

Appreciative Advising for Division I Student-Athletes

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Intercollegiate athletics is a topic continually riddled with controversy. Media outlets, college students, and enthusiastic fans all have opinions on the management and wealth of athletic departments, particularly at Division I institutions. As Harmon (2010) pointed out,

Collegiate athletics has exploded into a multimillion-dollar enterprise that has brought with it a host of issues, including the exploitation of student athletes, concerns about student athletes' academic success and low graduation rates, cheating by student athletes and staff, and misbehavior and crimes committed by student athletes, coaches, and athletics staff. (p. 26)

New stadiums, high-profile players, and well-paid coaches make the headlines, leaving the academic element of college athletics in the dust (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009).

Alongside the criticism of athletics comes the task of advising a very unique student population. A typical Division I athletics department has a staff of advisors with the sole purpose of managing the academic needs of athletes. Academic services generally include monitored study hall, learning specialists for at-risk students, content tutors, as well as student mentors. Weekly meetings, mandatory study hall hours, and monitoring of tutoring appointments are common practices. Academic advising is one service among many offered as part of athletic academic support, which can also house career and personal development programs for student-athletes, making it a one-stop shop for student services. Higher education professionals in this environment learn to juggle multiple responsibilities for their assigned teams, making the utilization of appreciative advising vital to ensuring student-athletes have all of the resources they need to succeed in college. Faculty and department advisors with an understanding of the student-athlete lifestyle can implement similar strategies and create meaningful interactions with these students.

Context for Student-Athlete Advising

More than 430,000 student-athletes are currently enrolled across the United States at more than 1,000 institutions (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2012a). This special population requires more specialized academic support to accommodate the educational standards of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). With an emphasis on both athletic and academic excellence, the NCAA requires that student-athletes meet certain requirements to compete. For each year of eligibility, a student-athlete must maintain a certain GPA, make a certain percentage of progress toward a degree, and complete 18 hours of academic credit. Additionally, each student-athlete's grade point average counts toward his or her team's academic progress rate. NCAA eligibility requirements are just the bare essentials of what professionals encounter when advising student-athletes.

Regardless of their sport, all student-athletes keep a disciplined schedule seven days a week. While other students on campus struggle with balancing their newly found independence

with more demanding academics, student-athletes rarely have free time. This leaves them hungry, exhausted, and sometimes discouraged. A typical week consists of 15 hours of class, 10 hours of study hall, and 20+ hours of athletic activities. There is little time for socialization outside of the team, and sleep is a scarce resource throughout the semester. Members of the same team live, practice, eat, and socialize together outside of practice. Interaction with other students is minimal outside of the classroom. Even with institutional limits on the number of student-athletes in each section of class, it is common for student-athletes to associate more with their athletic peers than non-athletic peers.

On top of social and educational concerns, the pressure to compete and succeed in athletic competition is foremost in a student-athlete's mind. One of the most remarkable characteristics of the student-athlete population is the influence of a team coach. For student-athletes, the coach, rather than the admissions office, is the first source of information. Information about athletics and the team are going to be presented first; from that point on, the athletic mindset is constantly in play. A coach has spent weeks, maybe months communicating with this student, and a strong relationship has already been built. Before athletes hit the books, they are in the weight room, practicing with upperclassmen on the team, and acclimating to the culture of athletics. For student-athletes, this is the most valuable authority in their day-to-day life. A head coach dictates both athletic decisions (which athletes compete), along with academic decisions, (when students can have class), and "courses are often chosen to fit busy schedules and not to support interests or even to challenge and support academic ability" (Harmon, 2010, p. 27). It is typical for coaches to announce a semester's practice block with the expectation that students work with academic advisors to schedule classes at another time.

Appreciative Advising with Student-Athletes

While the primary goal is to monitor a student-athlete's eligibility, it is also the role of the academic advisor to nurture and support these students in their goals. Appreciative advising can be a welcoming approach, giving advisors a step-by-step plan for "building rapport with students, discovering their strengths, unleashing their hopes and dreams, and devising plans to make those hopes and dreams come true" (Hutson & Bloom, 2007, p. 4). The six phases of appreciative advising are likely to repeat more than once as student-athletes work through the contrasting identities presented to them, as both student and athlete.

Disarm

The first step in the appreciative advising process is gaining the trust of each student-athlete. Media outlets gravitate toward coverage featuring high-profile student-athletes from revenue sports, destined to move into the realm of professional play. However, for a vast majority of student-athletes, a professional career in something other than sports awaits them upon graduation. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2012b), only a small percentage of NCAA student-athletes move on to professional play. Baseball boasts the highest percentage with 9.7 percent of college participants finding a place with professional leagues; football trails behind significantly with only 1.6 percent of players playing professionally.

Inquiring about each individual student's ambition as well as the culture of the sport at the institution directs advisors to the most appropriate direction for future discussions. How and why a student is recruited is critical, as some may come in with expectations of going pro in any sport. Discussing the pros and cons that they weighed as a student-athlete provides insight into what priorities the student has and how to best assist them in their goals.

Discover

After a safe environment is built, communication between the advisor and advisee can move forward with the purpose of helping students identify their priorities. One of the most essential advisor behaviors during the Discover phase is "listening carefully to responses and asking only positive, affirmative questions" (Bloom & Martin, 2002, para. 5). Comeaux and Harrison (2011) outlined three primary areas of commitment that apply specifically to the special population of student-athletes – institutional commitment, sport commitment, and goal commitment. For each student-athlete, the combination of these three areas of priority is different. The goal of appreciative advising is to help students find where they excel and build upon their interests in that particular field; with student-athletes, an added element of athletic skill and serious interest adds to the exploration process.

Institutional commitment. Institutional commitment refers to the connection a student-athlete has with the chosen institution and the investment of completing a degree. For some student-athletes, chiefly those that are academically gifted, this is of the utmost importance. They were attracted to the college or university for its academic prestige as well as its athletic reputation. For others, this may be a necessary means to continuing as an athlete. Confronting this fact is probably one of the most difficult in the process of appreciatively advising student-athletes. The higher education system in the United States is the primary filter to a place in the professional sports world. In the journey to become a professional athlete (particularly with football), college is the only route to a professional career. This leaves student-athletes struggling with the definition of student, athlete, and student-athlete. The athlete role is considered to be more legitimate and sanctioned than the student role for most student-athletes, "because it engulfs and controls their lives" (Despres, Brady & McGowan, 2008, p. 201).

Sport commitment. Considering most of their communication with the institution is initiated and managed by staff in the athletic department, it is no surprise that these students have a commitment to their sport. Prior to their enrollment, a member of the coaching staff or a current player escorts many of them throughout campus and facilities on the team. A view of campus is seen predominantly through the athletic lens. With the recent deregulation of contact between coaches and potential student-athletes, the mentality of athletics first is only likely to increase with high school players hoping to solicit a scholarship or commitment from a Division I institution. However, "athletes who committed early to the athlete role and had little meaningful exploration of investment in other roles reported lower self-efficacy for career decision making" (Lally & Kerr, 2005, p.15).

Goal commitment. The final commitment discussed by Comeaux and Harrison (2011) is goal commitment, described a student-athlete's initial educational plans during and after the pursuit of their undergraduate degree. As previously discussed, a wide spectrum of educational

dedication applies to student-athletes. For example, as Dawkins, Braddock, and Celaya (2009) stated,

Among student-athletes with aspiration for major sports, emphasis on sports may begin early in childhood and the extent to which they become academically engaged may also begin early on with complicity from parents, schools, and coaches in the settings of family, community, and school (p. 53).

With regard to the topic of academics, confidence building language is significant from the very first conversation. Student-athletes are very aware of their athletic ability; after all, they are a part of a Division I intercollegiate team. The opposite may be true of their academic ability. Connecting their future aspirations can help to cultivate a connection with goal commitment and degree completion, even for student-athletes planning to pursue a career of competition.

Finally, take time to evaluate what the student-athlete believes his or her strengths are, not just academically but also socially and athletically. As a mentor and advisor outside of their sport, it is likely that conversations with student-athletes incorporate a lot more than just academics. Team dynamics, athletic competition, and the transition to college life are also weighing on the minds of these students. Making sure to open all arenas early on helps to build rapport and let them know that you understand their experience.

Dream

The third phase of the appreciative advising cycle opens up the conversation to specific long-term goals that student-athlete have for themselves, including academic, athletic, and personal goals. Depending on the student-athlete and his or her interaction outside of athletics, personal identity may be the first area to address, as it can greatly affect both academic and athletic expectations. Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009) pointed out that “female, low-profile athletes, and athletes who interacted more with other nonathletic students, have a higher level of personal self-concept compared to male, high-profile athletes, and athletes who interacted less with other students”(p.104). Connections with teammates, relationship with coaches, and comfort level in the classroom are a few indications of how a student-athlete views his or her personal capabilities. Sometimes a feeling of inferiority, or a lack of ability to compete in the academic environment can cause a lack of ambition in the classroom. Most higher education professionals would be intimidated to walk onto the court or into the weight room and train next to college athletes. In turn, most college athletes are intimidated to walk into the college classroom and compete with their peers. Part of the dream phase is constructing an identity as a student and being at ease with academia, even if it is not a student-athlete’s forte.

Inquiring about a student’s aspirations is significant early in the process in order to provide them with adequate academic and career advising. Working toward determining a pinnacle of success for the student-athlete (whether is it athletic or academic) provides the basis for creating a plan of action. In addition to a post-graduation plan, it is essential to also develop semester and yearlong goals. For some student-athletes, the only goal may be to remain academically eligible to complete during the semester and at post-season competition. For others, it can be to obtain an internship or make the dean’s list. Advisors may not always have the same

expectations of our students as they have for themselves. Finding a common ground and accepting ambition in any form is important to ensure students are motivated to succeed.

Design

The design step is critical when work with student-athletes, particularly because an athlete's eligibility hangs in the balance. Semester course loads, grade point average, and percentage of degree completion must be monitored closely. One dropped or failed course can leave a student sitting on the bench during competition season. A roadmap for the rest of student-athletes time at the institution can alleviate stress associated with maintaining eligibility as well as personal expectations. In concert with the coach, an advisor can determine how many semesters of eligibility a student has to complete a degree, whether the student plans to utilize all of those semesters, and if graduate school courses would benefit the student. Student-athletes may be red-shirted, or pulled from competition, for one full year of their matriculation. Red-shirt seasons allow student-athletes to have an addition year at the institution, as they are allotted four full seasons of competition per the NCAA. While the prospect of sitting out a season is probably not the most desirable to the student-athlete, it does give advisors and advisees an additional year in which to work toward degree completion. Summer sessions of coursework are also more common, and sometimes expected, for student-athletes to either alleviate academic pressure during the season or to recover academically for continuing eligibility.

Major requirements, section times, and practice blocks are just the first step. Assessing how the student manages this schedule through a week, month, and season is an ongoing practice. Especially with at-risk students, coordinating weekly tutors, mentors, or learning specialists is of the utmost importance. Working around competition travel and practice, adjustments may have to be made as often as daily to accommodate the availability of the student-athlete. A full semester of assignments can be overwhelming to consider, and the expertise of an advisor can be very helpful in helping student-athletes break the semester into segments of one or two weeks, working to complete the most necessary assignments first.

Deliver

The deliver phase of appreciative advising is characterized by the execution of a mutually agreed upon plan by both the advisor and the student-athlete. Weekly and daily elements included in the plan could range from consistent class attendance and regular check-ins with the advisor to weekly tutoring appointments and monitored study hall hours. Overarching a span of four to five years, the goal is to allow the student-athlete to gain independence over his or her college career through demonstrating that they can stick to the plan and be successful with personal and academic goals.

In this phase, a majority of the responsibility falls on the student to maintain momentum and inform the advisor on any necessary adjustments. Throughout the first year, student-athletes may encounter new responsibilities like communicating with faculty, managing class notes during travel, and studying for exams during competition season. While these are not specific pieces of the plan mapped out by both parties, they are essential learning opportunities that an advisor can utilize to help the student build independence.

Don't Settle

The final phase of appreciative advising is a continual process that starts with the first day of class, regroups at the end of a term, and finally concludes with a student-athlete's graduation from the institution. Fatigue and homesickness, particularly in the middle of competition season, can lead to student-athletes questioning their ability to keep up in the classroom. One bad grade can bring a student's personal expectations to slip, and fighting that mentality presents a challenge for higher education professionals. As Harmon (2010) commented, "our student athletes suffer from negative stereotypes from their non-athlete peers, faculty, and even student affairs professionals. Many athletes are socialized to believe that everyone they encounter believes them to actually be a stereotype" (pp. 28-29). Athletes are physically, mentally, and academically tested every day of the week. Especially when in-season, they must work to reschedule exams, manage studying while on the road, and find downtime to gain back physical strength. Bringing the student back to the strengths, abilities, and interests from the beginning phases of appreciative advising can help facilitate movement past the current obstacle and on to a productive solution.

With various demands of time and energy, it is possible for student-athletes to end the semester disappointed in their academic performance. For every student-athlete that has a mindset of 'just getting by,' there is another student-athlete that has the goal to make a 4.0 GPA. There are opportunities for each of these types of students to see hard work pay off and also to see that sometimes perfection isn't everything when time constraints kick in. Reformulating the definition of success is quite common; circumstances can change drastically in the course of a semester. Constant communication and honesty between the advisor and the student-athlete is key to making progress and readjusting when necessary.

Just like other college students, student-athletes have career ambition. It is easy for student-athletes to be discouraged in the realm of career planning due to their lack of time; it's hard to land summer or semester internships, build professional contacts, or gain experience on campus. To compound the situation, it is difficult for student-athletes to access a campus career center during regular business hours, leaving them relatively disconnected from the resources available to campus. Building in a career development component to the appreciative advising process allows student-athletes to consistently evaluate what fields interest them, contact employers about internship or job opportunities that might fit their schedules, and articulate the skills they have gained from participating in athletics. Leadership, punctuality, teamwork, and dedication are only a handful of the traits student-athletes possess. Candid discussion on what they accomplish on a daily basis can bring out a much more extensive description. Ultimately, the ideal advising experience results in student-athletes finding a healthy commitment level for the institution, academic goals, and athletic performance.

Conclusion

Through the use of appreciative advising, higher education professionals can utilize rapport to help student-athletes identify their strengths and shape an academic plan that advisees are invested in. The most valuable commodity student-athletes possess is time; providing resources and continual encouragement can be the difference between a student-athlete

embracing the student-athlete lifestyle or losing interest in academics altogether. Motivation to perform in all arenas is an essential component that can only come from the student-athlete, but creating a safe environment and providing support for interests and strengths can transform a less interested student into a lifelong learner. Advisors can help these students slowly build a portfolio of knowledge and experience to make them viable candidates in the fields that interest them the most.

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