ACT and NCAA fees during this time. At the end of students' junior year, workshops should focus on submitting transcripts to the NCAA eligibility center along with reviewing SAT/ACT scores and GPA on the NCAA's sliding scale. While exit interviews will be the best approaches for SAs in grades 9-11, counselors should consider workshops specific to seniors at the beginning of the academic year to ensure NCAA course requirements are being met, discuss if students should consider their second ACT/SAT if necessary, and

complete amateurism questionnaire. While no workshop is necessary, counselors need to communicate with their SAs that they will send official transcripts and proof of graduation to the NCAA eligibility center. Developing and implementing such workshops can help ensure a smoother transition and a higher likelihood of success (Gerlach, 2018).

Developing a website to act as a platform for communication and understanding NCAA requirements can be a powerful and positive experience for counselors, students, and their families. The American School Counselor Association posits that professional school counselors should develop comprehensive school counseling programs that reach every student (ASCA, 2018). While most schools underutilize school websites to disseminate information, counselors can leverage this platform to help their students be more aware of their requirements to play intercollegiate sports and college admission requirements (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Counselors are encouraged to locate and post the plethora of resources that already exist on websites such as the NCAA, ACA, ASCA, and so on. Furthermore, materials developed by the high school counselor, including archived recordings of workshops, can serve as reminders for student athletes and their families of the requirements needed to graduate and transfer. This idea, coupled with using the website as a platform to promote athletics, may lead to a strengthened presence on high school campuses and the larger community it serves.

Conclusion

The high school counselor plays a critical role in the success of high school athletes hoping to take their skills to the next level and play in post-secondary

institutions. The odds of playing at the next level require athletes to be dedicated and persist through unique challenges that their non-athletic peers do not face. With the development and implementation of the aforementioned best practices, high school counselors, student athletes, and other stakeholders who play a role in the success of student athletes can be sure that athletes can have a smooth transition to post-secondary education. Future studies should examine how these best practices inform decision making amongst stakeholders, if collaborations between local community colleges and universities can develop transition resources to best prepare future intercollegiate athletes, and what the effectiveness of current transition programs focusing on student athletes.

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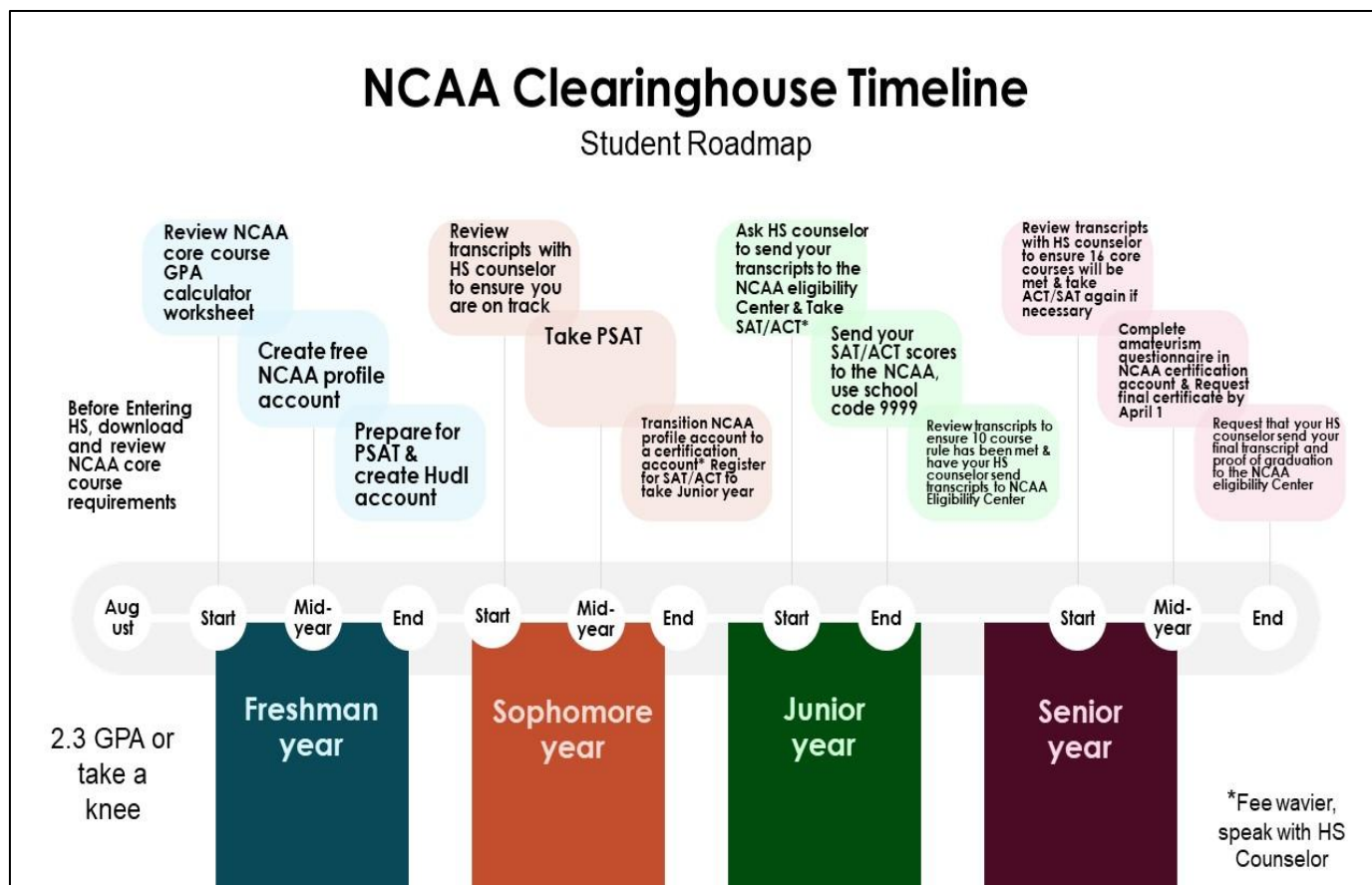
Appendix A

High School Counselor Timeline

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|---|--|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| <p>2020 Aug</p> <p><u>*consider beginning of the year workshop</u></p> | <p>Freshman: Review NCAA requirements</p> <p>Sophomore & junior: Review transcripts (10/16 core courses before the start of the 7th semester)</p> <p>Senior: Review transcripts & Take ACT/SAT (if needed)</p> | <p>2020 Sep</p> | <p><u>Progress reports</u> for all athletes</p> <p>Collaborate with coaches to offer SA workshops</p> <p>Junior: workshop regarding ACT/SAT</p> <p>Senior: workshop</p> | <p>2020 Oct</p> | <p>Sophomore: Sign up for PSAT</p> <p>Offer workshops based on grade level needs</p> |
| <p>2020 Nov</p> | <p>Offer workshops based on grade level needs</p> | <p>2020 Dec</p> | <p>Offer workshops based on grade level needs</p> | <p>2021 Jan</p> | <p>Freshman: Create free NCAA profile account</p> |
| <p>2021 Feb</p> | <p>Freshman: Create Hudl account</p> <p><u>Progress reports</u> for all athletes</p> | <p>2021 Mar</p> | <p>Freshman: Workshop: PSAT</p> <p>Offer workshops based on grade level needs</p> | <p>2021 Apr</p> | <p>Senior: Remind SA to complete amateurism within NCAA certification account</p> |
| <p>2021 May</p> <p><u>*consider end-of-the-year worksho</u></p> | <p>Sophomore: Remind SA to Create NCAA certification account</p> <p>Junior: Send final transcripts to NCAA; review ACT/SAT scores</p> | <p>2021 Jun</p> | <p>Senior: Send final HS transcripts and proof of graduation to NCAA eligibility center</p> | <p>2021 July</p> | <p>Update and review website</p> <p>Create new documents for upcoming school year</p> |

Appendix B

NCAA Clearinghouse Timeline



Appendix C

High School Counselor Resources

[American Counseling Association](#): In the search bar, type in Student Athlete to explore a variety of information regarding Student Athletes

[American School Counselor Association](#): In the search bar, type in NCAA to explore a plethora of information regarding high school Student Athletes

[NAIA Eligibility](#): Given the differences in requirements, Counselors should be informed of the differences between NCAA and NAIA

[2.3OrTakeaKnee](#): Reviews specific requirements for Division 1 sports

[NCAA High School Portal](#): High School Counselors guide, High School Counselor Quick Tips Flyer, Presentation Resources, how to upload transcripts, etc.

[NCAA Test Scores](#): Resource to help inform counselors and student athletes about where to send ACT/SAT scores, sliding scale and GPA requirements

Biographical Statement

Jacqueline Stahlke is a full-time faculty member at Victor Valley College in Victorville, California. Her roles consist of counseling student-athletes, teaching, and is a learning disability specialist. Her research has focused on students with learning disabilities, learning strategies, and student-athletes. She is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and currently finishing her doctoral journey at Grand Canyon University.

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