Go For the Win: A Collaborative Model for Supporting Student-Athletes

Jacqueline S. Hodes, Tammy James, Gerardina Martin, and
Kellianne Milliner
West Chester University

Abstract

Intercollegiate athletics is a transformative component in the structure of many institutions of higher education. Campuses benefit from the inclusion of athletic sporting events in assorted ways, and student-athletes are at the core of the events. Their academic success is essential to the success of the team. Studies show college athletes benefit from increased academic support and highly effective academic and social interventions. This article describes a unique, collaborative model for supporting college athletes at a Division II campus. The authors describe the contributions from each area, outline the collaborative model, and make recommendations for further study.

Keywords: Athletes, Academic Success, Highly Effective Practices

Introduction

Intercollegiate athletics began in 1852 when a crew race was held between Harvard and Yale (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). Currently, college athletics are an integral part of most higher education environments. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2014), over a half million students participate in intercollegiate sports in Division I, II, and III programs each year. Student-athletes contribute to the vibrancy of campus communities. The academic success of student-athletes is essential to the success of the individual team and campus athletic programs. West Chester University (WCU), a Division II institution, has created a unique, collabora-

Kellianne Milliner | West Chester University | KMilliner@wcupa.edu

tive model for supporting our student-athletes academically, socially, and personally.

The Case for Supporting Student-Athletes

At post-secondary institutions, student-athletes are in a classification all their own. They are often the ambassadors of universities and colleges across the country and the faces we associate with various legacies. Athletics is often referred to as the "front porch" of the institution and our student-athletes are the hosts (University of Washington, 2012; McCollum, 2009). They are students in the classroom and athletes on the field. Depending on the institution, student-athletes are often contracted with the school through various scholarships. The population of student-athletes is diverse, and they bring with them diverse needs. As diverse as this population may be, many student-athletes come to the post-secondary education experience ill-prepared for the rigors they may now endure. Three such concerns about college level student-athletes are (1) increased academic demands and new expectations; (2) managing the transition from high school to college: and (3) time management.

Student-athletes are students first. This idea may be lost to some student-athletes, as well as others on- and off-campus, who enroll in college for the first time. They arrive on campus with dreams of hard practices that will prepare them for the long seasons ahead. They dream of wins and championships. What some may fail to realize is they enter college for an education and athletics is another means to accomplishing such. Student-athletes often require more help than the average student because they have less time to complete the work and assignments. In some cases, student-athletes may not be prepared for the course load as the prior preparation they have received is not the same as students in the general population on a campus.

Students with diagnosed learning issues have an even greater academic risk. Coaches and faculty may perceive a learning disability is really a result of poor preparation in high school. Lombardi (2008) states it is imperative for advisors and learning specialists to work with the athletes as they come into the college setting and determine early on if the student-athlete is at an elevated risk for academic issues. Athletic departments must work closely with the academic

support system on campus to ensure students receive the best opportunities to succeed not only on the field of play, but also in the classroom.

The transition from high school athlete to college or university student-athlete is a challenge in and of itself. All of a sudden, non-classroom time otherwise spent with friends and socializing is consumed with functions related to one's athlete status, such as tutoring, team meetings, practices, appearances and other mandatory events. The demands made on student-athletes are ever increasing. No longer do they just represent themselves and their families as they did in high school. Now they represent thousands of students, professors, coaches, administrators and alumni stakeholders. Their actions and words are tied to the legacies of those who graduated before and any inappropriate behavior can set off a firestorm (Hill, 2001). Student-athletes may feel distracted by the pressure of being in the public eye. The expectations and demands made on them can seem daunting.

Student-athletes will spend on average anywhere from three to six years in a collegiate setting. Umbach (2006) encourages institutions to put an academic support system in place to teach or at least inform the student-athletes of time management techniques and to instruct them in beneficial ways. Options for managing one's time include study group sessions, using a structured schedule or planner or finding a note-taking buddy in class. One essential intervention is to advise student-athletes of the importance of managing time in order to succeed.

From their first day on campus, student-athletes at the Division II level are required to meet specific academic benchmarks in order to continue their participation in athletic competition. These academic benchmarks help to support the student-athlete in maintaining progress toward graduation at the institution. Currently, all student-athletes must pass, at minimum, six credit hours each semester and average at least 12 credits per semester of attendance, to be calculated each fall. They must maintain a cumulative grade point average of a 1.8, 1.9 or 2.0 depending on academic year. In the Fall of 2016, these benchmarks will increase to nine credits each semester, earning 24 credits each year (as opposed to averaging 12 throughout

the career), and a 2.0 minimum cumulative GPA. Students who do not meet these benchmarks are not eligible for competition or travel. These academic success targets are the first step in supporting the student-athlete.

West Chester University

West Chester University is located in the center of Pennsylvania's thriving Brandywine Valley. Established in 1871 as a Normal School for training teachers, the University has grown to include comprehensive programming through its five academic divisions: the colleges of arts and sciences, visual and performing arts, business and public affairs, education, and health sciences. In 1981, with the passage of the State System of Higher Education bill, WCU became one of the 14 universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE).

Over the past decade, WCU has experienced rapid growth and is currently the region's fourth largest university. In Spring 2014, 12,948 undergraduate students and 2,119 graduate students pursued studies in 100 undergraduate and master's degree programs (WCU, 2014). WCU has a number of articulation agreements with other institutions, including all 13 PASSHE institutions and a number of community colleges. During the 2013-2014 academic year, 1,884 transfer students continued their degrees at WCU (WCU, 2014).

WCU has grown from a local state school to a much more selective public institution. In 2013, WCU received 13,438 applications, accepted 6,922 (51.5%), and enrolled 2,292 first-time first-year students (17% of applicants) (West Chester University Fact Book, 2013, p. 21). Approximately 13% of students are from out-of-state. The 2013 Freshman Academic Profile includes a high school GPA of 3.53 and a combined SAT of 1079 (West Chester University Fact Book, 2013, p. 11). The student body is 61% female and 39 % male. Nineteen percent are underrepresented minority students (West Chester University Fact Book, 2013, p. 31).

WCU supports an NCAA Division II athletics program, with 24 intercollegiate men's and women's teams. With 545 student-athletes in 2013-2014, WCU has one of the largest Division II programs in the country (US Department of Education). During the 2013-2014 Season, WCU qualified three teams for national semi-finals in their

respective sports and seven programs reached the conference finals (WCU View Book, 2014, p. 19).

WCU's new Strategic Plan, *Building on Excellence,* contains the WCU Values Statement, which states WCU is committed to upholding the values of academic achievement, integrity, service, equity, collaboration, stewardship, creativity and innovation (WCU Strategic Plan, 2013, pp. 4–5). The Strategic Plan encompasses five broad themes which support the fundamental goal of the institution—education. Those themes include Academics, Enrichment, Sustainability, Engagement and Diversity (WCU Strategic Plan, 2013, p. 7). Each theme has established priority goals, objectives and outcome measures for a three-year period of time.

Increasing or maintaining retention and four-year and six-year graduation rates is important and essential for most post-secondary institutions. WCU's overall first- to second-year retention rate is 87.9% for those students admitted in 2013. The six-year graduation rate is 66.9% for those admitted in Fall 2008.

In both the current PASSHE and WCU strategic plans, there is a call to increase student success, specifically among underrepresented and low-income students. In 2011, PASSHE revised performance funding for the 14 state system institutions. The conceptual framework for the revised performance funding program identifies four primary drivers to assist in shaping the future direction of individual universities and the PASSHE system as a whole (Board of Governors, 2011, p. 49). The performance funding indicators include both mandatory and optional indicators. Universities must use the following two measures to determine student success: Degrees Conferred and Closing the Achievement Gap (for Pell recipients and underrepresented minority students). They may also choose from a number of measures to gauge student success, including the measure of Student Persistence (second- to third-year retention rate and third- to fourth-year retention rate) which has been chosen by WCU (WCU, 2014).

Student-Athletes and Academics at West Chester University

In Spring 2014, of the 368 first-year student-athletes, 178 (48%) were conditionally admitted. Conditionally admitted students enter the University in two ways: (1) through the summer bridge Academic Development Program (ADP) or (2) as special admits who

only enroll in 12 credits for their first semester.

The Spring 2014 headcount of students shows 67% of second-year students and third-year students and 70% of fourth-year students were conditionally admitted. In Fall 2014, 52% of first-year students, 65% of second-year students, 73% of third-year students and 63% of fourth-year students were conditional admits. The six-year graduation rate for those admitted in Fall 2007 is 67%, 2% lower than the overall student rate of 69%. These numbers indicate academic intervention is critical for first-year student-athlete success, as well as maintaining student success for all student-athletes through the implementation of high-impact practices.

Supporting Student-Athletes through Collaborative Efforts

Our institutional efforts to support the academic success of student-athletes have resulted in a multi-layered approach. As we have discussed above, many reasons exist for supporting the academic success of student-athletes. As a mid-sized public, state-system institution, WCU has faced extreme budgetary issues over the past decade. Shrinking financial support from the state of Pennsylvania has forced University leaders, faculty, and staff to be thoughtful and creative in continuing to offer programs, services and interventions to help students retain enrollment and graduate. This approach to supporting student-athletes is a true collaboration, one where the challenge of compromise has been met and the outcome of students' success is evident.

To support student-athlete success, a variety of services and interventions, both individual and environmental, needed to be in place and coordinated in a more seamless fashion for student-athletes to access and utilize. First, the Department of Health and the Department of Athletics already had measures in place (such as athletic mentors and a course specifically for student-athletes) to support student-athletes but were not coordinating support with the Learning Assistance and Resource Center (LARC). Second, the demand from student-athletes who needed or wanted academic support, such as those on academic probation, Early Alert and/or continued probation, were overwhelming the staff at the LARC and the three academic mentors provided by the department of athletics. Third, students in the higher education counseling program were seeking

out field experiences in both athletics and the LARC.

Coordinator of Academic Support Services for Student-Athletes

As discussed, student-athletes have a great need for assistance in navigating the complexities and demands of their student-athlete role. It is vital a coordinator be at the helm of organizing, planning, staffing, implementing, and advocating for an academic program encompassing all areas affecting the academic success of student-athletes. Currently, the Department of Athletics at WCU is administered by three people who are charged with coordinating all aspects of the department, including but not limited to event management, fundraising, NCAA compliance, facilities management, operational and scholarship budget oversight, personnel, equipment management, student-athlete support and academic services.

In order to focus on academic success for student-athletes, a dedicated coordinator for academic support services was engaged. A faculty coordinator was appointed from the Office of the Provost to monitor student-athletes' academic progress through mid-semester progress reports, direct communication with professors/academic advisors and compiling grade reports at the completion of each academic semester. The coordinator also assists supervising the Athletic Mentors who meet with at-risk and ineligible student-athletes. The coordinator serves as the athletic department liaison with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities and with the LARC. Finally, the coordinator creates and maintains a comprehensive database of student use of support and tutorial services and prepares reports accordingly.

Student-Athlete Academic Course

Leadership/Lifeskills for Student for Athletes (HEA 208) is currently offered as an elective through the Department of Health and is designated specifically for first- and second-year student-athletes. This course is designed to provide student-athletes with basic life skills and leadership training to become successful students at WCU. Contents of the course include, but are not limited to, time management, study skills/habits, academic planning, campus resources, stress management, healthy lifestyle practices (including nutrition, alcohol use, tobacco use and drug abuse), goal-setting, decision-making, conflict resolution, team building and community advocacy.

Athletic Mentoring

The Academic Mentoring Program exists to provide services to student-athletes who may be at-risk academically or are deemed to be in need of services to help navigate academics at the college level. Two graduate assistants and at least one intern meet weekly with students in the program. There is a commitment to hiring mentors who have worked with student-athletes or participated in athletics during their post-secondary experience. The mentors serve as liaisons between coaches, professors and student-athletes. This increased communication is essential to the success of the program. All student-athletes are mandated to (1) attend all academic success meetings; (2) obtain a tutor; and (3) attend study hall at the LARC on campus. The Academic Coordinator meets on a weekly basis with the mentors to discuss all student-athletes in the program and specific issues that may arise.

Counselor Education Program

The WCU Counselor Education program offers a Master of Science degree in Higher Education Counseling/Student Affairs. The programs are accredited by Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), which ensures students who successfully complete the degree are eligible for licensure as Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC).

The approximately 100 current students pursuing the M.S. in Higher Education Counseling/Student Affairs have varied career aspirations. Many students wish to work in traditional student affairs areas, such as residence life and housing, leadership, orientation, multicultural affairs, judicial affairs and student activities, to name a few. Others are more drawn to exploring positions in career development, academic advising, disability support, and mentoring.

As part of the curriculum, students must complete 700 hours of field experience. The field experience requirements include one 100-hour practicum and two 300-hour internships. Students are encouraged to obtain other field experience on a volunteer basis or paid through graduate assistantships. The varied field experience opportunities allow for students to be competitive in the job market upon commencement. In an alumni survey, of those who responded and were actively seeking positions, 65% reported employment within six

months post-graduation (WCU, 2014).

Many students choose to complete some or all of their field placement experiences at the LARC. The students are eager to take the skills they learn in the classroom and effectively apply them to assist students who are on academic probation, continued academic probation and early alert status. Each semester, the director and assistant director of the LARC provide supervision to 10–14 graduate students. Each graduate student is provided with a job description which includes (1) meeting individually with students on continued probation and Early Alert; (2) developing and implementing a group to address academic concerns of students in general or for a specific population of students (i.e., athletic teams); and (3) participating in a comprehensive pre-semester training. In the pre-semester training students are provided with general information about the University and the various resources available, which allows them to be effective counselor practitioners as they meet with students. Helping students navigate a large bureaucracy is one way to ensure student success.

Learning Assistance and Support Programs

The Learning Assistance and Resource Center (LARC) at WCU houses the tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, and Early Alert programs, as well as a variety of other programs to help further the mission of the Center, which is "…to provide quality academic support services which help students become independent, active learners who achieve academic success. The LARC aims to promote cognitive development in a diversity of student populations through assessing and teaching the affective skills necessary for achieving academic and personal learning goals" (LARC). To support this mission, the LARC collaborates with other departments, including the Department of Athletics, to function as an area of academic support. The LARC has held study hall for several student groups, including a Supervised Homework Assistance program for the developmental program and the Athletic Study Hall for the Athletic Mentoring Program.

The LARC supports the Athletic Study Hall by offering space, graduate students to run the study hall, and tutors to support the academics in high-risk courses, such as math and chemistry. In 2013, study hall was piloted as a part of the Equity Scorecard recommendations and as a program under the Student Success Network created

by the Provost to help solve issues of access, retention and graduation. The program was a mild success and was refunded. With the additional planning, the program increased by 400%.

During Fall 2014, 63 students were enrolled in the athletic mentoring program and were required to attend four to six hours a week of study hall. Seventeen students were added mid-semester to the program. For the 80 students enrolled in the program, the average number of hours attended over the semester was two per week and the average number of hours completed for the semester was a total of 32 hours per student. The Athletic Study Hall had a total of 2,334 contact hours for the Fall 2014 semester. A total of 46 students completed between 28–70 hours during the fourteen-week study hall program.

Recommendations for Replicating the Program

This unique collaboration on one university campus does not have to be an anomaly. The program does not need to be replicated in the same way in order to be effective. The key to the success at WCU was three-fold: 1. keeping student-athlete success at the forefront of the conversation, 2. finding possible and mutually beneficial solutions to each area involved, and 3. breaking down silos so as to not duplicate services. The program at WCU requires very little budgetary support. Below are considerations for those wishing to reproduce this collaborative approach.

1. Determine where the program should be housed. The physical space is as important as the host division or department. Housing the program in one common physical area is best and most convenient for students. Although it might make sense to house the program in an athletic facility to assist student-athletes, we found it was more effective to house the program in the LARC, as it is centrally located on campus and in the same building as our main dining hall. The LARC staff has access to and is familiar with the campus resources student-athletes might need. They can quickly connect them with individual resource personnel.

2. Remember to be data-driven. It is imperative to have access to data about student-athletes from your institution-

al research office as well as your department of athletics. The significance in understanding your student-athlete is in relation to the average student is central, and collecting your own data about the student-athletes--their needs, the frequency of contact, their satisfaction of the support, their academic progress, and of course, their learning, is a crucial element.

3. Find and hire academic mentors. WCU is fortunate to have a graduate program in higher education counseling, which provides many interns to serve as academic mentors. Other graduate programs, such as social work, psychology, education, etc., may be open to providing student interns to serve as academic mentors. Serving as an academic mentor may be a professional development opportunity for resident directors or new professionals in student affairs and student services fields. It may also be an excellent opportunity for tenure-track faculty to engage in a service opportunity on campus. Regardless, training and supervision of academic mentors is an essential part of the program.

4. Have clear conversation about how decisions will be made about the program. Is one person or department in charge of the program or is it truly a collaborative venture? Regardless of the answer, it is critical to have regular conversations with the various departments participating in the program.

Conclusion

Student-athletes benefit from navigating the complexity of higher education with support. For many students, the complicated bureaucracy of higher education is a difficult maze to navigate. The need to support student-athletes is clear. We need to support them both on and off the playing field. The next time you cheer on a student-athlete as they dribble down the court, swim the lap or perfect a perfect routine, try to see more than just the athlete. Try to see the complexity of their lives—conditioning, practice, classes, studying, working, playing their sport and having an age-appropriate college

experience. The support we can offer these students will assist them in their success while in college and beyond.

No single entity can address and solve the multiple social, emotional and behavioral needs of collegiate athletes, much less offer all the programs and services for academic success. Therefore it is imperative the colleges and universities develop interdisciplinary approaches to coordinate efforts to meet these needs.

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