

Advising the Student-Athlete

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) passed landmark legislation in 1983 to increase minimum eligibility and satisfactory progress standards. Since that time, the collegiate student-athlete has been the subject of extensive media and institutional review. The media's attention to the topic has often appeared sensational, charging universities with the exploitation of illiterate athletes who only aspire to careers in professional athletics. This has created a misleading perception of student-athletes by the general public and members of the campus community. The purpose of this essay is to review recent institutional studies which describe the academic preparation and subsequent performance of student-athletes and to discuss their implication for the advising process.

Recent data suggest that the stereotype of the student-athlete as a "dumb jock" who selects a university to major in eligibility is inaccurate. As a group, varsity student-athletes were found to be more interested in the academic characteristics of the university than the athletic aspects of the athletic program.¹ With respect to high school preparation, several studies have shown college student-athletes exhibited weaker academic preparation than non student-athlete populations.² While deficiencies exist, many studies of academic performance have shown no difference between student-athletes and non student-athletes.^{5 6 7} Snyder⁸ found student-athletes' college grade point averages exceeded predicted scores from their standardized test scores and high school ranks. Stuart⁹ found students playing football and matched non athletes did not differ in academic performance during their first two years of college. An ETS/ACT study found similar measures of persistence. Student-athletes consistently had higher success rates than matched groups of non student-athletes. Differences, however, do exist in subpopulations of student-athletes. Several studies have found male, black revenue-producing student-athletes exhibit weaker academic performance.^{10 11 12 13}

Many institutions of higher education which value the prestige and notoriety of a successful athletic program have assumed the ethical responsibility for creating positive academic support interventions designed to assist high-risk students. These programs have been found to be successful in improving the persistence rates and grade point averages of student-athletes.¹⁴ Ill-equipped students left to fend for themselves in an academically competitive institution are often embarrassed, publicly humiliated in the classroom and media, discouraged, cast as failures, or resort to academic dishonesty as a survival technique.

Prior to the new student-athlete's arrival on campus, his/her only contact with the institution has typically been through a coach or alumni. Once on campus, academic advisors are vital to the orientation process. Their attitude toward the student-athlete should portray confidence in the ability of this particular student to be academically successful at the institution.

Student-athlete practice and competition demands, coupled with academic responsibilities, differ from the experience of normal students and place them in the position of academic risk. Less prepared freshman student-athletes, in particular, may have naive perceptions of the academic routine and rigor of courses and majors. Their high school athletic and academic experiences are often dissimilar from the reality of the college classroom and sports competition. Nothing should be taken for granted during the first meeting with the academic adviser; therefore, the adviser should be prepared to spend the necessary time with the student-athlete. Sensitivity to their new roles and demands must complement course and major selection. The ability of the individual student-athlete to undertake recommended production line curricular timetables should be evaluated carefully. Whenever possible, it is important to inform the student-athlete of course content and description, teaching methods and evaluation procedures. Any course considered high risk would well be avoided during the freshman year in order to provide a positive start. Many institutions with competitive athletic programs offer a fifth-year grant program for scholarship student-athletes who need to complete their degree requirements. These programs provide an additional year without the pressure of athletic competition or practice. Academic advisers should inquire about the availability of fifth-year programs and advise the student-athletes accordingly.

Aside from institutional academic standards, advisers must be aware of NCAA and athletic conference requirements for continuing eligibility and satisfactory academic progress. Representatives of the athletic department should be utilized as resource people for rule interpretations and background information about individual advisees. The academic support offices within athletic departments often provide an array of academic support programs for student-athletes such as testing and assessment, new-student orientation, learning skill development, reading skill development, writing skill development, tutorial assistance, career counseling, and general counseling.

These services often rely upon and interact with campus professionals and institutional resources. The cooperation among the academic adviser, athletic department support services, and institutional support agencies should create a network of support for this target group of students.

Advising student-athletes offers an opportunity for the professional or academician to develop expertise with special and atypical students. Student-athletes offer diversity to the campus which allows other students a more complete educational experience. The same respect and unconditional positive regard for general students should also be afforded to student-athletes. Too often, the advising relationship is one of stereotyping the student-athlete into a "dumb jock" category, and thus the advising session becomes one of directing university policies and orchestrating course schedules. As with all students, advisers should establish a working relationship with student-athletes by acknowledging that the university welcomes them and stands ready to assist them. Advisers must be assertive at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner in pointing out individual weaknesses and referring the student-athlete to available institutional resources. Poor academic performance is often a symptom of personal or athletic-related problems. Advisers should explore the possibilities of these underlying stressors with the student-athlete.

The advising process is essential for the academic success of the student-athlete, for it is this process which creates the necessary climate of encouragement and support. The same commitment and discipline student-athletes direct toward sport can be transferred toward academic endeavors. Advisers are agents for the level of commitment institutions choose to demonstrate for the often misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned student-athlete.

FOOTNOTES

¹Sharon Mathes and Gerald Gurney, "Factors in Student-Athletes' Choices of Colleges," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 26 (July 1985), 327-333.

²Dean Purdy et al., "Are Athletes Also Students? The Educational Attainment of College Athletes," *Social Problems*, 29 (1982), 439-448.

³Lynn J. Snyder, "Academic Performance of Male College Athletes and Non-athletes: A Comparative Study," unpublished dissertation, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978.

⁴D. L. Stuart, "Academic Preparation and Subsequent Performance of Intercollegiate Football Players," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 26 (March 1985), 124-129.

⁵Snyder.

⁶Stuart.

⁷Educational Testing Service and American College Testing Program, "Athletics and Academics in the Freshman Year: A Study of the Academic Effects of Freshman Participation in Varsity Athletics" (December 1984).

⁸Snyder.

⁹Stuart.

¹⁰I. Brigham, "Selected Academic and Non-academic Variables as Predictors of Male Student-Athletes at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale" (doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois

University at Carbondale), *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 42 (1981), 4417A.

¹¹D. Spivey and T. A. Jones, "Intercollegiate Athletic Servitude: A Case of Black Illini Student-Athletes, 1931-1967," *Social Science Quarterly*, 55 (1975), 939-947.

¹²Purdy et al.

¹³Snyder.

¹⁴ETS/ACT.