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Research Article

## Providing Integrative Career Counseling with Junior Ice Hockey Players: A Trial of a Career-Based Curriculum

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### Abstract

There are many negative health effects associated with the potential change in identity associated with an athlete's retirement, such as depression, identity crisis, alcohol/substance abuse, decreased self-confidence and eating disorders. This study examines a ten-session career-curriculum designed to assist in education and career development with the integrative outcome goal of helping Junior Ice Hockey Players (JIHPs) feel more confident about their futures after athletic retirement. Twenty-two JIHPs aged 16-19 years ( $M = 17.86$ ) from a team located in the Pacific Northwest participated in a ten-session career development curriculum. Their hockey playing experience ranged from 7-17 years ( $M = 11.7$ ). The curriculum included a pre and post-test assessment rating factors important to career development, which were identified as time management and goal-setting skills, poor financial education, and a lack of college and/or career readiness. The mean rating for each pre-test question was calculated to determine the need for education in each area. After completing the curriculum, participants reported having stronger knowledge and confidence in time management, goal setting and financial education. Participants also stated they had more confidence in their future career directions.

**Keywords:** Career readiness; College readiness; Junior ice hockey; Transition

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## Providing Integrative Career Counseling with Junior Ice Hockey Players

Ice hockey is a distinctive sport. Males aged 16-21 years have the opportunity to play junior ice hockey full-time after leaving high school and before entering the professional draft or playing collegiately. No other sport allows players a two- to three-year gap between their high school and college/professional careers in order to develop their skills. The purpose of junior ice hockey leagues is to provide adolescents and young adults with opportunities to gain skills, quality coaching, social maturity, educational advancement, recruiting exposure, advanced competition and protection of their amateur status [1]. In other words, these leagues seek to prepare their athletes for a future career as a professional or collegiate player. There are many unique challenges that Junior Ice Hockey Players (JIHPs) face, such as: balancing educational demands, adjusting to higher performance standards, relocation away from family, and preparing for whatever their future holds for them [2].

Often, JIHPs take a minimum two-year break from academic study to play hockey before they enter college as 19-21-year-old freshmen or enter a professional hockey league. Those who do not play professionally or attend college will be forced into athletic retirement, which can be harmful to their ego and identity [3,4]. There are many negative effects associated with the change in identity that comes with an athlete's retirement, such as depression, identity crisis, alcohol/substance abuse, decreased self-confidence and eating disorders [3,5]. These identity struggles can then cause difficulties when athletes try to create a non-athletic-related career or personal identity after their athletic career is over [6].

The return to academia or the workforce has been shown to be difficult for many of these players, as they tend to struggle with time-management, grades, athletic performance, and social behavior. These athletes also tend to lack the career skills and experience it takes to maintain a steady job [6,7]. The goal of career counseling is "to help clients learn to take actions to achieve more satisfying career and personal lives - not to make a single career decision" [8]. Claim that athletes in general have consistently reported lower scores than their non-athlete counterparts on educational and career plans [9]. Stated that athletic preoccupation may result in inadequate attention being given to educational and career plans [10]. Implementing career counseling for JIHPs may help them live more satisfying career and personal lives once their hockey careers are over. It can be a good way to show JIHPs that the skills that make them great hockey players can also make them great at a career. Career counseling may also reduce career immaturity and other symptoms associated with JIHPs' strong feelings towards their athletic identity and retirement [8].

There is a gap in the literature regarding ways to assist JIHPs in their journey toward athletic retirement. Such assistance can help them feel more confident and prepared for their future career or academic endeavors. Although there are plenty of career-related programs for professional and Olympic athletes, there are no programs

that address the unique case of JIHPs. In fact, most junior hockey organizations do not talk to their athletes about their career or education after hockey and tend to focus entirely on the hockey aspect [10]. The purpose of this study is to describe the development of a ten-session career/education curriculum geared towards preparing JIHPs for life after hockey.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 22 JIHP males aged 16–19 years ( $M=17.86$ ) from a team located in the American Pacific Northwest. Their hockey playing experience ranged from 7-17 years ( $M=11.72$ ). 12 of the team members were veterans, having played at least one previous year of junior hockey, while the remaining ten players were partaking in their first year of junior ice hockey. All participants were Caucasian and born and raised in the United States of America. The curriculum used in this study, which will be outlined below, was designed specifically for JIHPs. Culture, gender/sex, and years involved with the team/league were some factors that needed to be considered when facilitating the lessons. If an athlete began the program and then stopped participating in their hockey team, they were ineligible to continue participating in the curriculum, as doing so could have disturbed the flow of the group, as they were no longer a member of the team, which could create conflict and confusion.

### Ethical considerations

The study obtained International Review Board (IRB) approval on December 13, 2017. All participants signed informed consent form for study participation. Participants aged less than 18 years also provided written parental permission. The primary investigator, Jaime Sawchuk, passed a background check completed by the State of Oregon as well as the State of Alaska approving her to work with minors. All parents, coaches and participants were aware of the purpose of the study and received a letter outlining the goals and methodology of the research and the curriculum itself. All parties were notified that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The study had minimal potential risk and discomfort. All information provided by participants remained confidential. Parents and coaches were not given access to any of the information that the participants provided the investigator.

### Current curriculum

Over the course of ten sessions, the investigator taught a career-based curriculum to 22 JIHPs to help them in their transition to college or the workforce. The working curriculum is designed to be a resource for individuals working with JIHPs to assist them in recognizing that their athletic skills are transferable to the workforce and the world of academia. It is important to note that although not everyone strongly identifies with their culture or their major roles in society, athletes are likely to strongly identify with their athletic role [3]. This being the case, there are many negative effects associated with athletic retirement, such as: depression, identity crises, alcohol/substance abuse, decreased self-confidence and eating disorders [3,5].

The curriculum was designed to help JIHPs blend their athletic identity with the other roles they play in society. Many athletic skills are transferable to the workplace and the academic environment, and this curriculum will help empower JIHPs by capitalizing on those skills.

Players will complete a skills/interests assessment, begin identifying their skills, learn about proper time and stress management, learn how to set SMART goals, complete a resume, receive financial planning and receive transition and identity counseling. Career development is a lifelong process, which is why it is beneficial for athletes to begin thinking about and preparing for their future career while still playing their sport.

Participants were given a pre-survey questionnaire to assess their comfort and confidence in the future and help them consider ideas for future pursuits. Understanding what their future goals are be they academic or career-related was a huge component of achieving the goals set forth in the curriculum. The same survey was given at the end of the curriculum to assess changes in participants' attitude, comfort ability and confidence in the future. The first fifteen questions were "yes/no" answers, while the remaining 20 questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale where one indicated "strongly disagree" and five indicated "strongly agree". Questions inquired about participants' future plans, hockey identity, time management skills, money management skills, career knowledge, and goal setting skills.

At the end of sessions two through nine, participants were given a short questionnaire asking what they learned, what they liked about the session, and what they believed could have been improved in the lesson. The purpose of this was to give the investigator an idea of what worked well in the curriculum and what may or may not have needed adjustment for future sessions. The first nine questions inquired about the session itself and whether or not the participant learned anything new throughout the lesson. These questions were answered according to a five-point Likert scale where one indicated "strongly disagree" and five was "strongly agree". The final four questions were "fill in the blank" questions, in which the participants were able to provide the investigator with individualized feedback regarding the most useful things they learned, the least useful things they learned, questions about the lesson, and suggested improvements for future sessions.

### Data analysis

During the ten-session curriculum, participants filled out a total of ten surveys. The purpose of Session One's pre-curriculum survey was to give the administrator an idea of their knowledge of and confidence with entering the workforce or beginning college. During Session Ten, participants filled out the same survey, referred to as the post-curriculum survey, to provide an idea of how the curriculum helped shape or increase their knowledge of and/or comfort ability with entering the workforce or beginning college. The eight session surveys served to give the investigator an idea of what worked well in the curriculum and what may or may not need to be adjusted for future sessions. They also assessed what participants learned from the sessions and how they perceived it would help them in the future.

**Pre-post survey:** The pre-post survey consisted of 35 questions. The first fifteen questions required a "yes/no" answer. Participants had the option to answer "not applicable" for Question Two ("If I go to college, I know what I would major in"), as not all participants wanted to attend college, making this question inapplicable to them. Responses were then assessed according to the percentage of yes/no answers.

The remaining 20 questions allowed participants to respond on a five-point Likert scale. An answer of one indicated "strongly

disagree” and five indicated “strongly agree”. Questions inquired about participants’ future plans, hockey identities, time management skills, money management skills, career knowledge and goal-setting skills. Six questions were dedicated to college readiness, seven questions related to career readiness, four questions translated to time management skills, six questions were directly related to goal-setting skills, four questions indicated financial knowledge, and the remaining eight questions concerned hockey identity.

At the end of the curriculum, the pre- and post-survey results were compared to see if participants’ knowledge and confidence regarding college and/or career readiness had changed. The responses were assessed by the percentage of responses that were “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree” and “strongly agree”. The mean rating for each question was then calculated to determine the need for education in each area.

**Session survey:** At the end of Sessions Two through Nine, participants were given a short questionnaire asking what they learned, what they liked about the session, and what they believed could have been improved in the lesson. The purpose of this was to determine the participants’ opinions and perceptions of the session’s acceptability and ease-of-use, content and usefulness for their future.

The first nine Likert statements concerned the session itself and whether or not the participants learned anything new from the session, as well as participants’ opinions and perceptions of the acceptability and ease-of-use of the session. Responses conformed to a five-point Likert scale where a rating of one indicated “strongly disagree” and five indicated “strongly agree”. These results were calculated as the percentage of responses in each category, being “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree”. A mean rating for each question was then calculated to determine the fluidity and effectiveness of each session.

The final four questions required participants to “fill in the blanks” to provide their individualized feedback regarding the most useful things they learned, the least useful things they learned, their questions about the lesson and any improvements they would suggest for future sessions. These short-answer questions included: 1) what were the most useful things that you learned during the session? 2) What were the least useful things you learned during the session? 3) What questions do you still have about today’s topic? And 4) what improvements do you suggest for the next session? The curriculum is designed to be a fluid and on-going document that incorporates participants’ feedback so they get the most knowledge out of the curriculum itself. In other words, after each implementation of the curriculum, feedback from participants will be taken into consideration to make the curriculum stronger and more effective. Answers to these questions will be considered when making future adjustments to the curriculum.

## Results

In general, participants started the curriculum at Session One with limited college and career readiness and narrow knowledge of how skills learned from hockey (such as time management, goal setting and overall hockey identity) are transferrable into collegiate or workforce settings. Participants also had limited knowledge of how to prioritize and manage their time, how to properly set goals, how to manage their finances, and how attached to their athletic identity they were.

At the end of the curriculum, participants indicated higher college and career readiness, better time management skills, proper goal setting skills, more adequate financial education and had less attachment to their athletic identity. A comparison of the ratings obtained in Sessions one and ten are presented in tables 1 & 2, which show that participants increased their confidence and knowledge related to most of the questions (Tables 1 & 2).

## Discussion

At the conclusion of the program, participants reported improvement in all areas covered in the curriculum. This study addressed a gap in the literature regarding ways to assist the specific population of JIHPs in their journey toward athletic retirement, although there are career-related programs for other types of athletes. Research has shown that involvement in sport has a potentially significant impact on perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of athletes [11]. Unfortunately, there is limited empirical support and information regarding how sport involvement translates into other non-athletic areas of life, such as career or education readiness, especially when it comes to the understudied population of JIHP’s [11]. Although it can be effective, handing a JIHP a packet to fill out does not necessarily help them in their transition or fully get them career or education ready. Most current transition curriculums focus on athletes that were not JIHP’s nor did they have a systematic evaluation piece, but rather anecdotal evidence of success by talking with a few of the participants who achieved success after completing their program.

## Limitations

Although the results suggest that the curriculum was helpful for these participants in developing the skills that will prepare them for future colleges and careers, there are many limitations to this study. The first and most obvious limitation is the small sample size. Not only does the sample size lack diversity, but it also only represents one tier level of hockey and one type of league. Junior hockey has many more leagues across the United States and Canada that would have been good to include this study. American males aged 16-20 years were the only population examined and there is potential to expand this population in future studies. Another limitation of the study is the short time period provided to implement the curriculum. Due to time restraints, all sessions were completed within five weeks. It might be more beneficial if participants only had one session per week. Finally, there was only one facilitator trained for this curriculum. Although that was acceptable for this study, larger future studies would need more facilitators that are trained to implement the curriculum and collect data to ensure validity and reliability.

## Implications for Future Research

The main purpose of collecting data from Sessions Two through Ten was to examine what worked well in the curriculum, what needed to be adjusted for future sessions, what participants learned from the sessions, and how it will help them in the future. All of these answers will be taken into consideration when modifying the curriculum to be more effective and educational in the future. Future modifications of the curriculum according to participants’ suggestions could include: shorter sessions, longer sessions, individual rather than group sessions, using computers instead of smart phones, more debriefing, smaller groups, and using more examples of how to manage time.

#	Question	Pre-curriculum mean	Post-curriculum mean	Change
1	I would like to attend college	77% Yes	91% Yes	14% Increase
2	If I go to college, I know what I would major in	45% Yes	82% Yes	37% Increase
3	I know what I would like to have as a future career	40% Yes	95% Yes	55% Increase
4	I currently have a resume	40% Yes	100% Yes	60% Increase
5	I love playing hockey	100% Yes	100% Yes	<b>No Change</b>
6	When I meet new people, I introduce myself as a hockey player	77% Yes	50% Yes	<b>27% Decrease</b>
7	I know how to manage money	45% Yes	73% Yes	28% Increase
8	I have good time management skills	31% Yes	77% Yes	46% Increase
9	I would like to make a living playing hockey someday	86% Yes	100% Yes	14% Increase
10	I have job or work experience	68% Yes	77% Yes	9% Increase
11	It is important to plan for the future	100% Yes	100% Yes	<b>No Change</b>
12	I know the amount of education and/or training that is required for my career after high school	63% Yes	95% Yes	32% Increase
13	I set long-term goals for myself	63% Yes	91% Yes	28% Increase
14	I set short-term goals for myself	77% Yes	91% Yes	14% Increase
15	I like to be prepared and have a plan for myself	95% Yes	100% Yes	5% Increase

**Table 1:** Rate of “Yes” Answers to Survey Statements, Pre-curriculum vs. Post-curriculum.

#	Statement	Pre-survey mean rating	Post-survey mean rating	Change
16	I feel prepared for college	2.81	3.72	0.91 Increase
17	I feel prepared to enter the job market	3.68	4.18	0.50 Increase
18	I am knowledgeable on financial education	2.63	3.77	1.14 Increase
19	I could really care less about school. The sooner I get out, the better	2.50	1.86	<b>0.64 Decrease</b>
20	My family is the only reason I would attend college. Otherwise, I wouldn't go	2.13	1.72	<b>0.41 Decrease</b>
21	I am goal-oriented	3.68	4.23	0.55 Increase
22	Education is important to my future	3.68	4.41	0.73 Increase
23	I am good at managing money	2.81	3.63	0.82 Increase
24	Goal setting is one of the skills that I have learned from playing hockey	3.63	4.32	0.69 Increase
25	I often think about my future career	3.72	4.18	0.46 Increase
26	I set goals for myself in hockey and in school	3.72	4.23	0.51 Increase
27	I am good at prioritizing and managing my time	3.22	3.82	0.60 Increase
28	Someone has taught me financial education	3.22	4.73	1.51 Increase
29	The idea of retiring from hockey scares me	3.95	3.95	<b>No Change</b>
30	I believe that I am an athlete first and a student second	3.18	2.54	<b>0.64 Decrease</b>
31	I know exactly what skills and experience I should put on my resume	2.90	4.27	1.37 Increase
32	Most of my interests are hockey related	3.63	3.36	<b>0.27 Decrease</b>
33	I know what I will do when my hockey career is over	3.68	4.23	0.55 Increase
34	Time Management is one of the skills that I have learned from playing hockey	3.41	4.72	0.86 Increase
35	Some of the skills I use in hockey are similar to those I use in school or at a job	3.40	4.09	0.69 Increase

**Table 2:** Likert Scale Ratings of Agreement with Survey Statements, Pre-curriculum vs. Post-curriculum.

Future research will also incorporate a larger population that covers more of the United States and Canada and different hockey tiers and leagues, and includes participants that are 21 years of age. Not only will this increase the validity and reliability of the survey, but it will provide more information on what this population needs in general to succeed in the future.

## Conclusion

After completing the curriculum, participants reported having stronger knowledge and confidence in time management, goal setting

and financial education. Participants also indicated more confidence in their future career directions. Helping athletes in transition such as these JIHP's apply the lessons they have learned through athletics to everyday life can be extremely rewarding. Channeling a JIHP's passion into a new pursuit can help them positively transition to a new phase of life, which will help alleviate some of the negative symptoms associated with retirement. The purpose of the curriculum is not to have JIHP's let go of their athletic identity, but rather to help them to see how their hard work, dedication, and skills developed as an athlete can also transfer to helping them be more successful in life outside of sport, specifically in their career or academic pursuits.

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