Whose Responsibility Is It Anyway: The Student-Athlete?

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Introduction

In today's world of higher education, intercollegiate athletics, and complex society there is much focus and attention placed on the student-athlete. Regardless of the region of the country, the level of the school or the specific sport, the student-athlete experiences a high level of public and private scrutiny, which is often negative. According to Watson (2006), the general perception of college student-athletes is that they are privileged, pampered, lazy, out-of-control, and primarily attend school with the sole purpose of participating in intercollegiate athletics. This stereotype is often held by people who do not fully understand the relationship between the student-athlete and the academic setting.

The successes and the failures of student-athletes do not rest solely on individual athletes. The responsibility for promoting educational success should be shared between the athlete and the university in general because of the student label, and specifically on the athletic department because of the athlete label. However, these two organizations, the university and the athletic department, do not often work together with the individual student-athlete’s best interests in mind. “Intercollegiate athletics have been described as a closed system within the institution of the university,” (Watson, 2006, p. 23). Many athletic departments throughout the nation operate as independent companies and consider themselves separate from the university, and sometime above direct control by the university. This commonly occurs at major universities with tremendous tradition or clout among athletic programs who compete on a national forefront in the major revenue sports of football and men’s basketball. This dissonance creates a flaw in that universities frequently act under the assumption that the individual athletic programs will handle issues and concerns of athletes, (Watson, 2006).

A major factor affecting the success of student athletes is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA is the umbrella organization that regulates and governs almost all intercollegiate sporting events nationally for over 377,000 student-athletes (Watson, 2006). The NCAA’s primary focus is making sure that standardized rules are enforced and fair play is administered. The NCAA controls the championship games of every intercollegiate sport minus the college football’s postseason bowl games. The primary financial windfall included in these championships is the Division I men’s basketball tournament each March. In 2005-2006, the NCAA’s budgeted revenue exceeded $521 million. To say that it is a big-time business is an understatement. However, part of the NCAA’s mission is ensuring student-athletes, who are primarily responsible for generating revenue, are obtaining the best possible educational experience in order to be successful. As attention has been focused towards successful academic completion for student athletes, educational leaders are examining methods for controlling student athletes as a means of controlling the athletic departments themselves.

Student-Athlete Reform

First, there have been many recent changes during the last twenty years in student-athletes reform. This occurred for many reasons ranging from the exploitation of student-athletes by universities and athletic
departments to widespread scandals in intercollegiate athletics. As a result, public outcry to develop and promote integrity and character in intercollegiate athletics was determined to be in the best interests of universities, athletic departments, student-athletes, and the public. In a sense, these issues have produced a level of public accountability for intercollegiate athletics that far exceeds most organization. A great amount of this pressure of accountability has surfaced due to the instant access of the global internet in which information can be rapidly exchanged and alter the perception of athletics.

The first profound act involving student-athletes was the implementation of Proposition 48 in 1983 by the NCAA. Many athletic departments were using athletes to win games and make large financial windfalls with no regard or minimum standards for academic requirements. Proposition 48 changed the environment by adopting eligibility requirements and tracking graduation and retention rates for athletes (Davis, 2006). It required that student-athletes meet certain minimum standards in order to gain initial eligibility in intercollegiate athletics. This was introduced due to poor graduation rates that existed mostly in the major revenue sports of football and men’s basketball and was viewed as embarrassing for the universities and NCAA. To the public, student-athletes, particularly those in major revenue-generating sports like football and men’s basketball, are merely entertainers whose athletic accomplishments are subject to praise and criticism (Watson, 2006). In the past, there was the placement of athletes in very easy and uniquely named academic majors in order to simply maintain student-athlete’s eligibility. Proposition 48 was aimed at protecting student-athlete’s best interests while also adhering universities and athletic departments to minimum national academic standards.

In 2004, the NCAA implemented an academic progress report (APR) to focus on retention of student-athletes in order to make progress toward the ultimate goal of college graduation. In this system, each specific athletic team at a university will establish an annual APR. Each individual student-athlete on scholarship will be able to accumulate a maximum of four points per academic year. One point will be rewarded each semester for maintaining eligibility, and one point for each semester for remaining in school or graduating. If student-athletes fail to maintain eligibility or leaves the program and scholarship, then those specific points cannot be accumulated. If specific teams drop below the mandated cut line of 925, they could face punishments resulting in a deduction of the number of scholarships that can be awarded.

In addition to the APR, the NCAA also recently enacted a new graduation rate. This rate is different and more accurate than the previous rate that was calculated by the federal government. In the past, transfer student-athletes counted as non-graduates from the university that he or she left or the university he or she attended regardless if graduation was attained.

Additional regulations by the NCAA have been aimed at balancing the student versus athlete load for individuals. Before 1991, student-athletes indicated they spent more than thirty hours a week in their sport (Carodine, Almond, and Gratto, 2001). The NCAA enforced legislation aimed at assisting student-athletes in having a more balanced week between athletics and academics. “The NCAA mandated one off-day per week, and also incorporated a twenty hour maximum per week, and four hours per day maximum,” (NCAA, 2006). These daily and hourly regulations include practice, competition, conditioning, and team meetings. Exhaustion from training, traveling and competition, inadequate time for studying, isolation from the general student population, differential treatment from faculty, and pressures from coaches and alumni prompted and reinforced disengagement from
academic matters that led to academic failure and non-completion (Miller and Kerr, 2002). The NCAA has been responsible of attempting to assist the student-athlete so that he or she has the opportunity to be successful within all disciplines.

All of these NCAA regulations in the last twenty years have forced universities and athletic departments to perform things in certain manners in order to stay in compliance with NCAA regulations. These effects have directly affected student-athletes. Although all of these mandates have been aimed at assisting student-athletes in a positive manner, there have been unintended and negative effects.

University and Athletic Department Models

In the traditional governance model of intercollegiate athletics, the university board of regents is at the top followed by the university president or chancellor. The immediate line under the president is vice-presidents in several categories ranging from academics to fundraising and development to special projects to student affairs. The athletic department is spearheaded by the director of athletics who often times reports to the university president or chancellor. Occasionally the director of athletics reports to one of the vice presidents, usually in this case the vice president of student affairs. The director of athletics is responsible for all actions in the athletic department and receives tremendous positive credit when things are operating successfully on the playing field and in the financial components. However, the director of athletics receives enormous scrutiny when athletic programs are not winning games, and usually the dominos start building to make financial gains even when financial balance is difficult if not impossible to attain. In most ideal cases, the only person in the athletic department that reports outside of the director of athletics is the compliance director. The compliance director in the athletic department is the in-house NCAA rules monitor that reports directly to the university president or chancellor regarding athletic rules compliance. This chain of command is mandated by the NCAA in flow charts due to increased pressure from athletics to be successful to win athletic games. This setup eliminates the situation of mixed interests of the compliance director being under the direct control of the director of athletics. In some cases, the athletics academics director and department report to a vice-president rather than the director of athletics. This usually occurs at colleges that have had academic wrongdoings in the past and desire better checks and balances processes of the athletic department from someone other than the director of athletics.

Student Athlete Services

There are six major student-athlete services that many athletic departments provide for current student-athletes. All of these programs are aimed at assisting and enriching the student-athletes intercollegiate experience and channeling them into post-athletic success. These programs include orientation, career and life skills development, career planning and placement, CHAMP life skills, academic advising and monitoring eligibility, and academic support services.

Orientation is provided for all incoming freshmen. Some universities also include junior college transfer student-athletes, and senior college transfer student-athletes as they are not familiar with their new universities specific setup. Orientation is the first encounter by educational leaders to stress the importance of excellence to the student-athlete in both athletics and academics. All higher education institutions first and primary goals are to graduate students. Traditionally student-athletes have been trained in an environment that stresses the importance of resiliency and self-reliance (Watson, 2006). These orientation programs have been implemented to assist the assurance of student-athletes'
success, and also to educate them that there are many programs in place that can assist them in being a successful every day student. In most cases, student-athletes attend orientation sessions with regular incoming students. A majority of athletic programs require their incoming students to attend these sessions either in the summer preceding initial enrollment or immediately before the start of fall classes. Incorporating collaboration between academic and athletic programs can promote the goal of retention and graduation of student-athletes (Carodine, et al, 2001), thus it is imperative that student-athletes hear these concepts initially and frequently in the intercollegiate experience.

Also during this orientation period, the NCAA requires institutions athletic compliance personnel to review pertinent rules and regulations with student-athletes. This includes signing eligibility forms that include athletic department policies on topics that students and student-athletes regularly face. Some institutions have created seminar classes that include academic credit for the major topics and current issues in intercollegiate athletics. Commonly discussed topics include Title IX, gender equity, alcohol abuse, drug testing, tobacco use, role models, scholarship information, and other similar topics. Damon Evans, current director of athletics at the University of Georgia, goes one-step further, and personally sits down with every new student-athlete to explain the high academic expectations for Georgia student-athletes. “The thing that’s most important here, bar-none, is graduating from this institution,” he says (Matthews, 2006).

Secondly, career and life skills development is incorporated for student-athletes. Colleges and universities have an obligation to prepare athletes for life beyond collegiate athletic competition. It is the responsibility of the university and the athletics department to incorporate life components of learning to student-athletes to assist them in being successful. Many athletic departments are extremely committed to this area and employ full-time personnel to organize and conduct programs for student-athletes. Often times, athletic departments create competitive scoring methods among all university athletic programs to encourage student-athlete participation and positive performance.

Career planning and placement is also incorporated for student-athletes. “Relatively few student-athletes make it into professional sports careers; one in 12,000 by some estimates, and life in the big leagues is physically debilitating and short,” (Spigner, 1993, p. 12). There have been past research by Division I athletic directors stipulating that student-athletes need career counseling, career planning, and career placement. The purpose of the career development program is to assist student-athletes to learn more about their personal interests and skills and plan personal career and needs. These programs often include career assessment, planning, experiential education, co-ops, internships, and placement services. This process should begin during a student-athlete’s freshman year. There are a wide variety and types of tests that can be instrumented by career services to gauge student-athlete feedback. This process many times includes career exploration and student development issues. In addition, other topics often include goal setting, decision-making, time management, and effective communication.

Time management is a component that many people struggle with in their daily life. Time management is an essential skill because student-athletes are forced to pack a tremendous amount of activities ranging from academic to athletic to personal into a 24-hour day. Often times, a student-athlete’s day begins extremely early and ends very late. The day’s regimen includes class, weightlifting, study table, tutors, athletic practice, and injury treatment. This also is further maxed out with the additional stress of travel and competition during the playing season. “Cathie Humbold, a sports adviser at Auburn, says,
‘Time is the most precious resource any of us has, but especially for the student-athlete-and so we must help them allocate time, and consider time in helping them formulate a plan,’ (Holsendolph, 2006, p. 48).

Fourth, the CHAMP life skills program was established to benefit student-athletes. CHAMPS, which stands for challenging athletic minds for personal success, was established on college campuses with the purpose of enhancing student-athletes’ postsecondary experience. This program’s two-part goal is for student-athletes to complete college graduation and develop life-long skills to carry with them. It entails four total commitments: academic excellence, athletic excellence, commitment to personal development, and commitment to service.

Fifth, academic advising and monitoring eligibility components are in place to assist student-athletes. Student-athletes are required to be enrolled as full-time students which is twelve hours per semester in their designated program. Additionally, student-athletes must maintain grade point average requirements and must meet 40/60/80% requirements for academic major program. The detail and workload required to meet this compliance standard has forced institutions to have athletics personnel that monitor this information. To aid in this process, the NCAA has recommended to institutions that all student-athletes be assigned a computer code in the registrar’s office. The code depicts to the registrar that a student-athlete cannot drop a class and go to part-time status, indicating eleven hours or less. In order to drop a class, the student-athlete would have to have written permission from his or her academic advisor and from the athletic academic staff. These checks and balances are crucial in order to make sure a student-athlete does not go below full-time status and thus trigger ineligibility in athletic contests.

Institutions are encouraged to monitor student-athlete’s progress in class by requesting from appropriate faculty attendance reports and grading reports. This information is usually either mailed or emailed to the professor from the athletics academic staff. It is crucial that athletic academic departments monitor student-athlete’s academics for eligibility purposes. However, a negative byproduct of this is that it creates an uninsured environment with certain professors by signaling out the student-athlete. The professor may assume that the student-athlete may need special assistance when he or she does not. “These examples of unintended objectives and shortcomings actually occurred at a university’s academic support program at a PAC 10 school,” (Spigner, 1993). This collection system of information can also highlight a student-athlete and signal him or her out to anti-athletics academic faculty and personnel.

Academic advising for student-athletes is coordinated through the major program’s department and in conjunction with athletics academic staff. “The NCAA requires student-athletes to meet with their major advisers and athletic counselors during each registration period,” (Carodine, et al, 2001). It is extremely crucial that universities and athletic academic personnel are knowledgeable and place student-athletes during registration in correct classes so that he or she can climb the 40/60/80 required percentages to progress closer to graduation. This has recently become even more important and placed more emphasis on university and athletics academic personnel due to recent APR legislations. If student-athletes are not progressing toward eligibility requirements specific to their class classification, then specific athletic programs could lose scholarships.

Lastly, academic support services are offered to assist student-athletes. This includes tutoring, mentor programs, and disability services for student-athletes. Mentoring programs are very important to assist
programs, and disability services for student-athletes. Mentoring programs are very important to assist in student support efforts. A mentor can be extremely beneficial in assisting at-risk student-athletes in studying and time management. At-risk student-athletes usually include students on academic probation or in jeopardy of failing to meet NCAA or university academic standards. Mentors can be specifically involved in all aspects of time management and class planning of assignments or can be more mentally involved by providing an extra voice of support and comfort, and being an ear when the student-athlete needs someone to listen. Mentors often include university and athletic department personnel. In most cases, these mentors are required to go through mentor training to adjust them to positive and negative situations that student-athletes may be experiencing. “The Division of Student Affairs provides students who have disabilities with the resources necessary to perform academically,” (Carodine, et al, 2001). These programs can include assistance with speech, language, and hearing therapy, or note taking, sign language, and oral interpreters.

The NCAA legislation requires all institutions conduct exit interviews with all student-athletes upon graduation. These interviews are usually conducted by an assistant athletic director in a one-on-one setting. Information from these student-athletes can help the athletic department make improvements in the student-athlete support program. It is extremely important that institutions use this data to assist in improving the programs.

Conclusion

Intercollegiate student-athletes receive a great deal of attention and publicity, but it is important that they receive the necessary assistance from universities and athletic departments in order to be successful. Sometimes due to student-athlete’s extreme talent on the playing field, it is assumed that the student-athletes can handle every situation with poise and confidence off the playing field as well. It is crucial that departments throughout the university and athletic department commit the resources and support to assist student-athletes to be successful. All student-athletes are primarily students, and should fit into all structural components of the university. The only difference in student-athletes and the general student population is that student-athletes may be placed in situations that can be viewed as positively or more negatively affecting the university and the athletic department immediately and in the future. This choice will depend on the assistance and collaboration of the university and the athletic department to enable the student-athlete to be successful academically, athletically, and socially. This responsibility must be shared by the university, the athletics department, and the student-athlete to prepare these individuals for the biggest game of all: the game of life.

References

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