

Appreciative Advising and the Transfer Student-Athlete

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Abstract

This article discusses how the Appreciative Advising framework can be used in the new era of student-athlete transfer. Although the parameters around transfer student-athletes have shifted tremendously in the past six years, limited discussion has focused on how Appreciative Advising could impact the advising practice at institutions where these students enroll. Through the six phases, Appreciative Advising can help retain students and help them matriculate throughout their college eligibility timeline.

Keywords

student-athletes, Appreciative Advising, transfer students

The inception of the athletic transfer portal in 2018 is one of the most fundamental transformations of intercollegiate athletics (Swingle & Salinas, 2020). The transfer portal is a database where a student-athlete enters their name with the assistance of a compliance staff member of their institution to declare that they will no longer be attending their current school and are looking to compete at a new university. Through the 2020-2021 academic year, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) allowed a one-time transfer exception, where student-athletes would still have to sit a year in residence, meaning they would have to sit out an entire academic year of competition after they transferred institutions; however, it would only be three years later when the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) deemed every student-athlete would be immediately eligible regardless of how many times they transfer and pending their academic standing (“NCAA DI council adopts new transfer legislation,” 2021; Wright, 2024).

The study of transfer student-athletes has grown in research because of the constant changes in policies. Cooper and Hawkins (2014) discussed how negative experiences with institutional resources can lead to changes. They emphasized the importance of having a support system in navigating the process of finding a new school. Swingle and Salinas (2020) also found that student-athletes use support staff in the athletic and academic realm to navigate their swirling transfer process. Notably, coaching style, playing time, staff turnover, and lack of on-campus support are the primary reasons student-athletes transfer and consider transferring (NCAA, 2015; Richards et al., 2016). Because of the increase of movement in transfer students (Swingle & Salinas, 2020), it is important to note the common types of transfers such as a graduate transfer, a student who has graduated from a four-year university and is enrolled as a graduate student; a 4-4 transfer student, a student who is transferring from one four-year university to another; a reverse transfer student, who was at a four-year university and transfers to a community college; and a swirling transfer student who begins at a four-year university, reverse transfers to a community college and then completes their academic and athletic journey at a new four-year university.

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Appreciative Advising has been limited in the amount of work pertaining to student-athletes. Crisp (2013) provided the foundation, discussing how the framework can help build rapport with the student-athletes and shape a plan in which they invest. English and Kruger (2016) illuminated how stereotype threat among student-athletes is prevalent and how Appreciative Advising can reduce that and establish continuity between athletic and academic spheres. Most recently, Abel (2023) provided an overview of how the Appreciative Advising framework can be implemented to assist in recruiting and retaining student-athletes. Thus, this article tries to encapsulate elements of previous research to discuss how Appreciative Advising can be implemented and utilized in the new era of the transfer student-athlete from an athletic advisor perspective.

Appreciative Advising Connection to Transfer Students

Appreciative Advising is a practical framework that allows advisors to establish rapport with their students to help them discover and plan for their dreams (Bloom et al., 2008). With the increase in transfer student-athletes and a continuous shift in transfer policies, the following sections outline how each of the six phases can be insightful in working with this special population.

Disarm

The Disarm phase is essential in working with transfer student-athletes. These are student-athletes who have decided at least once that their former institution was not the right fit. In this setting, it is important for all personnel working with the transfer student-athlete to set the tone with the first impression (Bloom et al., 2008). Athletic advisors are often the first people on campus to meet with transfer recruits, but at many institutions, on-campus academic advisors may also meet with them. In these meetings, the goal must be to demonstrate how supportive one's office and university will be and to ensure comfort with everyone during the visit (Abel, 2023). Although most Division I institutions have a student-athlete support service office, discussing how the student will be successful and illuminating resources such as tutors, campus libraries, computer labs, and more emphasizes academic success and helps disarm the student and their guardian(s).

Once the transfer student-athlete commits to your university to pursue their academic and athletic aspirations, it is vital to make them feel comfortable. Small gestures such as meeting students at the door, decorating your office in a personal way, going to practice and competitions, and letting the student get to know you allow for trust to begin to develop (Bloom et al., 2008; Abel, 2023). Furthermore, it is important to distinguish a culture that cares holistically about the transfer student-athlete and wants to see them succeed academically and athletically. In the Disarm phase, you and the transfer student-athlete get to know one another and demonstrate your care for them at the start, allowing the Discover phase to begin.

Discover

Bloom et al. (2008) emphasized that getting to know and building rapport with students is essential in the Discover phase. With transfer student-athletes, the Disarm and Discover phases are working concurrently. In the Disarm phase, the focus is on building trust and credibility, while in the Discover phase, the focus is on building a genuine relationship with the transfer student-athlete. During this time, you seek to understand better their previous experiences, current realities, and any barriers they face. Asking open-ended questions allows you better to understand their past, present, and future selves. Crisp (2013) mentioned how important this phase is in understanding the students' priorities. Because of the multiple types of transfers, the goals, motivations, and visions of each transfer student-

athlete will vary. Athletic advisors must be able to address any problems with coursework being articulated to their school and mention any implications for progress toward a degree with the assistance of on-campus advisors.

In this phase, it is vital to discuss with the transfer student-athlete that you and your campus will be supportive in helping them reach their goals while proving to them that you have a welcoming office and can support them. You and the student-athlete will begin discovering each other and establishing rapport by asking questions and answering questions they ask you. The better connection you are able to establish, the more trust and willingness to discuss their dreams will occur in the next phase.

Dream

Bloom et al. (2008) addressed the Dream phase as one that focuses on understanding each student's short-term and long-term goals. Abel (2023) discussed that student-athlete personnel must understand their academic, athletic, and personal goals. As you ask questions to discover the interests of the transfer student-athlete, you will also understand their dreams and aspirations. With the NCAA's transfer guidelines and the explosion of other opportunities like Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), reasons for student-athletes transferring to other institutions have shifted. For example, student-athletes have left their former institutions to obtain large NIL deals (Givony, 2024; *The New York Times*, 2024). Even before NIL existed, Crisp (2013) cautioned that student-athletes and on-campus advisors do not always align in their viewpoints as some student-athletes just want to maintain their eligibility in order to participate in their sport and do not care as much about their academics. Even if a student-athlete has only transferred to your institution for athletic purposes, including NIL, developing and documenting short-term and long-term goals for the student-athlete in both the academic and athletic spheres is imperative.

Notably, the NCAA has granted blanket waivers, which allow exceptions to traditional rules because of unique circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic that extended student-athletes another year of eligibility. Consequently, the traditional four-year degree plan has shifted, and the transfer student-athlete now may be interested in accelerated bachelor's and master's programs, graduate certificates, or becoming a postbaccalaureate student without a specific degree in mind. The transfer student-athlete's dreams and aspirations may differ from those of a traditional student-athlete who stays at the same institution for four years. However, athletic advisors can help them find purpose in their time at their new school through purposeful listening, making connections, and encouraging the transfer student-athlete to possibilities.

Design

Creating an individualized plan is the main objective of the transfer student-athlete in the Design phase. Bloom et al. (2008) discussed how each student is different and how there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand that student-athletes' plans can be determined because of eligibility policies (Crisp, 2013). Athletic advisors at each institution must work closely with compliance staff and the registrar to ensure that all university and NCAA policies are upheld. Because of the extended timeline student-athletes are now facing, there are more possibilities to consider, and a new creative plan can be developed. Working concurrently with the transfer student-athlete, athletic advisor, and on-campus advisor is essential to ensure all parties know the plan and can hold one another accountable.

As transfer litigation has developed, new policies have been enforced on college campuses, making coaching staff, student-athletes, and athletic advisors work collectively to

establish the best plan for all. However, with unlimited transfer options, this dynamic has shifted. The student-athletes have the power to transfer schools every year of their eligibility, pending they maintain academic standards, which creates a unique dynamic between all parties involved because goals can become surface level, and student-athletes' true intentions may never come up. Consequently, athletic advisors typically meet with the coaching staff at the beginning and end of each year to discuss the eligibility of each student-athlete. Knowing how many years a student-athlete has left allows the coaching staff to prepare for future recruits, and it also allows the advisor and student-athlete to develop a thorough plan that they can see through the Deliver phase. Bloom et al. (2008) discussed that through the Design phase, it is important for the athletic advisor to explain technical information in an easy-to-understand manner that helps the transfer student-athlete make informed decisions and create an action plan. Whether the transfer student-athlete completes their remaining eligibility at your school or transfers again, the student's best interest needs to remain at the forefront, even if it may hurt from an athletic standpoint.

Deliver

Although one can create the perfect plan on paper or electronically, the Deliver phase focuses on the student-athlete to uphold their end of the agreement. This phase empowers the student-athlete to follow through, stay connected to the athletic advisor, and show progress every semester they are on campus. The transfer student-athlete needs to approach the athletic advisor with any concerns regarding coursework, travel, and even athletic problems. Although barriers may occur, it is important to create specific steps and a plan of action to allow the achievable short-term and long-term goals established in the design phase. Athletic advisors can provide support by liaising with the coaches and athletic director if things escalate and uproot the student-athletes' experience.

Another consideration in this phase is the athletic realm on which the student-athletes will be focused. Transfer student-athletes were brought to your university to uphold an agreement with the coaching staff. If that is not brought to the students' full expectation, other areas of their life, such as academics, can be uprooted (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). Because college experiences can vary at each institution, Abel (2023) emphasized that athletic advisors need to provide institutional knowledge of resources and full athletic and academic support for each student-athlete and how this information contributes to completing the individualized plan. Although there may be moments when the transfer student-athlete stumbles, it is important to update and refine the goals they have in all aspects of their journey.

Don't Settle

Continuous growth and development are the primary focal points in the Don't Settle phase of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008). Student-athletes play the primary role in making their experience a positive or negative one; however, athletic advisors and coaches also play a role. It is imperative to be on the same page and have congruency as the semester and academic year progresses. Coaching staff need to be realistic for the transfer student-athlete and their contribution to the team athletically. For athletic advisors, it is important to set the tone on the recruiting pitch and discuss the realities of the academic experience at the new school. As athletic facilities continue to grow to have resources such as learning support, career advisors, and other professional development opportunities, the arms race, which is money invested into support areas, cannot adequately predict success for the student-athlete in the era of transfer (Huml et al., 2014). If the student-athlete does not buy into what you, as the advisor, say or if they do not align with the coaching staff, the Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver phases will not be enough to compete against outside distractions.

Although we hope student-athletes share their dreams and aspirations with us, the world of intercollegiate athletics continues to evolve, and no matter how open and supportive of an environment you may provide, it may not be enough for a student to be retained and graduate.

Conclusion

As the transfer student-athlete experience continues to change due to new policies by the NCAA and governing entities, the mission of Appreciative Advising remains strong, focusing on being student-focused, providing support, and being a resource with every interaction. Transfer student-athletes will continue to garner attention due to the transfer portal, NIL deals, and the varying ways a student-athlete can transfer. Still, every one of these student-athletes is navigating their way through life, and you get to assist in that journey. Through the six phases of Appreciative Advising, treating these students just as you would any other is important. You disarm them at the beginning with small gestures, you discover their journey as you build rapport with them, you help them identify their dreams and aspirations as you understand what inspires them, you help design an individualized plan that may need to be adjusted, and you see the student-athlete deliver on that plan and excel in all areas of their life. Finally, you can tell them “don’t settle” and continue to challenge and push the students to be the best version of themselves.

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