

# Building a sport psychology presence at a small, Division III, liberal arts teaching college: Reflections on the process thus far



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## INTRODUCTION

- Many graduate students in sport psychology programs observe or collaborate with veteran sport psychology professionals as part of supervised training (Weinberg & Butt, 2021) but are then disillusioned by the realities of actually working in the field (Martin, 2020).
- Doing applied sport psychology work often requires a creative, entrepreneurial approach to gaining entry (Balague et al., 2011), and this is particularly apparent when working in academia at a teaching-focused institution.
- Heymann and colleagues (2022) identified stages of reflective practice for employability competences and career development (see Figure 1), and this conceptual model can be applied to early career professionals navigating their way through sport psychology employment opportunities after graduation.

## PURPOSE

- To reflect on the process of building a sport psychology presence at a small, Division III, liberal arts teaching college

## METHODS

### Participant

Female tenure-track Kinesiology faculty member (starting year 4) working at a small, Division III, liberal arts, teaching college on the East Coast (USA)

### Procedure and Analysis

An experiential writing reflection informed by Heymann et al. (2022) was conducted; excerpts were categorized according to the stages of reflective practice for employability (Heymann et al., 2022).

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS

Sample excerpts from the experiential reflection that align with each phase of Heymann et al.'s (2022) model are found below:

### Become Aware

- "After being trained by CMPCs at a Division I institution with grant funding for sport psychology services, I was disillusioned by the limited amount of discretionary funds provided to Division III coaches."
- "70% of my tenure and promotion evaluation is related to my ability to teach. I cannot spend all of my time doing applied work."
- "There has never been a professional explicitly trained in sport psychology/mental performance working here until my arrival. No one really knows what to expect..."

### Analyze the Current State

- "COVID-19 and the additional years of athletic eligibility have adversely impacted recruiting, retention, and endowments."
- "I have had three Athletic Directors in four years (who each brought in new leadership). I have also navigated multiple changes in Athletic Trainers. The constant turnover makes it hard to gain momentum with programming."
- "The mental health counselor assigned to work explicitly in the athletic department is paid a salary from the counseling center and does not bill through the athletic department. This makes it challenging to determine a fee structure that is feasible."
- "There seems to be a disconnect between the 'old school' and 'new school' coaches in terms of valuing sport psychology services; many coaches have no idea what sport psychology is."
- "I am usually only getting 'called' by coaches when things are going 'wrong' with a team and/or athlete."

### Draft and Plan a Solution; Take Action

- "I will advocate for more face time with coaches by presenting at their first meeting of the semester."
- "I will consult with the strength and conditioning coaches to assess how they bill for ad-hoc services."
- "I will open an LLC to keep my consulting services separate from my tenure-track responsibilities on campus."
- "I will offer a free workshop to each team to provide psychoeducation about what sport psychology is/is not. These presentations can illuminate my skillset and the types of services I can provide."
- "I will discount 'in-house' consulting services to incentivize participation yet uphold the value of said services."
- "I will speak with the clubs on campus that cater to student-athletes and prioritize community outreach."

### Reflect on the Action

- "Dual roles can be challenging... at a small school, I teach many of the student-athletes. I do not engage in 1:1 consulting when actively teaching a student-athlete."
- "After my first presentation with the coaches, many teams seemed interested in group sessions."
- "I have to make sure not to over-promise and under-deliver."
- "My continued training in counseling will be useful given the elevated mental health concerns expressed by our athletes."

## DISCUSSION

- Reflections mirror the same barriers to implementing sport psychology services (e.g., time, cost, access) outlined by high school coaches (Ford et al., 2022) and collegiate athletic administrators (Wrisberg et al., 2012).
- While full-time applied sport psychology roles are sparse (Martin, 2020), building a presence from scratch while simultaneously maintaining stable employment in the field (teaching, research) provides an opportunity to be patient, seek additional supervision, and overcome any deception associated with applied work opportunities (Portenga et al., 2016).
- Reflections also parallel the recent AASP research on job opportunities in mental performance (Vosloo et al., 2020). The demand for sport psychology seems to be increasing (Vosloo et al., 2020), prompting the need for program development. Many athletes at smaller, Division III institutions continue to advocate for sport psychology services (Murray & Ford, 2021).

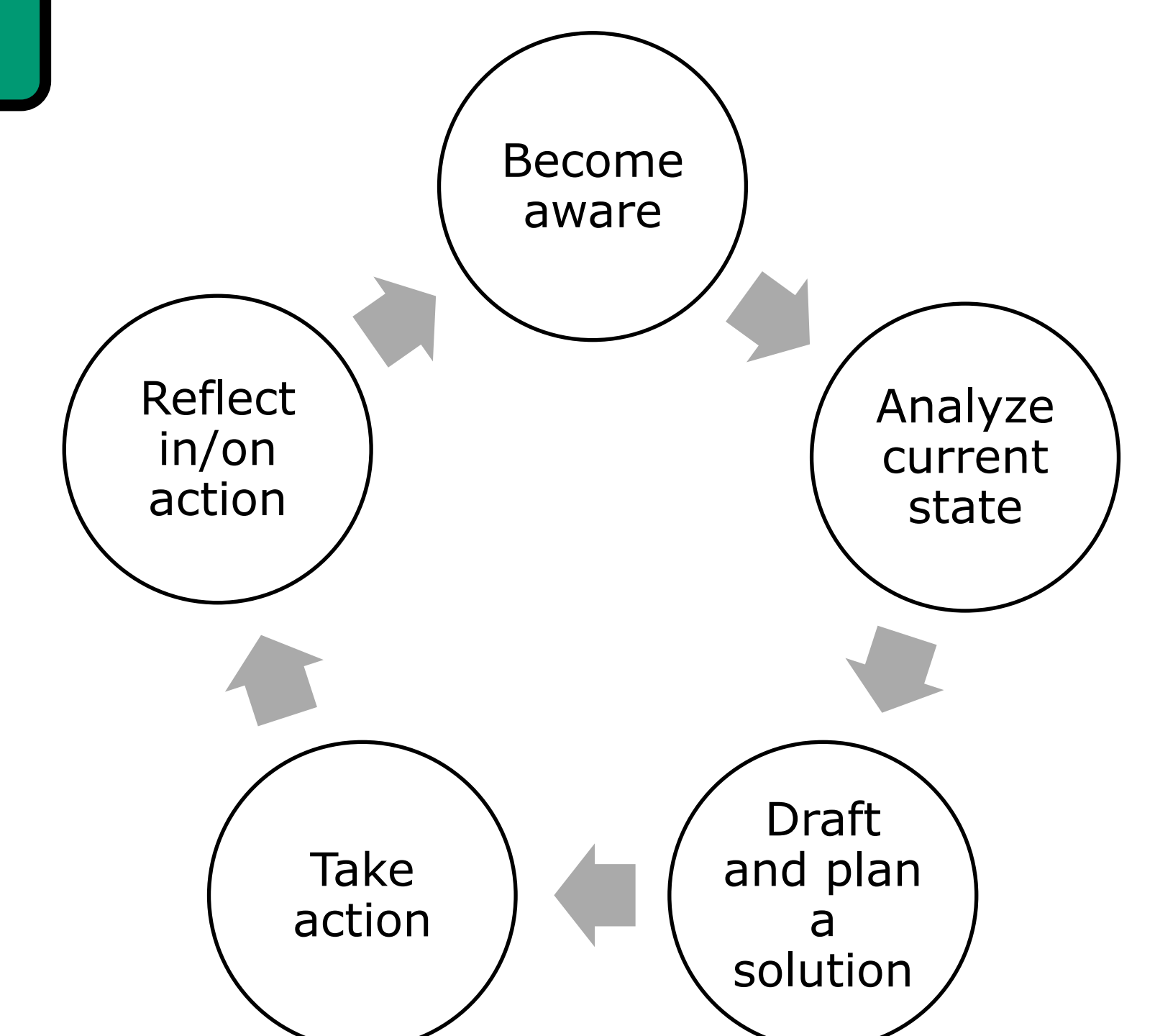


Figure 1. Model of reflective practice for employability competences adapted from Heymann et al. (2022).