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A Collaborative Recruitment Model between Honors and Athletic Programs for Student Engagement and Retention

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INTRODUCTION

A common need in honors education is to recruit a student cohort that actively engages in educational experiences, demonstrates a motivation for academic challenge, and is likely to complete the honors program. Honors programs use varied quantitative (Green & Kimbrough) and qualitative admissions criteria to yield this desired student cohort. However, research is limited on the value of quantitative measures, i.e., SAT scores, grade point average, and/or class rank, in predicting qualities such as student engagement or outcomes such as program completion.

Attempting to recruit a more diversified student cohort and to increase student engagement, the Clarion University Honors Program initiated a collaborative recruitment model with the athletic program. In addition to the goal of student engagement, this model was designed to be mutually beneficial through coordination of recruitment scholarship incentives. From the standpoint of the athletic program, student athletes' engagement in honors education could positively affect academic performance and consequently graduation rates. From the perspective of the honors program, admission of student athletes could create a more engaged student population within the honors community.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HONORS PARTICIPATION

Honors student recruitment is targeted to create an undergraduate cohort that enthusiastically engages in honors education and completes the program. Research has begun to document the positive influence of honors program

participation on first-year retention rate (Slavin, Coladarci, & Pratt; Shushok, 2006; Shushok, 2002) academic performance, retention, and graduation (Cosgrove, 2004). Factors that engage students in the honors community and enhance academic experiences need further investigation, but research on student learning and personal development has revealed the critical nature of student engagement (Astin; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 and 2005). Described as integral to best practices in student learning (Chickering & Gamson), student engagement is enhanced by factors such as student/faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning contexts, prompt feedback, time on task, communication of high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. These principles reflect theoretical discussions of the combined value of athletic participation and honors education such as Schuman's description of the potential value of athletics within honors education, specifically the dynamics of team participation, development of a work ethic, and persistence in accomplishment. These learned qualities are integral to academic accomplishment, scholarly research, program completion, and graduation rates.

ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT LEARNING

Over the past few years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has developed policies that place a high value on the educational experience of student athletes (Gayles & Hu). For example, "Life in the Balance" is a current NCAA initiative to coordinate intercollegiate athletics with the goals of higher education. Such a program has the effect of balancing the number of hours spent in athletic conditioning, practice, and competition with the inherent demands of an undergraduate program of study. In addition, many athletic programs require academic support ranging from informal study groups to formalized academic programs tailored for student-athletes.

Each of the three NCAA divisions has a set of unique characteristics that differentiate it from the other two. Understanding these characteristics and rules is important not only to athletic departments but also to academic units. Division I universities are typically larger and offer a wider variety of athletic programs. According to NCAA legislation, Division I programs can offer individuals financial aid annually based on athletic talent, but the NCAA restricts the total number of scholarships a particular sport can offer at an individual school. Division I has been the subject of public concern over recent years with regard to the educational experience of student-athletes (Gayles & Hu; Wolverton); it receives high media attention and generates the most revenue. However, Division II and Division III offer individuals a different type of collegiate experience.

Like Division I, Division II can offer financial aid based solely on athletic talent or ability, but it receives less media attention, generates less revenue, and has fewer athletic scholarships. With limited scholarship funds, many Division II colleges can provide only partial scholarships to student-athletes; hence they have an incentive to collaborate with academic programs in order to offer larger scholarships to prospective student-athletes. Division II is also known for promoting a complete college experience for student-athletes. Balancing academic, athletic, and social commitments (student engagement) can be challenging; Division II athletic programs, as a whole, have agreed to make this balance a priority for all student-athletes, offering them an opportunity to compete at a high level athletically while maximizing social and academic experiences.

Division III, the largest NCAA division, is the only division that cannot offer athletic scholarships. Division III schools are often known for their academic strengths while also offering an opportunity to participate in athletics; they can use academic scholarships to attract prospective student-athletes, but athletic recruitment is challenging since these schools are often private institutions with higher tuition costs. Given this challenge, effective collaboration between academic and athletic departments at Division III institutions can produce a higher recruitment yield of student-athletes.

In all three divisions, academic and athletic departments can collaborate to recruit top student-athletes and maximize the available scholarship funds and recruitment resources. Effective collaboration requires ongoing communication between units that, in turn, can yield increased engagement in learning experiences, program retention rates, and graduation rates for the university as a whole. Sander has shown that the outcome of an increased focus on academic programs for student-athletes is an increased graduation rate; although graduation rates vary by sport and by gender, a trend is apparent toward increased graduation rates among NCAA athletes.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

Increasing research is available to document the positive effect of honors program participation on retention and academic engagement. Collaboration between athletics and honors can positively influence undergraduate recruitment and retention of athletes as well as scholars. The purpose of this study is to provide a rationale for such collaboration and to describe a model for promoting it.

METHOD

BACKGROUND

Clarion University, located in Western Pennsylvania, has an enrollment of approximately 7,300 students. Based on decreasing regional demographics and a high concentration of colleges and universities located in western Pennsylvania and adjacent states, new student recruitment is characterized as competitive. Therefore, recruitment methodology was needed that was cost-effective, required no additional personnel, and yielded student applicants that met honors eligibility criteria.

The honors program was established in 1985 with 170 students enrolled in the program. Students are required to complete 19–21 credits and complete a capstone project. Applicants must have >1150 SAT (combined verbal and math) or equivalent ACT, > 3.64 overall grade point average, successful interview with honors, and essay. These criteria were structured as predictive of first-year retention, motivation for academic challenge, and basic oral and written communication skills. Student-athletes were recruited for 14 sports (Division II) and Wrestling (Division I).

RECRUITMENT METHOD

At the first coaches' meeting, the honors director presented the collaborative recruitment model, including its features and benefits. Coaches were given an opportunity to ask questions and indicate interest in participation. Subsequently athletic coaches reviewed all athletic prospects with regard to academic qualifications. Similarly, the honors administration reviewed academic prospects for potential athletic participation. Visits to the honors program were systematically included as part of the prospective student-athlete's campus visit. Itineraries typically consisted of meetings with the following:

- Faculty in the prospective student's major
- Honors program administrator
- Coaches
- Athletic director
- Honors student-athletes as campus escorts
- Athletic team

Campus visits were built primarily by coaches and coordinated by one member of the honors office staff, supported by the university's admissions staff. As part of the honors visit, prospective students were given a standard

presentation that included information on features and benefits of honors participation. In addition, prospective students were offered an opportunity to interview. These interviews were conducted by “trained” honors administration, faculty, or student office staff; therefore, no additional personnel were required.

Upon completion of the honors application and admissions process, scholarship awards were coordinated between the athletic department and the honors program, specifically the honors director and the athletic coaches. Scholarship values were maximized through coordination of these recruitment incentives.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents data trends for student-athletes enrolled in honors education over a four-year period. Given the discovery mode of this study, proportional changes in the honors student-athlete population were observed. The academic year 2004 served as the baseline for comparison. To begin to examine the results of this collaborative model, the number of honors student-athletes enrolled in the honors program was recorded.

We observed increases in the number of honors student athletes recruited each academic year. This trend occurred despite the elimination of the men’s track and field team in 2006. Initially, track and field was part of the collaborative recruitment model. The effect of team elimination was predicted to negatively affect the 2007 recruitment results; however, trends appeared relatively stable.

Grade point averages were recorded as a general indicator of academic performance. As with the number of student-athletes, small but steady increases in the overall grade point average were apparent. Concomitantly, the overall grade point average of all students in the athletic department

Table 1. Number of honors/student-athletes, relative increase within honors population over a four-year period, and average grade point (academic performance)

Year	# Honors Student Athletes	% of Honors Population	Overall GPA
2004	8	4.1%	3.49
2005	12	5.6%	3.51
2006	15	7.4%	3.52
2007	16	8.0%	3.58
2008	18	10.3%	3.70

increased; specifically, a steady increase in the total number of athletes with a 3.2 grade point average or above was observed. Finally, program completion rate for the honors student-athletes was examined. Over the observation period, all students who entered the honors program completed the program within four years.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to provide a rationale for programmatic collaboration between athletics and honors. Given this rationale, a collaborative model was designed that started with recruitment and continued throughout the academic program of study. The data trends suggest that this model is worthy of further research. Qualitative data based on interviews with coaches suggest that the collaboration provided benefits in recruitment and institutional commitment. Coaches also reported that honors program advising positively influenced the student-athletes' program of study, and initial data documented that all athletes completed the honors program.

Future investigation of the collaborative model should include longitudinal investigation of new student recruitment outcomes, qualitative description of retention efforts, outcome measures such as program completion rate, and qualitative studies of the collaborative model's impact on athletic programs and honors programs.

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