Published on Sports Management Resources

Key Elements and Best Practices in the Development of Academic Support Programs

Historically, the design of academic support programs in college athletics has been more about responding to crisis than operating from a sound and proactive philosophical perspective. For example:

- a coach may recruit a talented student-athlete who doesn't meet admissions standards, the institution makes an admissions exception and now an under-qualified and academically under-skilled athlete is at academic risk.
- a top athlete in the program becomes academically ineligible and the institution has to explain why he or she is missing from the line-up and demonstrate they are making a good faith effort to move the student-athlete into academic good-standing
- a newspaper reports that the basketball team that has just qualified for post-season championships, but has a miserable graduation rate

Based on one or more of these or similar critical needs, the athletic department hires a tutor, a learning specialist or others to help the student-athlete who has failed or is in danger of failing. The support system grows into an organized program as more athletes with similar problems are identified and a person is appointed to direct the program on an ongoing basis. Then coaches realize the potential the academic support program has as a recruiting tool. A new 'arms race' begins as state of the art facilities, computers and academic services become part of the "athlete is special" culture. The development of a 'we take care of athletes better" academic support program becomes a significant recruiting asset.

Throughout this evolutionary process, chances are that the academic support program was:

- initially, or still is controlled by the athletics department;
- focused on the most important sports which might have been more likely to recruit students at academic risk;
- developed through trial and error rather than acquisition of advice from academic experts;
- developed without reliance on fact-based data; and
- focused serving the needs of 5% to 10% of all athletes in the program who were at highest

academic risk.

It's important to acknowledge that there are many academic support systems that are doing a great job. But there are others that are just managing to stay 'one step ahead of the next academic crisis' thanks to the passionate commitment of staff members. These programs require ongoing and careful management attention because of the existing and growing high stakes of failure.

Today, institutional reputation risk related to academic integrity is at an all-time high due to the following factors:

- media coverage of graduation rates and academic progress rates, publicly reported due to NCAA rules and state open records mandates, has become the rule rather than the exception;
- academic progress rate failure poses the risk of loss of athletics scholarships as a penalty at NCAA Division I institutions, the most highly visible athletics programs;
- the stakes to win at Division I institutions show no signs of abating, putting more pressure on coaches in the recruiting process;
- the academic rigor at and the competition for the best students at top institutions is escalating, putting more pressure on academically under qualified students in the student body;
- athletics department controlled academic support programs carry an inherent "conflict of interest" position and as student registration in selected "easy" courses, less demanding majors or independent studies with less than rigorous professors come to light, questions increase about whether student-athletes or their tutors are producing required academic work;
- faculties, charged with preserving the academic reputation of the institution, become vocal critics of academic support systems that are controlled by athletics or non-faculty personnel and not subject to faculty oversight; and
- the NCAA mandates the existence of academic support programs for student-athletes in Division I and these programs now come under regular certification review through a transparent on-campus evaluation process, the results of which are publicly released.

This environment creates even more pressure on academic support programs to prevent student-athlete failure, leading many observers to believe that athletics' staff members pressure student-athletes to take majors and courses where they can be successful rather than career tracks and academic training with useful future value. Thus, colleges and universities are beginning to take a higher interest in and much more sophisticated approach to bringing these programs under faculty control and making them more effective and academically defensible.

These factors also make it clear that the academic support program cannot be viewed as a construct isolated from the admissions process, faculty oversight or pressures on coaches. Following is a discussion of the key elements and questions that should be considered in the development of effective and educationally defensible academic support programs.

1. **Admissions Policy Exemptions.** As soon as the institution grants an exemption to the minimum academic standards established for admission to the college or university, two things happen: (1) its responsibility for the experience of that student increases because it knowingly admits a student who will be challenged to compete in the classroom with higher qualified classmates and (2) reputation risk increases. While it is tempting to argue for no admissions exemptions, such exemptions are commonplace. It is not unusual for institutions to waive regular admissions requirements for students

who are extraordinarily gifted in music, the arts or other areas that defy traditional forms of measurement. It is also not unusual for normal admissions standards to be waived for students with learning disabilities or underrepresented minority populations whose socio-economic status, past discriminatory treatment, lack of basic developmental skills or other factors have prevented them from attaining the qualifications needed to meet normal admissions standards.

In many cases, the question is not whether such students are capable of graduation; rather, it is whether these students are provided with the programs that will enable them to acquire the study skills, strategies and other advantages to which they have previously been denied so they can compete in the classroom on a level playing field with their peers. Athletes, who are often classic overachievers, have many advantages in this regard, if they can be surrounded with the right programs and environment. In fact, there are many higher education institutions that require specially admitted students to participate in academic support programming such as:

- 'summer bridge programs' offered prior to the first full semester of attendance
- learning disability, basic reading and writing assessments
- remedial programming based on basic skill assessments or academic deficiencies identified during the admissions process
- academic support programs provided by the institution (as opposed to the athletics department).

Therefore, the first critical decision on the part of the University is whether athletes will receive admissions exemptions and if so, under what criteria, according to what process and how many such exemptions be granted. At what point does the number of special talent special admissions change the culture of a particular sport, the entire athletics program or, at smaller institutions, affect the nature of the entire student body?

2. **Academic Profiling**. It is critical for every institution to backtrack and do research for the purpose of identifying the characteristics of those student-athletes who were unable to graduate from the university and those who entered with characteristics predictive of academic failure but who were able to succeed. What are the predictive criteria that define a student-athlete at high academic risk? What are the characteristics of at-risk students who succeed? Is there a system in place where this information is assembled for prospective athletes? Are coaches fully informed about the academic profiles of prospects during the recruiting process? Does the academic support program maximize the production of those attributes of at-risk students who successfully graduated?

3. **Review of At-Risk Admissions**. Some type of review mechanism, preferably faculty member dominated, should be put in place to make decisions on whether scholarships or admissions should be offered to student-athletes with exceptionally high risk profiles. A definite conflict of interest exists if the coach or athletics staff has the decision-making power over admissions, even if the registrar or other university administrators are part of the review system. Contrary to athletic administrator or coach fears, I have found faculty oversight committees to be extraordinarily supportive of highly motivated student-athletes with poor academic backgrounds. Not only do these faculty overseers support admissions, but because of their decision-making responsibility, they become invested in developing an academic support program that proves them right. Often, they take a personal interest in the academic success of these students. Athletics directors should consider establishing a structure where a three to five faculty member subcommittee of the faculty athletics governance structure has this responsibility. No donors, coaches or administrators should be a part of the recommending body. The coach and the athletics

senior staff member overseeing academic affairs should be charged with presenting the ‘case’ for such exemptions and being directly responsive to faculty queries regarding the reasons why the staff believes the student-athlete will be successful.

4. **Acknowledgement of Overall Faculty Control**. Key to academic integrity for any athletics program is transparency of data and faculty control of academic performance tracking and oversight mechanisms, such as the practice of reviewing and recommending admissions exemptions. The larger athletics policy structure (faculty athletics council, board of athletics policy should always be faculty dominated (majority vote). All specially admitted student-athletes should be tracked throughout their collegiate careers and regular academic progress and graduation achievement reports on this group as well as all student-athletes should be made to the Faculty Senate or other appropriate university faculty governance structure. Athletic department conformance with the institution’s core belief in faculty control of academic integrity is essential. The extent to which the athletics department acknowledges this trust in faculty control and judgment by policy and through organizational structures, the more likely it is that coaches and athletics personnel will work together with the faculty to effectively to maximize the success of student-athletes.

5. **Academic Unit Control of Student-Athlete Academic Support Programs**. Control of athlete academic support programs should not reside in the athletics department for obvious conflict of interest reasons. However, even though the program is controlled by an academic unit, there should be a very close working relationship between the athletics department and those responsible for the program with regard to student-athlete participation. The coach has a major and direct responsibility for recruiting student-athletes and supporting their academic success. The head coach controls whether a student participates or sits the bench and is a key influencer whose encouragement for class, study hall or tutoring session attendance or other positive academic behaviors is critical. This requires regular communication with the coaching staff either directly or through athletics personnel charged with that responsibility. Athletics program participation is time-consuming. Academically at-risk students may need scheduling or travel accommodations whenever sports participation and academic preparation conflict. Coaches may have to use the 'carrot' of participation to reinforce a student-athlete’s participation in the academic support system.
It is important to acknowledge that some of the best and most ethical academic support programs in the country have been developed by athletics departments and are still controlled by athletics departments. What do you do in these cases to maintain program excellence but deal with the appearance of impropriety? The solution is to move the entire program to academic unit control but to move the program in its entirety, being sure to keep the same staff and organizational structure that made the program so successful. In fact, "moving" the program would be a figure of speech. In all likelihood, the program would remain in the same physical space, continue to be funded by athletics department resources and all personnel would remain. The only, but very important, change would be to whom the head of the program would report, with that person someone outside of the athletics department.

6. **Audience to Be Served by Academic Support Programs**. Another key decision is whether (1) all student-athletes, (2) an academic risk sub-set of all student-athletes or (3) all students on campus will benefit from the academic support program. The time commitment required for athletics should be considered a risk element for all student-athletes. Athletics departments should have policies in place that provide academic support benefits for all athletes in need rather than those who have been profiled as high-risk. If all athletes must meet normal admissions standards, chances are good that no special academic support programs will be required. Rather, it becomes an athletics department obligation to

ensure that all athletes are aware of academic support programs available to all students and to ensure that athletics program obligations don't interfere with such access. The larger the population of student-athletes who do not meet normal admissions standards, the more likely it is that the staffing, cost and size of such programs will be considerable and the programs will become more student-athlete focused.

7. **Early Assistance to At-Risk Students**. First semester performance sets the tone for academic success and should be an important focus for academic risk students. If possible, high risk student-athletes should be encouraged to enroll during the summer prior to their initial full-time semester to maximize their adjustment to higher rigor academic demands, assess their reading and writing skills, enable testing for learning disabilities, offer study skills training and surround the student with an academic support system that is not in competition with the beginning of a sport season or a full academic course load. All program resources should be instituted at the very beginning of the student-athlete's first full semester of work and in conjunction with monitoring programs that periodically assess progress or grades in each course during the semester. Chances are that at-risk students will require tutors for each of their courses in addition to general learning support (writing, reading, time management, note-taking, studying and test taking). Both programs should be instituted before signs of academic trouble appear.

8. **Early Plug In to Students with Disabilities Office**. Students with learning disabilities receive many important services and accommodations that are unrelated to their status as athletes. Early identification of such students and the establishment of their connections with these services are essential.

9. **Policy Support of Academic Achievement**. There are several critical areas of policy support that need to be established by the athletics department and/or the college:

- notice to coaches that graduation rates and the academic success of student-athletes is one of their critical responsibilities and that they are expected to adjust athletics demands toward this end
- coach removal of the athlete from participation in practice and/or competition to provide athletes necessary study time to remedy academic deficiencies or create disincentives for failure to attend class or needed academic support programming
- graduation rate and academic progress rate criteria as coach employment evaluation elements and factors considered for reappointment, contract renewal or multiyear employment agreements
- commitment to ethical and curricular integrity with regard to coaches, other athletics personnel, or academic advisor personnel directing students to take or avoid particular courses, instructors or majors in order to maintain athletics eligibility
- prohibition of athletics competition during final exams when the institution controls the sport schedule
- scheduling policies that limit missed class time require the approval of athletics schedules by the faculty policy board
- specific procedures for faculty approval of exceptions to missed class limitations due to forces out of the institution's control and accommodation of academic needs for such exceptions
- prohibition of athlete enrollment in courses taught by coaches or if such courses are required, mechanisms which prohibit coach involvement in the determination of an athlete's grade for that course
- faculty governance control of course credits for varsity sports participation as part of physical

education or sport-related majors and the maximum allowable hours accepted for such courses
- required exit interviews with athletes that address athletic department and coach support of the athlete's academic achievement
- faculty governance prohibition of campus-wide cancellation of classes for athletics events
- mechanisms for the regular collection and review of data by coach, by sport and overall such as GPAs, choice of major, athlete enrollment and grades by course section, academic progress (% of completion of units required for degree), graduation rate, etc. that enable administrative and faculty oversight
- faculty majority dominance of athletics policy and academic review structures
- mandated reports to the faculty senate or other faculty governing body on the academic achievements of athletes with comparisons to the regular student-body, including specially admitted athletes
- priority registration for athletes that will minimize lost class time and maximize their opportunity to register for classes required for progress toward their degrees
- coach and athlete involvement in regular campus activities and programs supporting the student's educational experience (community service, guest speakers, study abroad, etc.)
- designation of a faculty member (faculty athletics representative) that is responsible for overseeing academically related athletic department policies, procedures and programs
- assessment of the academic skills and profiles of all newly enrolled athletes
- monitoring and report preparation by a non-athletics entity to comply with rules of eligibility for athletics competition
- training and supervision of and employment agreements for tutors and mentors enforcing ethical conduct related to student production of all academic work product and student academic independence
- provision of summer academic scholarship assistance for at-risk students
- provision of assistance to students desiring to return to the university to complete undergraduate degree programs under appropriate circumstances
- protection of athlete academic information in conformance with privacy laws and institution policy

10. **Elements of a Comprehensive Academic Support Program**. College faculty, staffs of academic support programs administered by the office of the provost or other appropriate academic officials and athletics personnel should work together to ensure that student-athletes, especially those at academic risk, have access to quality academic support programs containing the following programmatic elements:

- Study Skills Learning Support – training programs helping students improve the following skills: time management, writing, reading, note-taking, prioritization of tasks, test preparation and test-taking
- Tutoring – subject matter tutors helping students with specialized course content
- Mentoring – provision of regularly scheduled assistance to at-risk students with regard to reinforcement of study skills and strategies, monitoring of class attendance, monitoring of grades on all assignments and tests
- Accommodation of Learning Disabilities – assessment, support and accommodation of students with identified learning disabilities by the appropriate campus office responsible for such programs
- Technology Access and Training – access to use of and training on computers and other technologies essential for efficient production of academic work at times available to student-

athletes
- Study Hall – access to study areas with a climate conducive to learning and retention and access to academic assistance

The extent to which the use of such programs is required by student-athletes should be dependent on their at-risk status and demonstrated academic performance, with programming mandates reduced as the student becomes academically and behaviorally more capable. The goal of all academic support programs should be to assist the student-athlete in achieving a level of academic competence that enables him or her to compete in the classroom in an independent, responsible and mature manner.

By Donna Lopiano, Ph.D., President, Sports Management Resources

Topics

Academic Issues

Philosophy/Vision/Mission/Goals

Risk Management

Source URL: https://sportsmanagementresources.com/index.php/print/pdf/node/224