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The Role of Student Affairs Professionals within Intercollegiate Athletics Administration

Joslyn P. DiRamio

This paper explores the connection between student affairs practice and the administration of intercollegiate athletics. Affairs professionals can provide an invaluable service to student-athletes as advocates of learning and personal development. By examining the founding documents of the student affairs profession and the principles of good practice in student affairs, recommendations are made for the integration of student affairs professionals into university athletics departments.

Departments of athletics and student-athletes are two dimensions of university life in the United States that shape the dominant culture of many campuses across the nation. On those campuses where these two aspects of culture do not influence the dominant culture, they “play an important role in the culture of an institution,” nonetheless (Pope & Miller, 1996, p. 2). Likewise, student affairs professionals play an influential role in an institution’s culture. As advocates for students on both the academic and personal development levels, student affairs professionals strive to create an institutional culture that is both challenging to and supportive of students.

Unfortunately for student-athletes, a limited amount of collaboration exists between athletics departments and student affairs professionals. Traditionally, the administrative personnel of collegiate athletics departments are a combination of former student-athletes and retired coaches. These individuals are not typically trained in educational and developmental theories and philosophies related to college students. An increase in the number of student affairs professionals who are integrated into the administration of athletics departments would increase the positive development of student-athletes as students, athletes, and adults. The inclusion of student affairs professionals in the administration of intercollegiate athletics is supported by the basic beliefs and assumptions shared by professionals in the field of student affairs and the profession’s principles of good practice. This paper focuses on four basic assumptions that student affairs professionals share. These four assumptions are: (1) “the academic mission of the institution is preeminent,” (2) “out-of-class environments affect learning,” (3) “effective citizenship should be taught,” and (4) “a supportive and friendly community life helps students learn” (NASPA, 1989, pp. 9-11). By combining each of these shared assumptions with a number of principles of good practice, a detailed analysis of the role that student affairs professionals can play in the lives of student-athletes is presented.

A Preeminent Academic Mission

Much research regarding student-athletes and their role in the campus community focuses on the conflicting demands that are placed on these students in the academic and athletic arenas (Funk, 1991; Gunn & Eddy, 1989; Nishimoto, 1997; Rhatigan, 1984). Often times, especially in the most high-profile and competitive sports, the academic responsibilities of a student-athlete become second priority to the athletic commitments. Because of this, many student-athletes struggle to succeed academically as well as athletically. As a result, a great deal of criticism regarding student-athletes' academic abilities exists in the minds of faculty, staff, students and the public at large (Funk, 1991). The myth of the “dumb jock” pervades the culture of higher education despite the fact that more student-athletes do well academically than their non-athlete peers (Sailes, 1996).

Calculating the exact statistics related to the GPAs and graduation rates of college athletes is challenging, yet studies indicate that “the overall grade point averages and graduation rates for college student athletes were slightly higher than for the ordinary college student” (Sailes, p. 194). There are many theories that explain why college athletes do well academically as compared to their non-athlete campus counterparts. Some theories point to the “achievement-oriented” environment in which athletes function and the “transference of achievement values from sports to the classroom” (Funk, 1991, p. 27). Other theoretical models propose that

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an increased level of self-esteem gained from participation in a sport “creates a higher level of aspiration in other domains” (Funk, 1991, p. 27). Additional hypotheses point to the existence of both internal and external pressures placed on student-athletes to succeed in all life experiences (Funk). Considering the reality of the academic success of the majority of college athletes, “the dumb jock stereotype appears to have no scientific basis” (Sailes, 1996, p. 194).

Regardless of the validity of stereotypes surrounding the academic performance of student-athletes, the fact that negative attitudes do exist influences the treatment these students receive in the classroom (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). Student affairs professionals can support the student side of the student-athlete by helping to dispel the negative myths that exist regarding the academic performance of athletes. Increasing publicity surrounding the academic successes of athletes can challenge these stereotypes. Student affairs professionals can also support the academic success of athletes by creating structures of academic support for all student-athletes including tutoring programs, study sessions, and faculty mentoring programs.

Student-Centered Learning

While student affairs professionals believe that the academic mission of the institution is preeminent, of equal importance is the fact that the student, not the course of study, must be at the center of any education (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). These two philosophical tenets have direct implications for the relationship that student affairs professionals can have with student-athletes. As educators focused on the academic well being of all students, student affairs professionals are able to create and support structures for academic success. From academic mentoring/advising programs to study skills workshops, this group of professionals can create environments for learning based on theory, research, and experience for any student population on campus. A student affairs professional on staff in a department of athletics is able to devote his or her time to the development of programs specific to the academic needs of student-athletes. Also, in order to keep the education student-centered, the student affairs professional in the athletics department is able to offer programs in locations and at times that are practical for student-athletes (Jordan & Denson, 1990).

Forging Educational Partnerships

One of the principles of good practice for student affairs is the creation of collaborative relationships across “territories of...expertise” in the interest of advancing student learning (Blimling & Whitt, 1999, p. 18). Partnership across divisions and departments within an institution is challenging. Cooperation within a department is easier since a level of trust and understanding is established from a history of working together. As a staff member in an athletics department, a student affairs professional is able to collaborate with coaches and department administrators to create a culture of learning within the athletic department that mirrors the culture of the entire institution. A student affairs professional can also work to forge relationships with faculty in order to create systems of academic support for student-athletes beyond the athletics department.

Creating and Supporting High Expectations

With the creation of collaborative relationships within the athletics department, a student affairs professional is able to initiate and communicate high expectations for a student-athlete’s learning that are supported throughout the department. The creation of such goals is another of the principles of good practice within the student affairs profession that leads to a holistic, student-centered approach to education (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). There are many ways to create and support expectations for achieving academic success within an institution. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulations require minimum academic standards for all student-athletes in order for them to remain eligible for competition (NCAA, 1999). A student affairs professional within an athletics department is able not only to monitor the minimum progress of athletes but also to help the athletes create realistic, individualized goals for academic success beyond the minimum requirements.

Perhaps, the most important methods for encouraging success among student-athletes are through leadership opportunities, regular recognition of academic achievement, and goal-oriented academic assistance programs for the most at-risk students. A study by Saidla, et al., (1994) pointed to the fact that leadership and interpersonal communication skills were both enhanced due to participation in athletics at the college level. This positive relationship between sports and two of the skills necessary for academic success is encouraging. Student affairs professionals would be able to emphasize the talent already present in the student-athlete’s

paradigm and mold these attributes into a means for successful work in the classroom in addition to work on the field or the court.

Out-of-Class Environments Affect Learning

A college student's time outside of the classroom far exceeds the amount of time actually spent in a formal academic setting. For student-athletes, "often, the out-of-class activity can be all encompassing" (Pope & Miller, 1996, p. 5). Team practices, team meetings, individual workouts, and travel to and from competitions, are just a few examples of the time commitments that dominate a student-athlete's out-of-class time. With so much time committed to athletic endeavors, it is no wonder that student-athletes often feel disconnected from the learning that they experience in the classroom. "This focus on athletic activity [on the collegiate level] may also inhibit the exploration of other skills and limit future planning" (Sowa & Gressard, 1983, p. 238). However, with a student affairs professional on staff in the athletics department, attention can be paid to the many learning opportunities that exist for student-athletes outside of the classroom.

Active Learning

The first principle of good practice in student affairs encourages professionals to engage students in active learning" (Blimling & Whitt, 1999, p. 14). Student affairs professionals strive for this goal from every office across campus, and the athletics department need not be an exception. Active learning environments are those in which a student participates in the achievement of educational goals in a functional and creative way. In these environments students develop basic skills such as organization and time management in conjunction with an enhanced sense of self worth and confidence (Blimling & Whitt).

In a student-athlete's life, being chosen to serve as the team captain, being appointed as a student representative to the athletic council, participating in community service events, and organizing positive team-building programs all contribute to the active, out-of-class learning that can occur. Given the amount of planning and preparatory time that is required of coaches and athletics administrators, very little time is left for the intentional creation of active learning opportunities for student-athletes. A student affairs staff member is able to dedicate time and energy to this task thereby creating an enhanced learning environment for student-athletes that extends from the classroom to the playing field and beyond.

Teaching Effective Citizenship

Student affairs professionals are committed to the ethical and moral development of college students (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; NASPA, 1989). Student-athletes, as a special population, experience unique circumstances surrounding their development of ethics and values. Not only do they receive conflicting messages concerning their academic and athletic involvement, they also receive mixed messages related to winning, money, violence and personal accountability. The sources of the mixed messages include peers, coaches, university administrators, governing bodies such as the NCAA, boosters, fans and society at large. "The emphasis on winning plus the constraint of burdensome regulations promote a climate in college athletics that encourages deviant and unethical behavior (Baldizan & Frey, 1995, p. 35). Where a dangerous climate exists, special attention must be paid to the student-athletes who live and learn within that climate.

A Conflict of Interests

The culture of intercollegiate athletics is often set apart from the culture of higher education institutions and is influenced by many conflicting interest groups. At one end of the athletic spectrum sit the student-athletes who are living the reality of being a college student and a competitive athlete. Many of these athletes are funded based on their athletic talent and do not receive much support for academic achievement. Next on the spectrum are the coaches. These men and women have the interests of the student-athletes at heart, but they must also face the reality that their jobs rest on the percentage of games lost and won. Athletics administrators function somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. As they attempt to balance the pressures of having an economically and athletically viable program with providing an educational space for student-athletes, student-athletes become more abstractions than individuals. Further down the spectrum sit athletics boosters and sports fans. In general, these people have very little interest in the academic and personal development of athletes. They are more interested in touchdowns scored and baskets sunk. At the furthest end of the spectrum

are the NCAA and various media stakeholders. For these people intercollegiate athletics means big business and big bank accounts. With all of these various constituents contributing to the culture of intercollegiate athletics, there is no denying that the messages sent to student-athletes regarding ethics and values are complex and many-layered.

Student Responsibility

Navigating within a culture that is not supportive of ethical development at every level can be challenging for student-athletes. Perhaps the greatest disservice to student-athletes is the awarding of a special status. This athlete status, which manifests itself in privileges such as early registration, private dining facilities and a limited level of accountability for behavior, results in “the student-athlete’s stunted development of responsibility” (Funk, 1991, p. 34). The privileges increase as the level of visibility and success increase for each sport and student-athlete. In the most extreme of circumstances, “socially unacceptable behaviors,” such as physical and sexual violence, are overlooked “in exchange for superb athletic performances” (Benedict, 1998, p. 13). While these circumstances are rare, turning a blind eye to even a minor violation of university policy sends a message to a student-athlete that he or she does not have to play by the same rules as everyone else.

The presence of a student affairs professional within an athletics department adds the professional viewpoint of a person who is not entrenched in the culture of intercollegiate athletics. This same person is a member of a profession that is dedicated to the development of responsible students who “bear the consequences of their actions” (NASPA, 1989, p.11). While athletics department administrators do have the interest of student-athletes at heart, often the pressure to prevent a financial loss outweighs the intention to enforce ethical behavior. A student affairs professional without the same burdens of budgets and boosters is able to create a system of student-athlete accountability that supports ethical and moral development. The system of accountability would include clearly articulated levels of accountability that a student-athlete has as a member of different yet interrelated communities. Also, the student affairs professional can serve as a link to representatives of the communities in which student-athletes have a stake to ensure a consistent approach on all levels of student-athlete accountability.

Communities of Support

The cumulative effect of encouraging the academic, extracurricular, ethical and moral development of student-athletes is the creation of a supportive community that enables all of these goals to be met. The principles of good practice in student affairs encourage the building of supportive and inclusive communities” in order to provide the structure “necessary for students’ success and achievement” (Blimling & Whitt, 1999, p. 19). Creating a community supportive of student-athlete development and achievement within an athletics department is the first step. Aligning that supportive community with others across campus is the second step to developing a comprehensive support system for student-athletes.

The Building Blocks of a Supportive Community

Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (1991) describe five necessary components of institutional policies and practices that are focused on student learning. The components are: (1) “preparing and welcoming newcomers,” (2) “promoting responsible student behavior,” (3) “enabling multiple subcommunities,” (4) “blurring boundaries between in-class and out-of-class experiences,” and (5) “allocating resources” (p. 322). These components have direct relevance to the creation of communities of support designed to enhance the learning experiences of student-athletes. Components two and four have already been addressed in this article. The remaining three components are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Preparing and welcoming newcomers. Welcoming new student-athletes into the athletics department and the institution as a whole is the first step toward ensuring their positive transition from high school to college. Transitions can be difficult for any college student, and student-athletes often face unique challenges associated with their transition to college. For many student-athletes, coming to college means a reversal of status, or becoming a small fish in a big pond. Also, many students of color are challenged by the transition from a minority environment in high school to a predominately white college campus (Funk, 1991). In addition, a student-athlete, to some degree, experiences a lifestyle that is separate from the existence of the typical college student.

Whether physically separated from campus due to travel time related to competitions, structurally separated from the central area of campus to the area of campus devoted to athletics, or functionally separated from other students due to intense practice schedules, student-athletes are often “segregated from many activities available to the regular college student” (Nishimoto, 1997, p. 98). As a result of this separation, student-athlete communities often develop initiation rites for new members who do not understand the history, traditions, and meaning associated with being a college athlete. This reality is where the danger of hazing in college athletics manifests itself most clearly.

Knowledge of and sensitivity to the unique transitional issues that student-athletes might face when they arrive on a college campus are essential for the creation of communities that are welcoming, inclusive and supportive of their needs. Equally important is the clear and concise presentation of information necessary for successful maneuvering within the new culture of collegiate life. A student-athlete must not only learn the details of registering for classes and finding the dining hall, he or she must also become familiar with the many rules and regulations associated with NCAA intercollegiate athletics.

Enabling multiple subcommunities. As a result of student-athlete separation from the majority of students on campus, student athletes experience their sports teams as their “main social support network” (Nishimoto, 1997, p. 101). Given the amount of time spent as a team practicing, competing and traveling together, strong ties of friendship and loyalty develop. These relationships are extremely important for the development of interpersonal skills and mature relationships. Also, these student-athlete communities provide support for each other based on mutual understanding and respect. Enabling the existence of multiple subcommunities such as these is of importance because these “communities can provide a haven from what at times seems to be an impersonal, bureaucratized university” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991, p. 329).

Allocating Resources. One of the most important actions that an athletics department can take to ensure the creation of supportive communities for student-athletes is to allocate the appropriate resources for this purpose. The allocation of resources can include funding community events that promote interaction between various subcommunities within the athletics department. Also, providing discounts and incentives for members of the university community to attend athletic events can create an institutional level of support for student-athletes. Perhaps, the most important resource decision that an athletics department can make in the interest of its student-athletes is to dedicate a full-time staff position to a student affairs professional.

The NCAA itself supports such a decision through the Challenging Athletes’ Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS)/Life Skills Program. This program was developed in 1991 and its focus is on student-athletes’ development in five areas: academics, athletics, personal, career and community. The NCAA provides training, materials and programmatic support for any athletics department that dedicates one full-time staff member to the Life Skills Program (*NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills Program*, 2000). An educational program that is focused on the total development of student-athletes, such as the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program, is aligned perfectly with the mission of student affairs professionals and supports the inclusion of such a professional in collegiate athletics departments.

Conclusions

Student-athletes have been present within the fabric of higher education in the United States since the nineteenth century (Rudolph, 1990). Given the increasing importance of and interest in sport as entertainment in modern American culture, the presence of athletes and athletics departments on campus will more likely than not only increase as the twenty-first century moves forward. College student athletes play an important role in the culture of an institution” (Pope & Miller, 1996). Because of the role of athletes on campus, an awareness of the issues specific to the development of student-athletes among student affairs administrators across campus is necessary. In order to best serve student-athlete needs, and encourage their success as students and athletes, a greater commitment to creating a campus climate friendly to and supportive of student-athletes must be made.

The benefits that a student affairs professional can bring to an athletics department are numerous. From an understanding of student development to a commitment to the values of student-centered, holistic education, a

student affairs professional is a fount of knowledge and experience regarding college students. For many years, there has been recognition in the higher education community of the natural connection between the student affairs profession and intercollegiate athletics (Meabon & Schuh, 1994; Pope & Miller, 1996; Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984). However, the inclusion of student affairs professionals as staff members within athletics departments has been slow to materialize nation-wide. Pope and Miller (1996) insist that “no single administrator can take on responsibility for all student-athletes, and the alternative is a holistic, environmental approach to creating a climate and desire for student learning, retention and growth” (p. 15). The inclusion of at least one student affairs professional in the athletics department at any institution would enhance the quality of the learning environments that each student-athlete experiences as a member of the athletic and university communities.

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