

# **PRACTICE BRIEF**

## **Supporting Student Athletes with Disabilities: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

Students with disabilities face tremendous change when transitioning to postsecondary education. Student athletes with disabilities face additional time and academic demands. Many universities have developed academic support programs for these student athletes. This article describes a case study of a Learning Assistance Program developed to support student athletes with disabilities and others who struggle transitioning to a Division 1 university.

Approximately 11% of undergraduates in 2003-2004 reported having a disability, up from 6% in 1999 (Horn & Berkold, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). Although the transition to college is difficult for many students, adjustment to college for student athletes with disabilities presents additional academic, time, and publicity dilemmas to overcome.

### **Problem**

Students with disabilities must develop strategies to deal with the many new demands of the college environment. They must navigate the change in processes and services from the high school to college environment, tackle the increased academic demand of college courses, and deal with the lack of a school-imposed schedule on their time (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). In addition, they may find academic support services dispersed throughout the university, requiring a student, for example, to seek writing support from the writing center, math support from the math department, course-specific support from individual professors or departments, and general strategy support from an academic help center. Research has shown that struggling to adapt to these changes often affects a student's willingness to persist to graduation (DaPeppo, 2009).

Student athletes must develop additional strategies to meet the requirements of playing an intercollegiate

sport. For example, along with university requirements for academic eligibility, the National Collegiate Athletic Association ([NCAA], 2009) adds criteria for progress toward degrees and successful completion of course hours to maintain competition eligibility. Also, to compete, student athletes are required to complete a requisite number of study hall hours, a minimum of between eight and 20 practice hours per week, competition travel and play, and community and university service obligations (NCAA, 2009). These athletes, especially from high profile sports, are also public figures at all times, even when attending class or seeking course accommodations.

Given these additional demands, many universities have established student athlete academic support units to work in concert with or as supplements to support services for the general student body. These support units provide advising for NCAA eligibility purposes, study halls, tutoring, and mentoring services for student athletes.

As the number of student athletes with disabilities has increased, both the NCAA and the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletes (N4A) have taken up the issue of how to best support these students. In the past several years, academic support units of many Division 1 schools have created Learning Assistance Programs (LAP) with Learning Specialists to provide this support. In a recent survey of Learning Specialists, the N4A (2007) found that they come from many different professional backgrounds, including

counseling, education, and special education, and their top four responsibilities are teaching learning strategies, time management skills, organizational skills, and working with student athletes with learning disabilities. There is much variety between universities in the services offered. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of one such LAP.

### Strategy

Following the recommendations of its University Athletic Committee, the student athlete academic support unit of a large, Division 1 university decided to develop a LAP dedicated to working with student athletes with disabilities and those who were struggling in their first two years of college. The Committee cited several reasons for the program, including: (1) an inability for students to access Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) because of their athletic schedules, (2) the long waiting list or cumbersome procedures for assistance through support services on campus, (3) the unwillingness of some student athletes to seek help outside of athletic support services because of their highly public status, and (4) the need for progress monitoring for NCAA compliance.

The LAP began in 2005 with the hiring of a former special educator as the Lead Learning Specialist. The mission of the program was to provide supplemental academic support services for student athletes with disabilities or who were struggling during the transition to college (i.e., years 1 and 2) and to work closely with SSD. The Learning Specialist developed the LAP to address the self-determination, self-management, and technology skills for these students, skills identified as critical to college student success (Getzel, 2008).

**Working with SSD.** Initially, the Learning Specialist and Assistant Director of SSD met on several occasions to develop a documented plan for information exchange and to invite participation in orientation activities. Specifics about support services such as academic coaching were shared and, with their permission, dialogue about students and whether they were accessing or experiencing difficulties with services continued throughout the program's existence. In addition, a partnership between the LAP and SSD's Assistive Technology office allowed shared technology resources for all students with disabilities on campus.

**Academic support services.** The academic coordinators who were responsible for overseeing the

eligibility and academic progress of student athletes referred students with disabilities or those suspected of having a disability to the LAP. These coordinators were an integral part of the LAP development process. When academic issues arose for a student after general tutoring or mentoring services were provided, the Learning Specialist met with the coordinator and the student to discuss the issues and to problem solve. If the student athlete was a student with a disability, the Learning Specialist worked as a liaison to the SSD office, explaining procedures, making appointments, and helping the student athlete understand the process. If the student athlete was suspected of having a disability, the Learning Specialist would work with the student to get more information and to provide help in securing a psychoeducational evaluation. The academic coordinators discussed all referrals with the student athlete's coaching staff.

Once a student was admitted to the program, the Learning Specialist developed and implemented an individualized plan for support. In addition to assistance in obtaining accommodations, several levels of individual and group assistance were available. These services were similar to those offered by many different units on campus but were more readily accessible and individualized in the LAP. See Table 1 for a description of services. The goal of the Learning Specialist was to provide the initial support necessary to help the student athlete transition and then to move the student to independence from those services by the end of their second academic year.

All LAP services were scheduled around a student athlete's course, practice, and travel schedule. The LAP staff scheduled appointments on Sundays from 4 pm to 10 pm and Mondays through Thursdays from 8 am to 10 pm. Evening meetings usually took place during mandatory study hall hours. The Learning Specialist communicated general progress and all missed sessions to the academic coordinator who then informed the coaching staff. If a student athlete missed more than three scheduled sessions in a semester, they were dismissed from their LAP services.

### Observed Outcomes

In the first semester of the program, four student athletes identified with disabilities received direct services from the Learning Specialist (three freshmen and one upperclassman). All four were able to maintain passing

Table 1

## Academic Support Services Offered

<b>Service</b>	<b>Available to General Student Body?</b>	<b>Individual / Group</b>	<b>Goals</b>
Academic Coaching	Yes; SSD (one semester wait list)	Individual	Help the student learn content material, time management skills, self-advocacy skills, and various study skills. The student and Learning Specialist set specific academic and learning goals and used course content in instruction toward these goals.
Structured Study Hall	Yes; Academic Support Unit (students on probation or returning from suspension)	Small group	Three to five students worked with the Learning Specialist either on content material, task analysis skills, or time management skills. The Learning Specialist helped to maintain student focus and monitor task completion.
Study Groups	Yes; individual courses	Small / large group	Learning Specialist would help students identify important material in the reading, review for important vocabulary terms, and determine effective study strategies. Setting allowed for much discussion of content and an environment where student athletes felt comfortable asking questions.
College Success Strategies	Yes; Academic Support Unit	Large Group	Focused on study skills, understanding college topics, life as student athlete (public speaking, responsibilities when traveling, etc.)
Assistive Technology	Yes; SSD (during office hours)	Individual	Training on use of assistive technologies such as readers, speech-to-text programs, or digital tape recorders.

grades and remain eligible for competition in the next semester. Two have since graduated, one has enough credits to graduate, and one has left the university.

By the spring of 2009, 60 student athletes received either individual or small group services from two Learning Specialists. The program had expanded to include a section of a College Success Strategies course similar to that offered to all students but geared to athletes (e.g., meeting with professors to provide travel letters and how to respond during an interview) and two large study groups for Introduction to Psychology and Introduction to Theater. Sixteen of the 60 student athletes served were identified as students with disabilities. Twenty-one student athletes received individual academic coaching, 10 worked in structured study hall, 10 received individual consultations (usually two to four sessions per semester), 22 participated in course study groups, and 12 enrolled in the College Success Strategies course. Only six of the student athletes involved with the Learning Assistance Program (including only one student athlete with a disability) earned less than a 2.0 GPA for the semester.

### Implications

Students with disabilities often struggle with the transition to postsecondary education (DaDeppo, 2009; Trammell, 2009). Student athletes with disabilities have the additional time, academic, and publicity demands related to their sports. Universities often need to provide centralized and accessible academic support services for these students. A Learning Assistance Program with a Learning Specialist who is knowledgeable about disabilities and instruction can work within these academic support offices to provide the support and progress monitoring necessary to help these students transition successfully.

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## About the Author

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