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Jacob Alan English
Georgia State University, jacobenglish.phd@gmail.com

Ann Cale Kruger
Georgia State University, ackruger@gsu.edu

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Appreciative Advising: Six Phases to Mitigate Stereotype Threat Among Student Athletes

Jacob Alan English

Ann Cale Kruger

Georgia State University

Abstract

Negative stereotypes are pervasive in intercollegiate athletics. The possible threat imposed by stereotypes has the ability to cause anxiety and undermine mental and physical performance. This paper explores how the perceived threat of being stereotyped may undermine athletes' academic performance, and the potential of the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework to reduce that stereotype threat.

The academic underperformance of student athletes is well documented (Levine, Etchison, & Oppenheimer, 2014). Research cites multiple explanations for it: athletic recruitment strategies (Bowen & Levin, 2003), problems with academic support services (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012), stereotypes (Wininger & White, 2008), stereotype threat (Dee, 2014), campus perceptions (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007), academic corruption (Kihl, Richardson, & Campisi, 2008), time constraints (Comeaux, 2010), and dual role conflicts (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). The focus on underperformance perpetuates stereotypes plaguing student athletes. This is especially true of Division I intercollegiate athletes, as this group receives the most negative media attention (Feltz, Schneider, Hwang, & Skogsberg, 2013; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). We will review how the perceived threat of being stereotyped may undermine athletes' academic performance, and we will explore the potential of the emerging practice of appreciative advising to reduce that stereotype threat.

The research portfolio for appreciative advising is small, but growing. Very little research addresses the practice of advising student athletes (but see Crisp, 2013), and there is no research literature on how appreciative advising may mitigate stereotype threat. In this article we will argue for further investigation into the role that appreciative advising could play in assisting student athletes to resist stereotypes and obtain academic achievement and personal wellbeing. Common student athlete stereotypes will be presented along with the associated threats. Empirically-based stereotype threat mitigation strategies will be introduced and then compared to appreciative advising techniques.

Stereotypes and Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes are not harmless and can threaten the performance of the targeted group. The most common stereotype associated with athletes is the dumb jock, which can be traced back to ancient Greece. During 500 B.C. Greek athletes spent more time honing their athletic abilities and less time on academic endeavors (Wininger & White, 2008). More than two thousand years later, this stereotype remains prevalent (see research studies listed in Table 1). Stereotypes depict student athletes as less intelligent, less motivated, and less prepared for class than non-athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Sailes, 1993; Sherman, Weber, & Tegano, 1988;

Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Studies show that faculty members hold more negative stereotypes about Division I and II collegiate athletes than about their non-athlete counterparts (Baucom & Lantz, 2001).

Table 1

Student Athlete (SA) Stereotypes in Empirically-Based Studies

Study	Year	Author(s)	Findings
An Investigation of Faculty Perceptions of Athletics at Division IA Universities	1988	Sherman, Weber, and Tegano	Faculty members' perceptions were collected from 104 universities about athletics on their campus. Sixty-five percent of faculty believed that SAs were not as academically successful as other students.
A Study of Prejudice Toward University Student Athletes	1991	Engstrom and Sedlacek	The Situational Attitude Scale Student Athlete was used to survey perceptions of SAs by 293 incoming freshmen. Students held negative attitudes about SA academic competence.
An Investigation of Campus Stereotypes: The Myth of Black Athletic Superiority and Dumb Jock Stereotype	1993	Sailes	Perceptions were collected from 869 students about SAs and African American student athletes. 45% felt that SAs were not as smart and 44% believed they took easier classes than other students, respectively.
Faculty Attitudes Toward Male Division II Student-Athletes	2001	Baucom and Lantz	A revised Situation Attitude Scale Student Athlete was used to survey perceptions of 409 faculty members about student athletes on campus. Data suggest that faculty held prejudicial views about revenue and non-revenue athletes.
The Athlete Stigma in Higher Education	2007	Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, and Jensen	A survey was completed by 538 SAs about how they were treated by faculty, TAs, and non-student athletes. Only 15% reported positive perceptions. Comments affirmed the dumb jock stereotype (low academic motivation and undeserved privileges).

Stereotype threat is the perceived risk that a negative stereotype about an individual's group will be confirmed by an unfair assessment of the individual group member's behavior (Dee, 2014; Steele, 1997). The threat is more significant if the group member strongly identifies with the stereotyped group and also cares about the domain of behavior being stereotyped. For example, a student who cares about academics and also strongly identifies as a college athlete may feel anxious that the prevailing stereotype will cause a professor to make an unfair assessment of his or her academic performance. Stereotype threat can cause anxiety and undermine mental and physical performance (Beilock & McConnell, 2004), and research has demonstrated this effect in a variety of stereotyped groups. Effects have been shown in African American students' academic performance (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013); minorities' achievement in STEM majors (Beasley & Fischer, 2012); women's performance in mathematics (Johnson, Barnard-Brak, Saxon, & Johnson, 2012) and athletics (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014); older persons' performance in memory and physical ability tasks (Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015), and student athletes' academic performance (Stone, Harrison, & Mottley, 2012). Although stereotypes vary, the threat of a stereotype affects targeted groups in similar ways by increasing anxiety and diminishing performance.

Here is a hypothetical illustration of the phenomenon. A female college student arrives at her classroom to take a mathematics exam. Before the test begins, the professor makes an announcement: "I did not have time to make the test gender neutral, so for the women in the course, try your best on the more difficult questions." Under such a condition, recent studies show that test performance by females will be poorer than performance by males because the professor made the females aware of a negative stereotype, and this increased anxiety and diminished performance. However, under a different condition in which the threat is not invoked, female students' performance on this same test will be equal to that of males. Unfortunately, research also shows that it takes very little to invoke the threat. For example, simply recording one's gender or race at the beginning of a test is sufficient to invoke the threat and negatively affect performance.

Data show that stereotype threat negatively affects the academic performance of student athletes in situations where they are made aware of their athletic identity (Dee, 2014; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), and in some cases when they are made aware of both their student and athletic identities simultaneously (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009). Dee (2014) manipulated the social identity that was invoked, or primed, in an experimental situation to examine its effect on cognitive performance. Athletes and non-athletes were randomly assigned to either a treatment or control group. The control group was given a one-page questionnaire asking students about housing and living arrangements. The treatment group was given a one-page questionnaire asking if students were members of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), if they played a sport, which sport, and the frequency of scheduling conflicts between athletics and academic requirements. After the one-page questionnaire both groups were given 30 minutes to complete a test comprised of 30 quantitative questions and 9 verbal questions taken from the Graduate Records Examination (GRE). Test scores for non-athletes did not differ between the treatment and control groups. However, test scores for student athletes were significantly lower in the treatment group than in the control group. Student athletes' cognitive abilities suffered when their athletic identity was primed before an academic assessment.

Yopyk and Prentice (2005) found similar results in their study. Two experiments were conducted to explore the influence of stereotype threat on student test performance and self-regard. In the first study, athletes and non-athletes were randomly assigned to one of three groups that primed either their extracurricular identity, their student identity, or no identity. Participants included members of the football team, the men's ice hockey team, and three all-male *a cappella* singing groups. The students assigned to the extracurricular identity group were asked to write about their last athletic competition or singing performance. The students assigned to the student identity

group were asked to write about their last academic success. The students assigned to the control group were asked to write specific directions on how to get to the library from their dorm. After the writing session, each group was given the Self-Rating Scale questionnaire and a test with ten math problems. Student athletes who were primed for their athletic identity performed worse on the math test and also reported lower academic self-regard than the other groups. In the second experiment, student athletes were first primed by completing either the self-rating inventory or the math test used in the first experiment. It was hypothesized that the self-rating inventory would elicit an athletic identity and the math test would elicit a student identity. Participants included members of the football team, the men's ice hockey team, and the baseball team. After the prime, all participants completed a task that required them to fill in the letters of 20 word fragments. For example: (eight fragments with words related to an athletic identity) TE_ _ _ _ _ _ [TEAMWORK]; _ _ NN_ _ _ [WINNING]; (eight fragments with words related to a student identity) ST_ _ _ [STUDY]; and (four fragments with words related to both identities) A _ _ _ _ _ IC [ATHLETIC, ACADEMIC]. Student athletes who were primed by the self-rating inventory used more athletic-related words to complete fragments, while student athletes who were primed by the math test used more student-related words to complete fragments. These findings show that after priming a particular aspect of a student's identity, the identity remains in mind and is directly represented in the student's subsequent completion of vague word fragments; that is, it continues to influence seemingly unrelated subsequent task performance.

Harrison and colleagues (2009) investigated the interaction between athletic identity and gender in their effect on task performance, exploring the type of cues that cause stereotype threat among collegiate athletes. Male and female student athletes completed a GRE-style 40-item test of verbal analogies. Before taking the test, students were asked if they participated in Division I athletics (athletic identity), or if they were scholar-athletes (academic-athletic identity), or if they were research participants (neutral). The authors hypothesized that since females are generally more engaged in academics than males, they would be more threatened by a dumb jock stereotype. Results confirmed that female athletes performed worse than their male counterparts when primed for their academic-athletic identity. The findings support the theoretical assertion that to perceive a stereotype as threatening, a student must identify with both the domain of behavior being assessed (academics) and the group (athletics).

Interventions can mitigate stereotype threat by promoting student individuality (Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, & Mitchell, 2004), shaping theories on intelligence (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002), activating positive stereotypes (Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002), and encouraging students to set and meet high standards (Cohen & Steele, 2002; Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager & Walton, 2011). The latter type of intervention will be the focus of the next section.

Empirically-Based Mitigation Strategies

A review of empirical studies (Yeager and Walton, 2011) suggests that psychological interventions can mitigate stereotype threat and produce positive and long-lasting effects on student's academic achievement. These interventions focus on the student's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the self and thus they are similar to appreciative advising, where the advisor also focuses on a student's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their academic achievement.

Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master (2006) conducted two randomized field experiments (the second was a replication) to explore the influence of self-affirmation on the academic performance of African American students in seventh grade. African American students experience higher levels of stress in the classroom than other students due to negative stereotypes about their academic performance. A racial gap in achievement was present in the classroom studied. In the

intervention, students were assigned to a self-affirmation group or a control group. The affirmation group was given a list of values and asked to identify their most important values. The control group was given the same list and asked to identify their least important values. Then each student wrote why the values they chose were selected as important or not important. African American students in the affirmation group received higher grades during the term than African American students in the control group. The findings suggest that the intervention reduced stereotype threat and encouraged the students in the affirmation group to realize their strengths and values. Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel & Brzustoski (2009) completed a two year follow-up study to test the long-term effects of the intervention. The increase in grade point averages continued for two years with a limited amount of self-affirmation exercises.

If a student does not have a sense of belonging or feels academically inadequate in an educational environment, he or she may be less motivated or may feel threatened by unfair judgment. Walton and Cohen (2007) conducted two experiments to assess how belonging uncertainty destabilizes the achievement of stigmatized groups in academic settings. Thirty-six African American and thirty-four European American undergraduate students were selected to participate in the study. Experiment 1 manipulated the level of threat to the student's sense of belonging by randomly assigning them to one of three groups. Two of the groups were assigned to list either two friends (easier) or eights friends (harder) who would fit well in the computer science department. The control group did not make a list. The students were then asked to complete several measures to assess their own sense of belonging to the computer science department and the belonging of other students (students were given other student profiles with pictures). The results showed that the manipulation did not affect European American students. However, African American students who experienced difficulty listing eight friends reported that they felt they did not belong in the department and also felt that other African American students did not belong. It appears that the threat of not being able to list eight friends created a sense of self-doubt among African American students. Experiment 2 sought to reduce the threat in the first experiment by telling students that all students (regardless of race) have feelings that they do not belong, but it dissipates over time. Students then participated in three activities that confirmed the message. The activity that is most relevant to appreciative advising was the use of daily diaries. Students were emailed an afternoon and evening questionnaire asking them to report their achievement behaviors for seven days. Results show that African American students who used the daily diaries had grade point averages that increased from sophomore to senior year and their sense of belonging improved. Walton and Cohen (2011) completed another study on belonging that replicated Experiment 2 from 2007. The new three-year study found that the intervention improved minority students' sense of belonging as well as self-reported physical health and happiness. In fact, the intervention reduced doctor visits up to three years after the intervention.

Appreciative Advising

Appreciative advising, also known as strength-based advising, was developed out of a combination of positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and social constructivism. Positive psychology studies the phenomena of human happiness and wellbeing (Rodrigues-Munoz & Sanz-Vergel, 2013). Founded in 1997 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman, positive psychology studies three pillars of happiness: positive emotion, positive traits, and positive institutions (Kristjansson, 2012). Recent studies suggest that positive psychology interventions lead to greater levels of wellbeing for college students (Leontopoulou, 2015; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011). These interventions have been shown to elicit increased feelings of hope and social support, a greater ability to handle stressors, and improved awareness of character strengths. Interventions

may include, but are not limited to, goal setting, optimism, character strengths, gratitude, time and resource allocation, and flow (D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014). Positive psychology is a relatively new field and only recently has been applied in the field of education.

Appreciative inquiry is an approach based in positive psychology and was developed by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney in the 1980s. The approach focuses on supporting organizational change by augmenting strengths, rather than mending weaknesses (Doggett & Lewis, 2013; Samba, 2013). Social constructivism is a theory of knowledge; it asserts that learners jointly create knowledge by authentic participation with others in the community (Llyas, Rawat, Bhatti, & Malik, 2013). Social constructivists do not direct students to learn (in advising this would be called prescriptive advising); rather they support the student to develop knowledge through participation in activities. Appreciative advising applies the theories of positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and social constructivism to the advisement of college students by focusing on the talents of a student, rather than on what is not working (Bloom & Martin, 2002). Advisors build rapport with students by asking positive and intentional open-ended questions to allow the student to explore their aspirations, create a plan to achieve those aspirations, provide feedback and encouragement to achieve goals and act beyond those goals.

The first implementation of appreciative advising took place in 2003 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The university used the approach with students on academic probation. The advising model led to improved retention rates and a significant grade point average gain (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). From 2003 to 2009, eight institutions incorporated appreciative advising into their institutional units. (Bloom, Hutson, He, Amundsen, Buyarski, Christman, Cuevas, Woodward, Murray, Robinson, & Kucharczyk, 2009; see Table 2). These institutions used appreciative advising in different units to facilitate goal setting, incorporate strength into the student's academic work, overcome fears, and retain students.

Table 2

Institutions That Are Intentionally Incorporating Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2009)

Institution	Carnegie Classification	2008 Enrollment	Unit Using Appreciate Advising	How the Institutional Unit is Using AA
University of North Carolina at Greensboro	Research university (high research activity)	16,872	Student Academic Services Office	Advising, adviser training, undergraduate academic courses (First-Year Experience and class for probation students), advising pre-nursing students who do not meet standards, Appreciative Advising Inventory, and graduate-level ESL courses
University of North Carolina at Wilmington	Master's (larger programs)	12,098	University College	Advising, adviser training, TEAL Learning Community, and Academic Recovery Program

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis	Research university (high research activity)	29,764	University College	Advising students on probation, workshops for students on probation, and adviser training
University of South Carolina at Columbia	Research university (very high research activity)	27,390	Academic Centers for Excellence; Higher Education and Student Affairs program	Advising students on probation, adviser training, Appreciative Advising Inventory, advising master's degree students in Higher Education and Student Affairs program, and graduate-level course that focuses on Appreciative Advising
Miami University Hamilton	Special focus institution	2,522	Office of Academic Advising and Student Retention	Advising all students, including probation students; advising syllabus; adviser training; and Appreciative Advising Inventory
Eastern Illinois University	Master's (larger programs)	12,349	Bachelor of Arts in General Studies program	Advising adult and non-traditional students, electronic advising
Prairie State College	Associate's public suburban	5,294	College-wide	Advising at-risk students, faculty and adviser training
Grand Valley State University	Master's (larger programs)	23,295	CLAS Academic Advising Center (pre-professional advising)	Advising pre-professional students

To describe student response to appreciative advising, Truschel (2008) administered the Appreciative Advising Instrument to 112 college students who had a 2.0 grade point average and were on academic warning. Students had received three appreciative advisement sessions during the first five weeks of the semester. Students improved in motivation, confidence, academic responsibility, and dedication to academic achievement. Hutson (2010) compared two cohorts of students. The first cohort participated in a first-year experience program that did not include appreciative advising. The second cohort participated in a similar first-year program plus appreciative advising. The second cohort achieved higher grade point averages and retention rates and reported greater feelings of confidence and academic readiness.

Appreciative Advising and Student Athletes

Why begin the quest for change in athletics with academic advisement? First, academic advisement is an essential component of the student athlete experience. In 1975, the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) was formed to assist college student athletes, to focus on the unique issues they face (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). College athletes are challenged with balancing athletics and academics while meeting the expectations of professors, coaches, friends, and family (Yukhymenko–Lescroart, 2014; Surujlal, Van Zyl, & Nolan, 2013). Second, academic advisors can be effective in offering varied strategies. Advisors must be adept in career counseling, identifying effective leadership skills, and appreciative inquiry (Kelly, 2009). Academic advisement in higher education has been shown to facilitate learning (Borgard, 2009), cultivate a sense of academic self-efficacy (Gore, 2006), increase retention through frequency of advisement appointments (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013), and aid in goal setting (Burg & Mayhall, 2002).

Table 3

Six Phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Huston, & He, 2008)

Phase	Advisor/Student actions
Disarm	Make a positive first impression and building a rapport with the student.
Discovery	Ask positive open-ended question to receive insight on the strengths of the student.
Dream	Student states their aspirations.
Design	Advisor and student create plan of action to reach stated goals.
Deliver	Student takes steps to act on plan and receives encouragement from the advisor.
Don't settle	Student and advisor set high expectations and take actions beyond stated goals.

Why consider appreciative advising to reduce stereotype threat among student athletes? First, overall wellbeing (both academic and personal) is at the core of both appreciative advising and threat mitigation. The appreciative advisor supports the student to explore educational aspirations and attain goals. By focusing on strengths and devising a plan, the student gains tools to positively navigate challenges, possibly including stereotype threat. Second, tested strategies to mitigate stereotype threats are similar to the six phases of appreciative advising (see Table 3) in their focus on positive personal development. Research shows that negative stereotypes about athletes are pervasive in the college community, and the threat caused by these stereotypes can undermine cognitive performance. Appreciative advising, like threat mitigation interventions, focuses on affirming positive traits, reducing stress, and improving a sense of adequacy, motivation, and academic performance. Research is needed to determine how the psychological processes of

mitigation strategies and appreciative advising techniques are similar and how their outcome effects compare. It is an empirical question whether appreciative advising works, at least in part, by aiding resistance against negative stereotypes.

Discussion

Through the years the NCAA has responded to negative press about academic underperformance by college athletes (Gayles & Hu, 2009) by changing administrative processes and procedures, rather than directly addressing the personal needs and challenges unique to these students. Examples of those changes are the Academic Progress Rate (APR) and the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). APR is a term-by-term calculation of retention rates and eligibility among Division I student athletes with athletic scholarships. GSR tracks the six-year graduation trends of Division I student athletes with athletic scholarships, taking into account student athletes who transfer in and transfer out of the university. A team must receive specific scores in both APR and GSR ratings to qualify for competition. It appears that the required rating score for APR has changed annually since 2012.

An assumption can be made that the NCAA reforms are not working as expected since new reforms are created every year. For example, starting in 2016, incoming freshmen desiring to compete in intercollegiate athletics must meet new initial eligibility requirements. Students will be required to complete 16 core courses, with 10 of those core courses being taken prior to their seventh semester in high school (NCAA, 2015). It is commendable that the NCAA is connecting with a potential intercollegiate athlete as early as high school, but the reform again changes rules and procedures rather than directly supports the personal growth that underlies academic success. We argue that reforms must leverage the personal strengths of student athletes to enhance their academic success in college and personal success thereafter.

This article reviewed the dumb jock stereotype and the threat that it and other stereotypes pose (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Sailes, 1993; Sherman, Weber, & Tegano, 1988; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Wininger & White, 2008). We described four studies of threat mitigation strategies that included self-affirmations and encouraging achievement behaviors and that had a positive effect on academic outcomes (Cohen et. al, 2006; Cohen et al., 2009: Walton & Cohen, 2007, Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011). The positive outcomes of mitigation strategies are comparable to those that result from appreciative advising (Hutson, 2010; Kamphoff et al. 2007; Truschel, 2008). However, there is no research evidence directly linking appreciative advising and stereotype threat mitigation. Researchers should systematically examine the possible benefits of appreciative advising for student athletes. In particular, investigators should study whether appreciative advising works in part by mitigating stereotype threat, a not uncommon source of academic underperformance in this population.

Intercollegiate athletics is multimillion-dollar enterprise. The wealth and celebrity athletic programs generate can distract attention from the personal support that student athletes need to assure their wellbeing. It is the responsibility of higher education professionals to maintain a focus on the athletes as individuals and on our responsibility for their education. Student athletes can be successful in both athletic and academic arenas, but educational reforms that are student-centered, rather than systems-centered, are necessary.

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