

# **MENTORS FOR BEGINNING COLLEGE STUDENT-ATHLETES: A POSSIBLE AID FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The responsibility of giving scholarship student-athletes a well-rounded start at the collegiate level may be too immense for only coaches and academic advisors to carry out efficiently without additional help. Transferring part of this responsibility to "mentors" who help freshman student-athletes develop basic study habits and time management skills may be one resolution to the "academics vs. athletics" debate. The following is a discussion of the needs of student-athletes and a description of one organization's attempt to give the members of this special population a better foundation early in their academic careers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

College freshmen were deemed eligible for athletic participation in 1972, and it is commonly believed that at this point academics "took on less meaning" for college students (Stratten, 1990). The academic plight of student-athletes quickly worsened, until the early 1980s when Propositions 48 and 42 were passed. These propositions have tried to re-establish some order to the academic/athletic situation of the student-athlete, but without changes on the individual level these rules can be marginally effective at best.

Scholarship student-athletes, especially those who attend large NCAA Division I schools, are under increased pressure to succeed on the academic as well as the athletic level. In order to meet eligibility requirements under the rules of Propositions 48 and 42, student-athletes must be able to maintain an

academic load equal to most college students in addition to the practices, chalk talks, and travel time required of them as student-athletes (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986). This presents a problem for even the most mature, well-organized, and academically prepared student-athletes; unfortunately, not all scholarship student-athletes fit into this category. Some of the individuals who receive athletic scholarships invested so much time in athletics at the high school level that they enter college with marginal academic capabilities at best. There has to be a solution to this problem, whether it is psychological, organizational, personal, or a combination thereof.

Many athletic counselors (Sparent, 1986; Whitner & Sanz, 1988; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981) and psychologists (Camp & Epps, 1986; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; Stratten, 1990) have proposed a variety of programs as possible solutions. The problems with many of these programs are that they are impersonal, complicated, and expensive to administer. What will be discussed in this article are the academic/athletic demands placed on student-athletes, how these pressures are related to their overall academic success, and a possible alternative to their present situation to give them a better start in their college careers.

In an innovative new program, Texas A&M University's athletic department provided beginning scholarship student-athletes with older student mentors. The concept of mentoring is not new; its basis actually dates back many centuries in Greek mythology. In the Iliad, Odysseus, a great hero leaving on a long journey, entrusted his son's guidance and development to an old friend, Mentor. A strong bond developed between Mentor and the young boy which influenced the boy forever.

The mentor ideally is a person with whom the student-athlete can develop academic habits and beneficial time management skills which may have been lacking in the student-athlete's secondary education. A relationship with an upperclass non-athlete can also give the student-athlete a broader notion of being a student upon which to base his or her own academic habits, a concept lacking in many student-athletes' repertoire (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986). This program is easy to administer and monitor, and it can be conducted on a relatively inexpensive basis.

## **WHY STUDENT-ATHLETES NEED SPECIAL ASSISTANCE**

The academic preparation of high school student-athletes is a major contributing factor in their immediate college successes (Steinbrecher, 1989; Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986). However, the emotional and psychological impacts of the transition into college can also be influencing factors in all student-athletes' success: they have to deal with the added pressure of competition with experienced upperclass student-athletes and the change from being a "hometown star" to a "little fish" (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986).

An extended study conducted by Steinbrecher (1989) on the effect freshman participation has on academic achievement showed that playing or not playing in varsity competition as a freshman had no significant role in either the grade point averages or the graduation rates of scholarship football and male basketball players. What was found to have a significant effect in all cases were high school grade point average, high school rank, and standardized college entrance examination grades.

Student-athletes in general score lower on the SAT than their non-athletic counterparts (Stratten, 1990), and black male student-athletes who attend revenue-producing schools exhibit weaker academic performance than other athletic populations (Brigham, 1981; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Spivey & Jones, 1975; Snyder, 1978). According to the College Testing Service, in 1988 the average SAT score was 757 for black males vs. 965 for white males. Black females averaged 724 and white females 907 (Stratten, 1990). However, student-athletes are allowed to enter many colleges with SAT scores of 700, a score lower than the usual non-athletic student criterion. This is a practice which automatically places a low SAT student-athlete at a disadvantage. There is some concern regarding whether the SAT is a racially biased test (Stratten, 1990), but until this debate is reconciled, black student-athletes will continue to enter college less prepared overall than their white counterparts (Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Eitzen, 1988).

Black student-athletes make up a large percentage of the athletic scholarship recipients each year. However, the NCAA's March 1989 report, "Experiences of Black Intercollegiate Athletes at NCAA Division I Institutions," states that twice as many black student-athletes as non-blacks would have chosen not to attend college were it not for their athletic recruitment (Stratten, 1990). This may be due to "black culture," which tends to place a strong emphasis on sports as a social binder (second only to religion) and consequently detracts from academics (Spreitzer & Snyder, 1990). It also may be due to marginal preparation at the secondary level where the basic skills needed for academic success are not developed (Foster, 1986).

The average black scholarship student-athletes may be receiving less than ideal preparation on the secondary level because of substandard academic settings (i.e., overcrowded inner city schools) or because of their own lack of desire to take on academic challenges, since many black athletes intend to pursue a professional athletic career (Sparent, 1988). As many as 35 percent of all freshman student-athletes have the intention of "going pro," although in actuality less than 2 percent will ever play a professional sport (Sparent, 1988). Student-athletes from lower income families of varied ethnic backgrounds often place a high level of emphasis on sports as a career and are more inclined to see professional sports as a mode of upward mobility (Spreitzer & Snyder, 1990).

Many student-athletes are allowed special privileges in high school, privileges which translate into under-developed study skills, lowered self-perception, and limited goal setting abilities on the collegiate level (Foster,

1986; Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986). Of course, the argument can be made that student-athletes have the skills that make them athletic successes and these skills can be transferred to academics (Berg, 1989). But low academic statistics for high school student-athletes show that this is not necessarily the case (Lapchick, 1989). The development of basic study skills and time management techniques is crucial to academic success for every college student. Student-athletes, with enormous time commitments and physical demands, need these skills even more than others, but they cannot be supposed to know them innately. Student-athletes cannot be expected to come from an academic setting of "special privileges" and conform to the rigorous demands of college without help in developing the skills needed for academic success. If these student-athletes start out academically "at risk" (Stratten, 1990) and then have to contend with the demands of their sports, they should be supported in any way which may help them develop and succeed academically.

Another problem new student-athletes encounter is a common one for all freshmen. Homesickness—missing one's family, friends, and hometown—is an expected part of going off to college. However, many student-athletes have enjoyed an inordinate amount of attention from family, classmates, the community, and the press because of their athletic prowess (Camp & Epps, 1986). Especially during the recruiting period, student-athletes are made to feel special and important (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986). The transition then from this environment to a university that may have over 100 new scholarship freshman student-athletes can be difficult. It is not uncommon for these individuals to experience a period of self-doubt during which both their academic and athletic performances may suffer (Petipas & Champagne, 1988; Camp & Epps, 1986). These feelings of homesickness or isolation may be hard to deal with. In many instances student-athletes do not know who to turn to outside of team members or coaches; such approaches may be hard if they are trying to establish themselves as "one of the team." Advisors may or may not have established themselves as accessible for personal discussions by this time, and they are authority figures with whom some student-athletes may not feel comfortable.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Universities known for having high academic concerns for their students (e.g., Notre Dame, Duke, Georgetown) have invested large amounts of time and money into their programs. For example, Georgetown has tutors who travel with the student-athletes, keep track of their schedules, and help them with assignments (Wood & Miller, 1989). The University of Texas women's athletic department has developed a triphasic approach to their student-athletes' success: (1) a stringent battery of aptitude tests beginning at the outset of the freshman year and continuing through graduation; (2) an ongoing physiological course which deals with athletic issues pertaining to the human body; and (3) a required tutorial system (Rice, 1989). The University of Florida has a program in which the athletic counselor is responsible for helping

student-athletes identify areas of personal, vocational, and academic concerns as well as learn about their academic abilities through a series of aptitude tests and applications (Wittmer et al., 1981). There are also companies which specialize in collegiate programs. One such corporation, PACE Sports, Inc., has developed a 26-phase learning assessment test which identifies learning abilities needed by student-athletes to do college work or subsequent job tasks (Stratten, 1990). All of these programs have qualities which probably contribute greatly to the student-athletes' eventual success; however, many new student-athletes need more basic academic and psychological support at the beginning of their college careers than these programs afford.

Unfortunately, not all schools have the finances needed to provide full-time tutorial support or expensive psychological batteries. These responsibilities are often largely placed on the academic advisor, who may have too many advisees to spend quality personalized time with each of them. Tutors contribute in course-related areas but are not normally expected to help the student-athletes with time management or study habit skills that do not pertain to the tutor's specific area of interest. A relatively inexpensive and simple form of support for newcomers, who in this case are incoming scholarship student-athletes, is found in many professional organizations today and is discussed in the section below.

## **MENTOR PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS**

Formalized mentor programs have become common training vehicles in a variety of organizations during the last ten years (Zey, 1984). Mentor programs have been successful in corporations such as IBM, Hughes Aircraft, and Merrill Lynch and in divisions of the federal government (Phillips-Jones, 1983). These programs are utilized in a variety of fashions to help the new or upwardly mobile employee assimilate into a (usually large) institution more readily.

"The main purpose of the programs is to introduce new people to the inner workings of the organization and to help them with career advancement," states Linda Phillips-Jones, a research scientist who specializes in developing mentor programs for large corporations (1983). Although mentor programs are highly individualized according to the specific needs of each situation, they all have two basic attributes: individuality and coherent goals.

A primary facet of any mentor system is its pliancy, and the companies who have recognized this aspect of mentoring report the greatest successes (Lawrie, 1987). It seems that not only does the mentoring concept vary from organization to organization, but it also varies on an individual basis and over time as well. Most mentoring relationships evolve and include periods of acclimation, progress, independence, and eventually dissolution.

On the organizational level, the mentor and mentee may be expected to find each other by chance (probably the least effective method), they may meet at a special gathering (i.e., cocktail party) arranged for willing mentors

and new mentees to meet, or they may be assigned to each other (Zey, 1984). While the last option does not take into consideration possible personality or scheduling conflicts, it is commonly thought to be the most successful method used (Phillips-Jones, 1983). A mentor and mentee can be paired in a variety of fashions. For instance, an upwardly mobile specialist may be assigned a retiring mentor in the same field with the intention that the younger will eventually replace the older, or a newly hired employee may be assigned a mentor who has an outstanding work record. Regardless of how a team is paired, however, the shaping of the learner's attitudes and skills is a primary goal of the mentor relationship (Lawrie, 1987).

New members or members who are in transition greatly benefit from guidance. "Initial entry shock" (Phillips-Jones, 1983) can be greatly reduced when support from a member of the establishment is provided. Mentors who help their mentees set goals and then help attain them are valuable assets to any corporation. This goal-setting activity gives the mentor and mentee a common bond and builds confidence in the mentee. In the process of achieving physical or mental goals, the mentee often gains something even more valuable. Often the most valuable outcome of the mentoring relationship is a set of attitudes learned by the apprentice (Lawrie, 1987). Since mentors are usually chosen for their positive attitudes toward their jobs, this attitude is transferred to the mentee and thus eventually manifested throughout the organization (Lawrie, 1987).

## **MENTORS IN THE TEAM PROGRAM**

By providing mature upperclass mentors (preferably graduate students), an athletic department may be able to help beginning student-athletes in a variety of ways. The Texas A&M University athletic department began a unique project in the fall semester of 1990 in which each scholarship student-athlete ("ment") was provided with a mentor. The mentors were individuals who had excellent tutorial records with the department. In addition to weekly tutoring sessions, they spent time with the student-athletes on a variety of topics, including campus acclimation, calendar development (time management skills), and good study habit development.

Mentor training for this program (dubbed "The TEAM," an acronym for "Together in Excellence for Athletes with Mentors") did not involve an extensive format or complicated guidelines. It was felt that the simpler and more relaxed a mentor/ment relationship could be, the better its chance of survival. Mentor training consisted of two-hour orientation sessions in which the goals and expectations of the program were outlined and speakers from the faculty mentor organization and the student counseling center were heard. It was stressed that mentors are not intended in any way to replace the advisor in any of his or her respective duties; they are meant to enhance the advisor's position. Mentors serve as liaisons between the academic administration and the student-athletes, and above all as companions to their ments.

Reports on the progress of the TEAM program were collected in three ways. First, each mentor was asked to communicate with the student-athlete's advisor on a weekly written basis and on a monthly personal meeting basis to keep the advisor informed about the personal progress of the student-athlete. Second, a mentor supervisor made telephone and written follow-ups to the mentors throughout the semester to get feedback on the progress of the program. Third, the student-athletes filled out response sheets on their mentor experiences near the end of the first semester. All information will be compiled and compared longitudinally for graduation success rates of the student-athletes who complete the TEAM program.

## **GOALS OF THE TEAM PROGRAM**

The TEAM program is based on the philosophy that if student-athletes become familiar with an upperclass model (a mentor), they will have a beginning advantage that past student-athletes have not had. The mentor can introduce not only the campus and its basic attributes (like the library) but also the basic study and time management skills necessary for academic success.

The program's goals were as follows:

- (1) To help orient the beginning scholarship student-athlete
  - (a) by making them feel personally welcomed
  - (b) by helping them become familiar with the campus
- (2) To help student-athletes develop academic/athletic calendars
- (3) To help student-athletes identify weaknesses in their study habits and then to help student-athletes develop skills to fortify their academic abilities

The mentors' first priority is to let the student-athletes know that they are there as friends, as "big brother and big sister" figures. Often, new student-athletes feel that everyone is interested in them for specific reasons: the coach wants them to perform athletically, the professor wants them to perform academically, and even the advisor wants them to be able to perform in a decision-making capacity. Also, many student-athletes may benefit greatly from a relationship with a "normal" student role model since their contact with upperclass or graduate non-athletes is limited because of living arrangements and time constraints. According to a study conducted by Wilbur & Wilbur (1986), many student-athletes think that "normal" students like to study. By exposing them to students who have had years of experience in college, student-athletes may realize that this is not necessarily so.

## **STEPS OF THE TEAM PROGRAM**

The first step in the mentor/ment meetings was to help the student-athletes learn their way around campus. Many student-athletes are at a disadvantage from the very beginning of their college experience because, when other freshmen are going through university orientation, they are involved with practice, whether formal or informal. Football players especially suffer since their season often opens with the semester. In addition, some scholarship recipients are not able to attend an official college orientation because of the expense involved. For this reason, the mentors' first concern was the student-athletes' physical acclimation. Mentors took student-athletes on campus or library walking tours, helped them find classes and buildings on maps, and answered any questions.

Mentors spent the first few meetings getting to know the student-athletes and making them feel comfortable and welcome. Mentors stressed the idea that they were there to be "big brother or sister" figures if the student-athletes needed or wanted that type of interaction.

By attempting to identify with the student-athletes as people, mentors can become confidantes to them during normal and high stress periods. Student-athletes may have questions or needs unique to their own situations. Two common reasons for poor collegiate academic performance have been identified by Wilbur and Wilbur (1986): (1) the student-athlete does not understand how college academic demands differ from those of high school; and (2) the student-athlete lacks information on how to act like a college student. These may seem like trivial issues, but having mentors to answer "silly" questions may help guide student-athletes in the right direction. Growth in the mentor/ment relationship may, over time, help student-athletes develop into stronger students and individuals.

All freshmen have to make substantial adjustments when going away to a university: a new living environment (sometimes in an athletic dorm, which limits contact with non-athletes even more); a new lifestyle; different academic expectations; the "little fish in a big pond syndrome." All of these adjustments have to be made in addition to the adjustments that student-athletes have to make athletically, which may be substantial considering that they may be involved with sports more than classroom and study time combined ("A Study," 1988).

The second step in the mentoring sessions was development of a semester calendar. Early in the semester (usually the third meeting), the mentors and ments filled out a calendar form (provided by the department) of the ments' daily obligations for the semester. Of course, they know only a limited amount of information about their schedules at the beginning of the semester; therefore, maintenance of the calendar is conducted regularly as a team effort for the entire first semester or until the student-athletes display an ability and a desire to do it on their own.



This calendar is a record of both formal and informal commitments. Formal commitments include class and practice times, event dates (if any), reading assignments, quizzes, tests, paper due dates, and special academic events like extra-credit attendance at forums, plays, or lectures. Commitments are considered to be informal if no studying or athletic commitments are involved (e.g., weekend visitors or trips home). The purposes of maintaining such a specific calendar are listed below:

- (1) Student-athletes need to gain a visual picture of how busy their personal schedules actually are.
- (2) High demand periods need to be made visible long before they are a reality.
- (3) Student-athletes need to begin to regard time management as a personal responsibility.

The third step of the mentoring sessions, development of study habits, came later in the semester (around the third week), depending on the mentor/ment relationship and the student-athletes' progress. Since the mentors' primary goal is to be a "big brother/sister" figure, discussion of study habits was pursued only after the mentors and ments agreed that it would be helpful. Since part of the mentors' responsibility was to help their ments in the areas where they were not assigned formal tutors, the mentors examined the student-athletes' notes to develop a general concept of their study and note-taking habits and thus were better able to provide constructive comments on the students' obvious note-taking habits.

An assortment of note-taking and study hint sheets was provided in the mentors' orientation packets, and the mentors were encouraged to give their ments copies of these sheets. The mentors approached study habit advisement in a variety of ways according to the needs of the individual ments. Some felt that providing bits of information was more beneficial for their ments, and others shared a large amount of information at once.

Study habit suggestions were shared with the ments in the hope that this information could help them avoid what are often irreversibly bad habits. These "helpful hints" included three elements: (1) an outline guide for lecture note-taking; (2) a list of easy abbreviations to use during note-taking; and (3) a short essay on the importance of taking thorough class notes. If even a small portion of this information is utilized by a student-athlete in the freshman year, the chances of this habit continuing are far greater than if undesirable study habits are allowed to be carried over from high school.

In addition to the three main goals of the mentor program, the mentors helped the ments in areas of personal interest. For instance, some student-athletes were concerned about developing relationships with teachers. There is an overwhelming consensus among freshmen that college professors do not care to know them personally and do not want to be bothered with their individual

questions (Camp & Epps, 1986). In most cases, this is not true, and the students were encouraged to establish personal relationships with their instructors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many student-athletes leave secondary school with marginal study habits and time management skills, as well as a low academic self-esteem. If these fundamental aspects of college success can be developed early in the student-athletes' college career, they may have a much better chance of remaining eligible and eventually graduating. Since college student-athletes dedicate so much time to their sports, those who are lacking in these fundamental skills are not likely to develop them alone.

Successful professional mentor programs are the basis for the academic/athletic TEAM mentor program at Texas A&M University. The TEAM program is one alternative in the ongoing quest to find a solution to student-athletes' academic and athletic challenges. By providing new student-athletes with one upperclass model with whom they can begin to develop beneficial skills early in their college careers, they are likely to enjoy more academic successes and to develop greater overall self-esteem.

The TEAM program is not mandatory for the student-athletes at Texas A&M, but those who participate will be monitored, and their academic records and graduation rates will be compared to non-mentored student-athletes in the years to come.

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