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Faculty Control and Involvement or Athletics Department Isolation?

It's time for athletics programs to invest in closer relationships with the faculty, especially with regard to the oversight of academic support programs and recommendations for special admissions. The 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 classroom;
- 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 study courses 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 academic support programs for student-athletes in Division I and such programs come under regular certification review via a transparent on-campus process, the results of which are publicly released.

This environment creates even more pressure on academic support programs to prevent student-athlete failure. Many observers believe that athletics department advisors and academic support personnel pressure student-athletes into majors and courses in which they can easily maintain their athletics eligibility rather than encouraging them to pursue career tracks and more rigorous academic training with useful future value in which they have an interest. Thus, colleges and universities are beginning to take a higher interest in and much more sophisticated approach to bringing special admissions and academic support programs under faculty control and making them more effective and academically defensible.

Athletic departments should support this effort.

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 against 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 underrepresented minority populations whose socio-economic status, past discriminatory treatment, learning disability or other factors have prevented them from attaining the qualifications needed for normal admissions. In many cases, the question is not whether such students are capable of graduation, rather, it is making sure that these students 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 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 and according to what process will such exemptions be granted.

Some type of review mechanism, preferably majority faculty member dominated committee, should be put in place to make decisions on whether scholarships or admissions should be offered to student-athletes with 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 they support their 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 the responsibility for recommending admissions exceptions. 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 athletics staff believes the student-athlete will be successful.

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, etc.) should always be composed of a majority of faculty. This faculty policy committee should make regular reports to the overall university faculty governance structure on all specially admitted student-athletes and the academic progress and graduation achievement of all student-athletes. 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.

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. Use of athletics incentives or disincentives controlled by the head coach and coach encouragement for class, study hall or tutoring session attendance or other mechanisms of coach support of academic effort are 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.

Other Athletics Policy Support of Faculty Involvement

There are several other critical areas of policy for faculty involvement that should be considered:

- prohibition of athletics competition during final exams and other scheduling policies that limit missed class time with approval of such policies and 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
- faculty governance policy 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 conducted by faculty members that address athletic department and coach support of the athlete's academic achievement
- faculty governance policy prohibition of campus-wide cancellation of classes for athletics events
- 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
- designation of a faculty member (faculty athletics representative) that is responsible for overseeing academically related athletic department policies, procedures and programs

The extent to which athletics and the faculty work together toward the common goal of student-athlete academic success is a critical measure of the health of an athletics program.

-- by Donna Lopiano, SMR President

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