

STUDENT-ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT: AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

John R. Gerdy
Southeastern Conference

ABSTRACT

At most NCAA Division institutions, the academic and social development of the student-athlete has increasingly become the sole responsibility of the athletics department. However, the current athletic reform movement calls for increased integration of the athletics department into the overall university community. The increased emphasis in this area offers university student affairs departments a unique opportunity to become more involved in the personal and academic development of the student-athlete.

INTRODUCTION

Although many groups of students fall under the umbrella of institutional "student services," no group has been more outside the mainstream of the institutional student services network than student-athletes, particularly those on campuses that sponsor major NCAA Division I athletics programs. In many cases, responsibility for the "holistic" development of the student-athlete has been left almost entirely to the athletics department. However, because the realities of the "student-athlete experience" often pit the academic and athletic interests of the student-athlete against each other, institutional offices of student affairs must become more assertive in meeting their responsibilities for assisting in the academic and social development of the student-athlete.

With the intense pressure to win in order to generate the revenue to support large athletics budgets, the social and academic interests of the student-athletes, particularly those in the sports of football and basketball, are often in direct conflict with the interests of the athletics department. Coaches must win to retain their jobs. Athletics administrators must generate revenue to pay for the athletics program and must satisfy alumni demands for a winning program.

These inherent conflicts have nothing to do with "good guys" versus "bad guys;" they are simply the structural realities of big-time college athletics. Thus, it is easy to understand why coaches and athletics administrators are primarily interested in maximizing the student-athlete's athletic performance. In short, for coaches and athletics administrators, athletics is a full-time job. For student-athletes, it is a part-time job.

Relegating responsibility for not only the athletic development but also the social and academic development of student-athletes solely to the athletics department creates a clear conflict of interest for the athletics department and may, at times, hinder student-athletes in their efforts to gain a broad-based academic and social experience. Despite the widely held illusion that a student-athlete's only desire is to play professional athletics, most student-athletes come to school to earn a degree. According to the 1988 NCAA Study of Intercollegiate Athletics, upon enrollment 95.2% of football and basketball student-athletes and 92.8% of participants in other sports reported that obtaining a degree was of importance or of greatest importance. For these reasons, offices of student affairs must take a more active and responsible role in becoming more directly involved in the "holistic" development of student-athletes.

Because it is the responsibility of the office of student affairs to assist all students, including student-athletes, with their academic and social development, this essay will challenge student affairs professionals to reassert their authority in matters relating to this unique subgroup of students. Although skeptics will say that there is little chance of wresting authority away from athletics departments in this area, a unique opportunity for meaningful initiatives affecting student-athlete welfare is beginning to present itself. Specifically, the NCAA Presidents Commission, the primary force behind recent athletics reform efforts, has identified the theme of the 1995 NCAA Convention as "Student-Athlete Welfare." Thus, there now exists a license to discuss and address directly, both at the national and campus levels, ways in which to improve the student-athlete experience. The question is whether the athletics community as well as the student affairs community will take advantage of this opportunity.

The following suggestions, which touch on areas ranging from student-athlete recruitment to student-athlete exit interviews, outline opportunities for increased institutional student affairs involvement in the personal and academic development of the student-athlete. Although it will be asked whether student-athletes should be recognized as being a "special" population by the university community (such recognition being contrary to the principle of "total" integration of student-athletes into the campus community), given the unique nature of the intercollegiate athletics experience (i.e., time demands and high visibility) student-athletes are a unique subgroup on campus. Striking a balance between treating student-athletes like all other students while acknowledging their special circumstances and needs is difficult. Thus, the challenge facing institutions in the area of student-athlete development is finding the delicate balance between these two often competing ideals and determining the appropriate level of "special treatment."

INVOLVEMENT DURING THE RECRUITING PROCESS

The foundation for successful adjustment to college, particularly for the student-athlete, is set during the recruitment process. Because recruiting is the "life blood" of any successful athletics program, coaches go to great lengths to convince a prospect to commit to the university. During the recruitment process, coaches portray the institution in the way they think necessary to convince a prospective student-athlete to sign a National Letter of Intent. Thus, it is no surprise that a cause of student-athlete discontent often stems from a feeling that "coach didn't tell me it would be like this!" The adjustment from the highly recruited, pampered high school senior to the lowly freshman often leads to feelings of disillusionment and a sense of having been misled by the coach during recruitment.

In most cases, coaches do not knowingly misrepresent what campus life will be like for the student-athlete. More often coaches are simply not informed or are unaware of the unique culture at the institution or the wide range of programs available to help with a student-athlete's adjustment. In many cases, newly hired coaches report to campus to pick up a credit card and travel schedule and are recruiting the following day. How can coaches accurately represent student life at their institution when they have no appreciation for or understanding of the institution they represent? Thus, in an effort to provide coaches with the information necessary for them to paint a more accurate picture of campus life, the institution should require that all coaches—and new coaches in particular—participate in a comprehensive orientation program designed to inform them of the institution's culture, history, student life, and availability of student services. Such programs also represent a first step in a more healthy integration of athletics department personnel into the mainstream university community.

STUDENT-ATHLETE ORIENTATION

Another area of concern involves student-athletes' access to institution-wide orientation programs. Although many well-intentioned athletics departments develop orientation programs for student-athletes, such programs are not nearly as comprehensive as university-wide orientation programs. More important, however, is that when the athletics department administers the orientation program, it sets the unhealthy precedent that the athletics department will "take care of" all matters, including those relating to academics and student life, for the student-athlete.

Although the actual information that is disseminated as part of such orientation programs is important, it is the group with which the student-athlete participates in the program that is critical. Orientation represents the most crucial opportunity to set a positive tone for future integration into the campus culture. If the student-athlete's long-term academic and social interests, rather than the short-term athletics interests, are given full consideration, it is quite clear that it is far more beneficial and educational for the student-athlete to participate in a university-administered orientation program. Orientation is not nearly as meaningful when the student-athlete is seated in a room full of

freshman teammates. Participating in a university-wide program provides the student-athlete a much more accurate and meaningful picture of student life and the wide diversity of students on campus.

Student-athlete participation in such university-administered orientation programs will raise the issue of missed practice time versus participation in such orientation programs. Although coaches will insist that preseason practice is a crucial time to teach athletics fundamentals, it is far more important for the long-term personal development of the student-athlete to learn the fundamentals of being a student on a college campus. Thus, student-athlete participation in such university-wide orientation programs should be mandatory. In short, the office of student affairs is charged to orient all students, including student-athletes.

GIVING STUDENT-ATHLETES A "VOICE"

Recently the NCAA has made an effort to provide student-athletes "a voice," primarily through the creation of the NCAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. This committee meets on a regular basis with NCAA officials and is designed to obtain input from student-athletes regarding the student-athlete experience and suggestions on ways to improve that experience. Many institutions have formed institutional student-athlete committees. These committees, if they consist of the necessary institution-wide representation, can be an effective vehicle for providing student-athletes a voice in determining the quality of their collegiate experience. Because many issues that concern student-athletes relate to "general student life," representatives from outside the athletics department, including in particular student affairs personnel, should serve on these committees if they are to be meaningful vehicles to address non-athletic concerns. Unless a perspective is offered from outside the athletics department, the effectiveness of student-athlete committees in addressing student-athlete concerns relating to their academic and social development will be limited.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND EXTERNAL REPORTING

Most major college athletics departments provide academic counseling, tutoring, and social adjustment services as well as career counseling and planning. Often these programs are headed by an associate or assistant athletic director. Most report internally to the athletics department. However, such an internal reporting line may not be in the best interest of student-athletes. This internal reporting arrangement results in the authority over the major facets of the student-athlete's collegiate experience (i.e., the athletics component as well as the academic and social development component) being housed within the athletics department. Once again, the conflict between these often competing interests is problematic. That being the case, institutions should consider whether reporting lines for the academic support program should be adjusted from the athletics department to the office of student or academic affairs.

MONITORING THE ATHLETICALLY RELATED TIME COMMITMENT

The 1988 NCAA National Study of Intercollegiate Athletics revealed that student-athletes wanted a reduction in the amount of time they spent on athletics activities. As a result of these findings, in 1991 the NCAA adopted legislation to establish daily and weekly hour limitations on athletically related activities. The legislation limits student-athlete involvement in "mandatory" athletically related activities to twenty hours per week. The purpose of this rule was to create more time for student-athletes to spend on non-athletics activities and allow them to enjoy a more balanced collegiate experience. This legislation does not govern (nor should it) activities in which student-athletes engage on a "voluntary" basis. If student-athletes want to work out on their own, they should be permitted to do so for as long as they like. However, it is the type of workout that falls between the mandatory and voluntary—the "voluntary but really mandatory" workout—that compromises the intent of the rule as well as the student-athlete's rights. "Voluntary but really mandatory" workouts are the weight training or extra workouts that the coach says are voluntary but in which attendance is "noted." Student-athletes often fear that if they do not participate in these workouts, they will be penalized for "lack of commitment" to the team and sport.

That being the case, the institution's student affairs division must take a more active interest in assuring that student-athletes' rights in this area are not violated. Personnel in the office of student affairs should have some knowledge of the rule and should secure the authority to periodically interview or survey student-athletes to determine if these limitations are being adhered to. This is not to suggest that the office of student affairs should be responsible for monitoring compliance with this NCAA rule, or for that matter, serving as a "watchdog" over the athletics department. However, the purpose of this rule was to assist student-athletes in their holistic development, a matter that clearly falls within the authority of student affairs.

STUDENT-ATHLETE EXIT INTERVIEWS

At the 1991 NCAA convention, legislation was adopted to require Division I institutions to conduct exit interviews with a sample of student-athletes following the expiration of their eligibility. The purpose of this provision is to encourage athletics departments to be more responsive to the needs of student-athletes by creating opportunities for them to provide input regarding programs or policies that greatly affect their lives. Although the intent of this requirement is laudable, it remains in question whether athletics departments are utilizing this provision to provide meaningful opportunities for student-athletes to offer such input. For example, most exit interviews are conducted solely by athletics department personnel. In many cases, there is no record of the results of the interviews, and it is rare when a composite report is forwarded to the university's faculty athletics board, student-athlete committee, faculty athletics representative, university president, or office of student affairs.

Once again, because the content of such interviews will relate in large part to issues regarding general student life, the university's office of student affairs should play a major role in the development of the interview program and should actively participate in some or all of the interviews. Involvement by the office of student affairs will also encourage a more open and honest exchange of information and should serve to make student-athletes more comfortable in the interview process. Finally, the results of such interviews should be shared, in composite form, with interested parties both inside and outside the athletics department for appropriate discussion, feedback, and action, if necessary.

CONCLUSION

During the past few years, the NCAA has made significant strides in areas that affect student-athlete welfare. The establishment of the limit of 20 hours per week of athletically related activities, the elimination of athletic dormitories, and the mandated one day per week without practice are all initiatives that underscore the point that student-athletes are not simply athletes. However, these changes do not alter the fundamental conflict between the interests of coaches and athletics administrators (winning) and student-athletes (earning a degree). Because the athletics department has come to assume virtually all of the responsibility for not only the athletic development of the student-athlete but the academic and social development as well, the balance between student and athlete is often not balanced at all. Thus, to help reconcile the short-term athletics interests of the athletics department and the long-term academic and personal development interests of the student-athlete, it is imperative that institutional divisions of student affairs assume more responsibility for the holistic development of student-athletes. The designation of the 1995 NCAA convention as the "Student-Athlete Welfare" Convention offers a meaningful and rare opportunity for institutional student affairs personnel to reaffirm their role as a "major player" in issues relating to the academic and social welfare of student-athletes.

John R. Gerdy holds a B.A. in sociology from Davidson College, where his basketball jersey was retired, an M.A. in sports administration and a Ph.D. in higher education from Ohio University. He was a legislative assistant at the NCAA from 1986 to 1989 and currently serves as associate commissioner for compliance and academic affairs at the Southeastern Conference.