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# Response to “Issues of Academic Support and Performance of Division I Student-Athletes: A Case Study at the University of Minnesota”

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“Issues of Academic Support and Performance of Division I Student-athletes: A Case Study at the University of Minnesota” (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008) describes the process used by the University of Minnesota to examine the current state of academics and make data-based recommendations for the improvement of academic support for student-athletes. This paper serves as a benchmark paper for university administrators, faculty, and athletics departments. Many universities have undertaken self-examination in parallel efforts, but few have either documented their process and/or been willing to publicly share the process or the data. The papers’ authors provide important insights into the factors leading to meaningful examination of the issues and the politics leading to significant changes. Too often, in program evaluation (which this study truly was), the investigator fails to incorporate the necessary steps to ensure the identification of the appropriate questions, to gather data to adequately address critical questions relating to decision making, or to strategically include the decision makers who ultimately have the responsibility and the power to implement recommendations. To that end, the work of the University of Minnesota is a model for such a process. Hence, identifying and extracting model processes and examining those processes for ways to improve them can serve to guide others who have similar goals for their athletics programs.

## Processes and Procedures to Model

To ensure high quality of an evaluative study and maximize the likelihood recommendations will be implemented, experts in evaluation (e.g., Michael Patton, James Sanders, and Blaine Worthen/aq/) recommend certain steps which are well-executed in this study.

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## **A Clear Proactive Goal and Rationale for Study and Situating Those Goals in the Context of the Institution**

The University of Minnesota (U of M) made a strategically sound decision by creating a Task Force for a study of student-athlete performance coincidentally with the Strategic Positioning Initiative, the goal of which was “to strengthen the quality of students’ educational experiences through major academic initiatives.” Hence, the work of the Task Force could connect with and complement overall University goals and planning processes. In addition, the charge of the Task Force “to examine key issues surrounding student-athlete academic outcomes ranging from strengthening undergraduate retention and graduation rates, to improving coordination and delivery of academic support services” was grounded in its ties to the overall University goals. Further, the Task Force had a sound base for focusing on not only the traditional areas of retention, graduation rates, and coordination of and delivery of academic support services, but also the quality of experience that student-athletes have academically while at the University.

## **A Representative Task Force**

The appointment of a representative Task Force as the first action is perhaps the most important step in the subsequent success of the process of moving toward achieving the goals and identifying factors relating to the success of student-athletes. The most significant aspect of the appointment of the Task Force was the care taken to insure the Task Force was not only representative of the many constituencies but also included individuals whose presence signified the high priority of these issues. In particular the inclusion of administrators whose positions as Directors, Department Chairs, High level administrators, and faculty who were in positions to influence the implementation of recommendations provided a powerful advocacy group for encouraging implementation of recommendations emanating from the study. Key stakeholder groups from across university departments and operational units were included. Further, the support personnel to locate, record, and transmit the necessary data were made available to the Task Force as it completed its work. Finally, recognition of the time necessary to “do the job right” allowed the Task Force to carry out all the necessary analyses and to engage in careful interpretation without undue pressure to produce a premature report.

## **Using Longitudinal Data as a Basis for Determining Current Status of Student Success**

In the world of athletics it is easy for all of us to make assumptions about which students are at risk, the characteristics of students at risk, and the trajectory of their academic paths. By gathering data over an extended time frame (1999–2007) and, particularly, by analyzing students who were deemed “fragile” or “at risk,” the committee was able to make data-based decisions with the greatest likelihood of addressing the issues facing the populations of student-athletes most in need of attention while also not stereotyping or overlooking any group. Moreover, analysis of the data from the University of Minnesota provided the opportunity for addressing the particulars of the context in which these athletes were playing and studying.

## **Specification of Clear Indicators of Success and Seeking Early Predictors of Success**

By identifying clear measures of success (graduation within 4, 5 or 6 years of entry in the University) and using predictors of success ranging from entry variables to performance early in the careers of student-athletes in regression analyses models, the Task Force was able to examine a wide range of predictors including those relating to admission, enrollment patterns, early patterns of success or failure, etc. The statistical modeling methods also allowed for examination of contributions each of the independent variables had on the success of the students. By examining the early predictors of success, the Task Force was able to identify recommendations that could be implemented early in the student-athlete's university career.

## **Examination of Patterns of Underachievement and Overachievement to Identify Factors That Affect Those Outcomes**

The uniqueness of analyzing the data on students who “overachieved,” as well as the underachieving students, provides an opportunity to look at both sides of the coin in student-athlete success. Although administrators and faculty are quick to find reasons for failure, of equal importance are factors that can be duplicated, extended, and made a part of the experience of greater numbers of student-athletes.

## **Developing Strategies for Fostering Student Success Based on Analysis of Data**

In making recommendations for fostering student success based on the results of the data analysis on the particular athletes who are at risk or fragile in a particular environment, the probability of selecting, developing, and implementing effective interventions and being efficient in expenditures of time, money, and effort are increased. Rather than creating a menu of options with every affordable intervention, administrators can target those practices most likely to have impact and bring about change.

## **Student-Athlete and Non Student-Athlete Performance: Developing Interventions for a More Inclusive Population**

The subset of student-athletes who are considered fragile or at risk are but one group of students entering our colleges and universities that face unique challenges in achieving success. Certain aspects of their experiences and situations on campus can be positive (having the support of a naturally created group and the attention of an adult invested in the success of the student), but they also share many of the challenges of other at-risk students in a new environment (e.g., being a first-generation college student or not having been exposed to equally challenging and high-quality high school curricula). Hence, providing them the opportunity to be involved in interventions that are designed for all students facing these challenges might (a) provide a sense of being part of a large community, (b) make the interventions the usual course of business and not perceived as athlete privileges, and (c) might increase the scope of faculty committed to student-athlete success.

## **Integration of Athletic Staff Into University Life**

The recommendations for finding ways of integrating athletic staff into university life is one way for athletic personnel to bring perspectives from the student-athlete to the fore across the many areas of university life that affect their well-being. The achievement of this goal requires considerable rethinking about committee assignment at every level of the university. Provosts, Deans, Registrars, Financial Aid Officers, etc. all will need to pay particular attention to the composition of committees (and not select the high-profile coach they hope to meet and interact with) as they create committees. In turn, athletic personnel, including coaches, cannot accept assignments and then fail to take an active role, or these efforts will result in more harm than good.

## **Establishment of Centralized Databases**

As the Task Force in this endeavor discovered, one of the most difficult chores is collecting data from the many unconnected data banks within the university. In many cases, the type of analyses done by this group are either impossible or deemed just too difficult because of the decentralization of the databases on campus. Wherever the university or college decides to house the kinds of data necessary for these kinds of analyses, the personnel necessary to ensure accurate monitoring of data are critical to allow for the on-going monitoring and adjustments to the process that have been recommended and put in place.

## **Outreach Efforts to Former Student-Athletes to Complete Graduation Requirements**

While the stress on adequate yearly progress and graduation rates has everyone concentrating on the ways currently enrolled student-athletes are supported academically, inevitably some athletes will pursue professional careers or leave the university without finishing their degrees for other reasons. Yet many are within a few courses of completing a degree, and the efforts proposed by the Task Force represent a commendable and moral initiative that all colleges and universities should undertake to ensure completion of degrees by student-athletes. Certainly, every university has a different pattern of nonfinishers and will need to tailor efforts accordingly, but all should develop programs around the general principle of enticing the nonfinishers back to campus and supporting them in earning a degree.

## **Questions, Comments and Suggestions: Technical**

### **Revise Analyses: Drop Some Variables and Add Other Indicators or Predictors**

Any regression analysis is affected by the interdependence of variables and the number of variables that can be reasonably included. Several of the variables are so interrelated in this study (e.g., number of first-semester Fs, number of first-semester Ds, number of first-semester Ws; number of first-semester Cs, and ratio of units attempted to units completed first semester) that several could be eliminated and

some other potential indicator added. For example, second-semester performance or performance during the semester of competition could be considered. Many myths surround the level of performance of students during the season of competition; such analyses could shed light on the need for differing levels or types of support. The inclusion of data on the first semester after students declare a major (when the students can no longer so freely “shop” for less challenging courses) might also uncover patterns of performance that would inform recommendations.

### **Include Frequencies and Percentages in Data Presentation and Interpretation Of Results**

With many categories of student-athletes so small in these analyses, it was difficult to determine when differences or changes represented by percentages represented many student-athletes or only one or two.

### **Isolate Verbal, Quantitative, and Writing Indicators on the SAT and Subscores on the ACT**

The College Board warns against combining the scores on the SAT into a total score, and the differing constructs measured by the subtests might differentially predict success or difficulties of student-athletes. Similarly, the ACT scores should not be viewed as a single, total score.

## **Questions, Comments and Suggestions: General**

### **Add “Non-Successes” Who Were at Risk to the Overall Analyses and Interpretation**

The examination of at-risk students who “overachieved” provides valuable insights into their experiences and the factors contributing to their success; the picture would be more complete with a parallel analysis of “non-successes.” One is tempted to ask the question, “What if their profiles and experiences were the same?” Differences and similarities would more fully inform decision making. Further exploration of differing or similar advising patterns, course choices, and probing questions such as the outcomes when coaches’ judgments of “admissible” and likelihood of success are confirmed or not would enrich the discussion.

### **Examine the Effects of Summer Programs Carefully— Particularly the Effects of Providing and not Providing Continued Support in the Academic Year**

Examination of student-athlete success at the University of Virginia suggests that at-risk students do not thrive without the continued support of advisors, tutors, and programming carefully constructed to build on summer intervention. The huge investment in summer programs should not be jeopardized by failure to follow through with the support necessary to solidify success. In addition, summer course offerings should be “real courses,” rather than specially created courses. Students need to begin their experience with the demands made by rigorous syllabi and faculty.

## **Need to Stabilize and Evaluate**

The University has made initial plans and begun implementing new programs. One error often made in these situations is to constantly adjust without the same systematic examination of effects as the original study. When asked to document the effects of the programs implemented, the personnel involved often cannot provide the same level of data because they have been constantly adding or subtracting services. As a result, neither successes nor failures can be attributed to any of the changes made. Maximum success will follow from continued evaluation, particularly on the subgroups of student-athletes identified in this study.

## **Expand the Study to Include Additional Benchmarks**

The reported study has selected excellent quantitative benchmarks. The education of our student-athletes, however, should go beyond the simple outcome of graduation. The next step should be to examine the degree to which student-athletes are educated. Examination of patterns of courses taken, majors, and the preparation for careers outside of athletics should now follow. What are the effects of coaches' insistence on student-athlete enrollment in a limited set of majors? What happens when a coaches' advice to student-athletes and their athletic advisor's guidance about coursework conflicts with the students' notions of what is of interest to them or in their best interest? How well prepared for life after the university are graduating student-athletes?

## **Caution in Settling on the Implications of this Study Given the Changing Context**

The current data analysis included data on many students (81% of the at-risk or fragile students) who entered the General College of the University. That option no longer exists. Hence, the patterns of achievement or failure might be different in the new groups of students who enter after the General College option is not available. Following new cohorts until affirming or altering conclusions will be necessary to avoid generalizations that no longer will apply.

## **Caution with the Suggestion for "Special Majors"**

In making any suggestions for special majors, the University puts itself in a position of potentially creating a scenario of suggesting the student-athlete is not "capable" of succeeding in traditional academic majors or of creating "jock majors." Both of these outcomes are undesirable. Any major at any University must be academically defensible. Perhaps other steps can be taken first. Consider a career counseling program that begins in the first year of study that helps students see possibilities in existing majors; consider working with faculty to provide options for courses and or modifications in syllabi that have practical or career-related projects and papers so as to increase student interest in the major.

Question more deeply the success of students in particular majors. The assumption is often made that the major selected by large numbers of student-athletes is "of interest." Perhaps the success is because of inherent flexibility in entrance requirements for that major or the flexibility in class schedules (How

can a student be a science major if all labs are scheduled at times when practice is scheduled?) or because the advisors/academic staff/coaches are recommending that major because of perceived (or real) grading systems with fewer failures and higher grades. Before creating new majors, additional qualitative, in-depth analysis of the process of major selection is necessary.

Finally, if the creation of new majors is warranted, consider carefully how viable those majors really are. How many students with a major in sports marketing or sports journalism will be truly competitive in a market in which they will be competing with students who have marketing majors from commerce schools or journalism/English majors who have broader backgrounds? And how many positions for those specialized majors exist in the job market? Because such majors might not provide a broad liberal arts or business background, it could, in fact result in a high graduation rate of graduates who cannot find jobs. If concentrations can be built within the existing majors through the use of specialized internships (such as those offered in the Atlantic Coast Conference office) or with one or two specialized courses, the concept of addressing student interests becomes more defensible.

### **Broaden Stakeholder Base to Include Student-Athletes**

Many of the decisions about the problems to be addressed and the recommendations for change could be further illuminated by the voice of student-athletes. We all have various groups, including student SACs groups, that can represent student-athletes and help gather valuable input for these decisions. The students need not attend all meetings or participate in all committee activities, but to ignore their voices in this process is to leave out valuable information in the deliberations.

### **Be Aware of the Actions Required for and Potential Risks of Integrating Coaches and Athletics Staff Into University Life**

As noted above, the integration of athletic staff is a commendable step and has the potential to increase communication and understanding. Such integration, however, requires a strong, consistent message to all those forming committees, as well as to the athletics departments, about the importance of these committees. Furthermore, the appointment of coaches should be made with clear understanding that, like student-athletes, their schedules will often mean they must miss meetings in order to do their job. One problem most committees have is failing to take into account the schedules of absent members from the discussion about setting the next meeting date. This often results in the absent members missing the next meeting and so on. Relationships between the athletics staff and the university community could be worsened rather than improved by resulting assumptions that athletics personnel were not invested in the university community.

## **Final Remarks**

In summary, the execution and documentation of the processes undertaken by the authors of this paper and the Task Force make a valuable contribution and provide a model we can all use in examining the academic success of student-athletes, as

well as planning strategies to enhance their academic experience on campus. The comments and suggestions are offered not as criticism, but for considerations in taking the next steps in following up on the good work and to guide others who consider taking on a similar process.

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