What Every Academic Advisor Should Know About Advising Student Athletes

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Academic advisors may find particular challenges surrounding the needs of college-level student athletes. A number of important issues facing college advisors and athletes, including the campus climate toward athletics and athletes, the roles of the NCAA and the campus community in guiding the student athlete’s academic and athletic experience, and the identified needs of this special student population are discussed. Information regarding both developmental advising issues and sport-specific issues affecting student athletes is provided along with suggested strategies for implementation by the academic advisor.

KEY WORDS: athletics, campus environment, developmental advising, NCAA, student athletes

The academic advisement of collegiate student athletes has in recent years become a topic that has consumed considerable interest, time, financial resources, and personnel at most institutions of higher education in America. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has given significant funding as well as programming and staffing resources to its member institutions for the purpose of insuring the academic success and graduation of student athletes. As Ferrante, Etzel, and Lantz (1996, p. 4) indicated, “The consequences of participation in intercollegiate athletics, both positive and negative, have a great impact on many aspects of the lives and psychosocial development of student-athletes.” The challenges and needs of this student population are both similar to and in some respects different from those of their nonathlete peers.

To discuss the role of an academic advisor of student athletes, whether he or she advises one or many, several questions must be addressed. What is the history, the climate, and the context in which intercollegiate athletics operates on the campus? How do faculty member and student attitudes toward student athletes relate to the issues presented in advising sessions with student athletes? What are the developmental advising issues for student athletes, and do these differ from those of the nonathlete students? What are some of the sport-specific concerns that student athletes raise, and what can the advisor do to assist students with these issues?

Determining the On-Campus Academic and Athletic Climate

Whether the advisor works at a large, public, research institution housing a major Division I broad-based intercollegiate athletics program or at a small, private, liberal arts college with a Division III non-scholarship-based athletics program, he or she needs to understand the philosophical, political, and social climates surrounding the athletics department to contribute to the success of a student-athlete advising program. However, informally disseminated knowledge about the on-campus athlete culture is not often easy to acquire or may not be evident from the outside observer’s vantage point.

Academic advisors may wish to meet with selected administrators from the athletics department to gain an understanding of the philosophy and mission of the program on their campus and to better understand the academic commitment of the department. In addition, the faculty athletics representative, who is usually appointed by the university president, may offer perspective regarding the academic expectations of student athletes at the institution. If the college or university has an academic support-services unit specifically for student athletes, the unit director will be an important liaison to academic advisors. Because of the high visibility that college athletics plays on many campuses, academic advisors need to pay some attention to current issues surrounding the athletics program as well as any historical context that may have shaped the campus climate. For example, the pressure for building new athletics facilities in times of tight academic budgets, a recent and serious rules violation by members of the department, or the call for adding or dropping sports programs to more closely meet the requirements of the Title IX Amendment to the Civil Rights Act could all have an effect upon the campus climate. The student athletes with whom an advisor works may be affected by these hot topics, and for those less informed, could be seen as the root of problems associated with the athletics department.

Because intercollegiate athletics programs must
not only follow institutional guidelines, but also NCAA, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, or National Junior College Athletics Association rules and regulations, the advisor of student athletes must be knowledgeable about the constraints made on athletes and athletic programs on campus. For example, student athletes are not allowed to accept goods and services as incentives for recruitment or retention; violations negatively impact the integrity of the division, athletic program, and postsecondary institution. In addition, the organizational structure and reporting lines within the athletics program and within the overall university affect the environment and needs of student athletes. A school where the athletics director reports directly to the president and where the athletic compliance personnel and athletic advising personnel report to the athletic director may have a philosophy and climate that differs significantly from one in which the athletic, advising staff, and the athletic director answer to separate administrators. These differences may seem subtle to the outsider, but may have significant impact upon the dynamics between the athletics department and the rest of the university community. For example, at the University of Minnesota, the staff of the Academic Counseling and Student Services unit that services student athletes reports directly to the provost and is considered part of the academic arm of the institution. At the same time, the director of this unit sits on the athletics director’s management team, which allows for his or her clear alliance with the academic community while also serving the academic advising and learning needs of the athletic department. At institutions where the director of the advising unit reports to the athletics director, the pressure to “do the athletics department’s bidding at any cost” may have a greater impact upon the unit and its work.

**Intercollegiate Sport as a Cultural Phenomenon**

Recreational, amateur, intercollegiate, and professional sports permeate life in American society today. One cannot pick up a magazine or newspaper, listen to the radio, turn on the television, or overhear a social conversation without the mention of sport. Over the past 100 years, intercollegiate sport has developed from a male, student-driven entity into the present dual sex, multimillion-dollar NCAA organized structure (Sage, 1990). Now, more than ever, those who work with student athletes must understand the compromise, conflict, and even victimization that befall many 18- to 22-year-old athletes who have been promised a college education. Academic advisors can be attune to the tremendous pressures put upon student athletes to stay in peak physical condition, to maintain a certain weight, to commit to voluntary practices in addition to required ones, to win, and to greet the rabid media with poise (even after a tough loss). In addition, the pressures of maintaining a standard of academic progress are usually more intense for student athletes than they are for nonathletes. Sometimes the academic advisor can use a simple acknowledgment of the unique student-athlete situation to encourage advisees to discuss athlete-specific issues in the advising session.

The NCAA is charged to require its member institutions to adopt standards and practices so that appropriate attention is given to issues of student-athlete welfare, sound academic standards, and improved ethical conduct. The NCAA requires that each institution maintain presidential control over its athletics program (Bailey, 1993) such that the entire institution is held accountable for the maintenance of NCAA standards. As a result, the entire institution in violation when any individual breaks NCAA rules. In its constitution, the NCAA (2003, p. 4) set forth 13 principles for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics; 1 of these is the Principle of Sound Academic Standards:

> Intercollegiate athletics programs shall be maintained as a vital component of the educational program, and student-athletes shall be an integral part of the student body. The admission, academic standing and academic progress of student-athletes shall be consistent with the policies and standards adopted by the institution for the student body in general.

In addition, the Principle of Student-Athlete Welfare contains six specific points related to protecting and enhancing the physical and educational welfare of student athletes (NCAA, 2003, p. 3). University presidents and their delegated personnel of each member institution are responsible for promoting, maintaining, and evaluating these as well as the other 11 principles on their own campuses. The structure and process by which they accommodate NCAA rules vary widely from institution to institution across the country. Through the NCAA certification process, which began in 1994, presidents of each Division I institution must clarify how the 13 principles are met and monitored. Because most rules violations occur at the Division I level, the emphasis for evaluation has been placed there, but stakeholders in athletics programs of Division II and III institutions should not ignore.

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NCAA mandates.

Despite recent NCAA changes in academic standards, some believe that major reform is yet to take place and must be done for intercollegiate sport to redeem its integrity as part of the overall educational mission within higher education (Spaulding, Eddy, Spaulding, & Murphey, 1996). According to Spaulding et al. (1996), change must ultimately come from college and university presidents. They suggest that institutions continue with academic reform measures, ensure that disciplinary standards and procedures are the same for all students on campus, and ensure that oversight of athletics programs lies with parties outside of the athletics department (i.e., faculty boards, provosts, and presidents).

Advisors can determine the level of commitment to NCAA, conference, or institutional standards by obtaining information about the philosophical and political environment via NCAA certification reports, presidential reports, and the athletics department compact (strategic plan) with the institution. To determine the approaches that may be taken in developing advising services and programs for student athletes, advisors and administrators of advising programs must understand the posture of their colleges and universities on the issues facing student athletes. Knowing the potentials and constraints of financial, personnel, and facility resources are key factors in choosing the structure and operation of advising services. Determining where and how student athletes fit as part of the overall institution and being sensitive to the numerous pressures and constraints they face as members of a unique population is a balancing act that personnel at every college or university must face. However, answers to questions about the university culture and athletics and how they impact the student are not easy to find, but advisors must pursue this knowledge to develop an advising program that is in the best welfare of each student athlete.

Advisors must understand the focus of the athletics staff employed at the institution and the focus of the academic staff employed in the advising center or academic department. Although exceptions can be found to every generalization, the athletic staff often defines academic success as the maintenance of the athlete’s uninterrupted athletic eligibility. The staff is focused on the athlete’s effect on the team’s overall success as well as the significance of that team’s success on the entire intercollegiate program. However, faculty and professional academic advisors are primary obligated to focus the individual’s academic welfare.

Academic personnel do not view students as members of larger units, such as teams. They can, and should, consider them as individuals, but they also must be mindful of the nonacademic elements in a student’s life. Whether the student plays the violin for 5 hours a day, goes to a job every day, or plays football, the academic advisor must focus on the specific issues that relate to the student’s ability to be academically successful at the institution.

**Determining Faculty and Student Attitudes Toward Athletes**

Another key component for developing a solid advising program for student athletes is the role of the faculty. Whether the advising system is made up solely of faculty members or is comprised of advising center and faculty staff, advisors must appreciate the influence of their own perspectives on their advisees. Engstrom, Sedlacek, and McEwen (1995) indicated that many faculty members hold negative perceptions about male student athletes, especially in regard to academic competence, special services, and recognition. Many believe that male student athletes have lower academic credentials than do the general student population, and they expressed greater surprise at a student athlete obtaining an A grade in a course than they did when a nonathlete student received the same grade. However, female faculty members are more inclined to be sensitive and empathic toward the development of an “expanded advising and tutorial program” (p. 224) for student athletes than are male faculty members. In addition, Ferrante et al. (1996) and Burke (1993) indicated that misperceptions of student athletes as “dumb jocks” or as an overprivileged group of academically undermotivated individuals have led to a lack of understanding and a concomitant lack of support for one of the most diverse student populations on college campuses today.

The perception of the general student population toward student athletes has also been shown to reinforce stereotypes toward athletes. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) found that students hold negative attitudes about student athletes’ academic abilities and a lack of tolerance or understanding of the special needs and constraints that exist for them. In a fashion parallel with faculty members, female students are more positive than are male students in their attitudes about student athletes.

Campus climate regarding the student-athlete population plays an important role in either perpetuating or tearing down the stereotypes that exist for this group of students. The advising faculty
and staff, as well as student athletes, must be aware of the prejudices that exist on campus. Advisors must determine strategies that dispel myths and provide accurate information regarding the positive accomplishments of student athletes and the real life pressures and constraints that make them a special student population.

The dynamics of the faculty member–student athlete–advisor triadic relationship and the role that each individual plays in the overall development of the student athlete are key concerns for anyone involved in an advising program. To further the efforts in understanding the academic components of the student athletes’ lives, faculty members, staff, and students should have the opportunity to provide input and to receive information concerning the academic components of athletics programs via advisory boards or other means. For example, at a growing number of institutions across the United States, the president appoints members of the faculty, staff, student body, and sometimes the alumnus or community to an advisory board. The board members are charged to meet frequently, often monthly, and to both understand and advise the athletics department in its activities. Some of these boards have subcommittees that work on specific issues such as facilities, budget, academic standards, and student-athlete welfare. In addition, some collegiate institutions have had staff prepare brochures, Web sites, and other forms of media to help faculty members and staff understand the specific issues surrounding the student athlete and to assist them in their work with this student population on their campus.

Developmental Advising Issues for Student Athletes

Like their nonathlete peers, student athletes move through a developmental decision-making process about careers and other future life goals. Parham (1993) indicated that collegiate student athletes move through the same various stages of development as other students in their age group. However, unlike the general college student, student athletes must also deal with issues that pertain to balancing academics and athletics; social isolation; athletic success and failure; the expectations of coaches, parents, and the community; and injury or loss of athletic careers (Parham, 1996). Because of these additional stressors, the student athlete sometimes has difficulty focusing clearly or moving quickly toward academic and career goals. The academic advisor plays a key role in assisting these students as they formulate ideas, goals, and specific strategies for reaching goals.

Developing academic goals, determining academic strengths and weaknesses, and envisioning potential career options are all areas in which the advisor may be quite helpful to student athletes. Curry, Rehm, and Bernuth (1997) indicated that student athletes’ self-perceptions in the areas of self-worth, creativity, intelligence, and scholastic competence do not significantly differ from those of their nonathlete peers. This is good news and may be a result of efforts in recent years by student services professionals to encourage student athletes to become more aware of their nonathletic competencies. However, academic advisors must present developmental tasks to student athletes in ways that allow them to concrete and generate efficient strategies for exploration. For example, assisting students in choosing academic courses that will not only satisfy a general education curriculum requirement but may also be related to an expressed interest is a useful strategy. Although this is an advising strategy that is used for all students, the specificity of the courses chosen are more critical for student athletes because under NCAA mandates, courses that are not counted toward a degree may not be considered for certification of eligibility for competition.

Also, when working with first-year college student athletes, the advisor will want to know as much as possible about the incoming student’s academic strengths and weaknesses. Time should be taken to develop an academic profile that includes both quantitative information and the student’s own perceptions regarding strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and learning styles. Then, as academic decisions are made, both the advisor and the student are equipped to move in a direction that is focused on the individual’s needs and interests.

Because they have little free time during the academic year, student athletes may have difficulty taking advantage of extracurricular experiences, such as study abroad programs or internship/externship opportunities, during their academic-year schedules. Often, they will wait and incorporate internships into their summers when they have more free time. Some athletics departments are also developing their alumni and career database records as potential resources for student-athlete internship opportunities, and advisors may wish to explore these options on behalf of their student athletes.

Sport Specific and Special Needs Concerns

Although the advisor knows the climate, culture, and developmental issues concerning the student-
athlete population on campus, specific concerns of these students should also be taken into consideration. During initial meetings with student athletes and with members of the athletics community, advisors should ask some of the following questions:

- What are the participation expectations of these students?
- How do these expectations differ from out-of-season expectations?
- What are the practice times, and how do these affect class schedules?
- What training outside of practice (e.g., weights, running, etc.) is expected, and are these workouts to be conducted at non-scheduled times?
- How many home and away games are scheduled during the season or year?
- What kind of time and travel commitments must the student make, and how do these affect the student’s ability to attend classes?
- Does the institution have a policy that allows for students who represent the school in an official capacity to be given make-up exams?
- Do particular academic majors require exhaustive time commitments from students and conflict with their commitments as student athletes?
- What are the eligibility rules for participation (conference/NCAA)?
- How is full-time status and normal progress defined?
- What institutional support services are available to the student athlete based on his or her time constraints and commitments?
- Does the institution offer academic support services specifically for student athletes? If they do, what are their mission and scope? What services are provided? What is their formal and informal relationship to the advising office?

Of all these important questions regarding the culture and climate for student athletes, those questions that concern the formal criteria for determining satisfactory progress and full-time status are perhaps most critical. The academic advisor can serve as an important mediator between the educational and athletic realms for student athletes, and they can be an important support for these students who play key roles on behalf of the college or university that they represent.

Summary and Recommendations

Advisors of collegiate student athletes must be cognizant of multiple issues that affect the academic development and progress of this special student population. The organizational, political, and educational roles of intercollegiate athletics, the developmental advising needs of student athletes, and the specific concerns and needs that overtly and covertly affect these students all must be of concern to the advisor. Identifying the key players in student athletes’ lives and working with these individuals to determine common ground upon which to build solid advising programs and services should be a primary goal. Asking the right questions about student athletes’ daily challenges and lifestyles will allow advisors to both understand the issues at hand and provide relevant assistance and resources for this student population.

Advisors should first initiate regular meetings between the academic advising/faculty advising director(s) and the athletics program director(s). The shared information concerning the roles that each entity plays in the lives of student athletes can be used to create a supportive, productive, and successful educational and athletic environment for the student. Second, advisors can identify the various individuals who impact these students’ lives and encourage discussion about how student athletes can be clear in expressing their hopes, needs, desires, and goals with these faculty members, staff, family members, coaches, significant others, and peers. Finally, to be more effective in the advising process with each student athlete, advisors can determine the questions and answers that will give them a greater understanding of the unique factors facing these students as they strive to meet the academic and athletic goals before them.

References


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Author’s Note

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