

1999-2000

**Report of the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee
Subcommittee to Assess Academic Services to Student Athletes**

**University of Nebraska
Fall 2000**

Introduction

The Subcommittee to Assess Academic Services to Students is responsible for conducting an evaluation of the academic services provided to student athletes, and for formulating recommendations. Each year the Subcommittee selects a component of academic services to evaluate in depth. For the 1999-2000 academic year, the Subcommittee chose to evaluate the academic advising service.

At the beginning of the academic year, the Subcommittee sought to determine from all members of the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee, the Academic Senate, and top University Administrators whether there was cause of any type to conduct an evaluation of a specific area of Academic Services. No specific recommendations were offered.

Because of its importance to the academic performance of all student athletes, the Subcommittee decided to evaluate the academic advising service. Specifically, the Subcommittee sought to answer the following question: Are the mechanisms now in place to identify/prevent a practice of a "shadow curriculum," in which student athletes may receive preferential treatment, adequate? In its efforts to answer this question, the Subcommittee sought information from Dennis Leblanc, Associate Athletic Director for Academic and Student Services, Linda Olsen, Athletic Certification Coordinator for Registration and Records, the Student Athlete Advisory Board, and seven student athletes. In addition, Jo Potuto, Faculty Representative to the NCAA and Big XII, informed the subcommittee of all current NCAA and Big XII compliance regulations that affect academic advising.

ACADEMIC ADVISING FOR STUDENT ATHLETES

Interview with Dennis Leblanc, Athletic Advising

Student athletes receive two complementary forms of academic advising. They receive general guidance from Denis Leblanc upon entering the University of Nebraska and specific guidance from the college in which they choose to seek their degree once they declare a major.

In his interview with members of the Subcommittee, Dennis indicated that he attempts to do three things in his initial advising session with each student athlete. First, he tries to make sure that each student athlete understands that he or she is personally responsible for the choice of degree program and satisfactory progress within the chosen program. Therefore, he advises each student of the implications of his or her high school performance on degree options available to the student athlete. He works individually with each student athlete to ensure that he or she understands the general requirements of the various degree programs. He attempts to have the student athletes understand that the choice of a degree program will have consequences for their

course options as they pursue a degree and for their career options after graduation. No student is advised to pursue a specific degree program or required to take specific courses as a condition of participation in athletics.

Second, Dennis attempts to put each student athlete in touch with the appropriate advisor for the degree program the athlete chooses, or general studies if a program is not immediately identified. While Dennis is able to identify the general requirements of the most commonly pursued degrees, he recognizes that each student athlete is best served by the specific information the college advisors can provide.

It should be noted that student athletes are required by the NCAA and Big 12 to make satisfactory progress toward their degrees as a condition for eligibility. As a consequence, each student athlete must complete a degree progress report at the beginning of each semester that is signed by an advisor in the appropriate college and by the athletic advisor. The Faculty Representative reviews these reports.

Third, Dennis attempts to ensure that student athletes, during their critical first year, are socialized into the academic community of the university and the expectations for academic excellence that are a part of the athletic program. It appears that, earlier than the university as a whole, the Athletic Department had created a learning community for freshmen student athletes. Similar to the goals of the other learning communities in the university, the purpose of the student athlete community is to increase student retention by socializing the student athletes in the university community of learners and by finding courses, peers, and mentors that make the transition into the university smoother. This is particularly true for athletes of color, who often come from large cities outside Nebraska, and Nebraska athletes who come from smaller communities. Similar the practice followed by other learning communities, for students of color, Dennis has identified faculty role models and courses in which the student athletes can find a supportive peer group early in their university experience. This learning community approach has likely contributed to a substantial increase in the number of student athletes who successfully complete their degree programs.

It should be noted that student athletes are expected to compose a minority percentage of any course in the university. If student athletes exceed twenty-five percent of a course, the course is reported to athletic advising and registration for evaluation.

Student Athlete Evaluation of Academic Advising

The Subcommittee interviewed seven student athletes, selected randomly from students who were present in the Hewitt Center at the times of the interviews. These athletes included: one freshman, one sophomore, one junior, three fourth-year seniors, and one fifth-year senior. They represented men's and women's swimming and track, rifle, football, and volleyball. Three were international students and one was a junior college transfer. The student athletes were asked to comment generally on their personal experiences with advising. They were also asked about their knowledge of the existence of a "shadow curriculum" or favoritism toward student athletes in general or specific groups. Finally, each student was asked if he or she, or any student athlete

hew or she knew, was advised to take a specific course, to not take a specific course, or was given special treatment in grades or assignments.

Three facts were universal across all the interviews. First, the student athletes felt they had received exceptionally good advice. Second, every student athlete reported that the choice of their degree program and their progress within the program was their, and only their, personal responsibility. Third, the student athletes reported that they did not know, and had not heard, about a special curriculum or preferential treatment given to individual or groups of student athletes.

The fifth-year student athlete was particularly supportive of the advising program. He indicated that without the "tough love" of the program during his freshman year, he would not have stayed with the university and completed his degree. He offered that his decision to stay on to complete his degree after finishing his eligibility was, for him, testimony to the quality of advising. Similarly, the international athletes reported that each of them requires specific advice, due to the differences in the education systems in the home countries. All indicated that the advice they receive allows them to make the best degree choices. The freshman indicated that she was still undecided about which program she will follow. She noted that she was receiving important information, that she understood her options, and that she had been made to feel comfortable within the university.

Recommendations

1. Dennis advises each student athlete. Similar to the Subcommittee's findings in its evaluation of the mentoring program, advising does not appear to document the advising interactions fully. It may be helpful to maintain a log of the meetings.
2. Dennis has developed a learning community program that can be associated with above average retention and degree completion. Other departments in the college, in fact in the NCAA, may benefit from knowing what is done and why.
3. Often students receive individual advice about courses and instructors that is based on personal relationships that Dennis has established with faculty and advisors in the colleges. These relationships often allow student athletes to make better-informed choices. However, there is some concern that because this information resides informally with Dennis, future student athletes may not be able to benefit. Future student athletes may benefit if some form of documentation of this advisor network is available within the academic advising area.

ADVISING OVERSIGHT MECHANISMS

The Subcommittee attempted to determine if mechanisms are in place that would make a shadow curriculum or any form of systematic preferential treatment difficult to sustain. Specifically, we inquired about policies on incompletes and withdrawals, academic bankruptcy, use of pass/fail, attendance, grade changes, and degree progress. As indicated above, NCAA and Big XII requirements on degree progress rule out the use of these options in most cases. In fact, student athletes cannot avail themselves of these options as freely as non-student athletes. Declaring

academic bankruptcy, for example, would make a student athlete ineligible for competition for at least some time. Student athlete attendance and progress is monitored consistently and regularly. Even grade changes and satisfying of incompletes are reported and reviewed. One cannot completely know the factors beyond the syllabus for the course (and, therefore, subject to the grade appeals process) on which an individual instructor bases a grade for students in her or his course. However, it is very difficult for grades to be altered after the completion of a course, with or without the knowledge of the instructor, without the change able to be verified. Grade changes and other grade related matters are routinely monitored by members of the registrar's office and any irregularities called to the attention of the Registrar and the Hewit Center advising staff.

It should be noted that at least a few faculty find monitoring of student athlete performance to be, in itself, preferential, because it does not allow student athletes to fail as easily as non student athletes.

The use of (1) progress report forms at the beginning of each semester signed by both college and Hewit Center advisors, (2) attendance reports during the semester, and (3) independent reviews by the registrar's office and the Faculty Representative after the semester all suggest that a "shadow curriculum" or systematic preference for student athletes would be difficult to sustain. Student athletes may, in fact, have fewer options open to them to improve their grade honor points than non-student athletes.

Recommendations

None.

DISTRIBUTION OF MAJORS

Due to the number of available courses and informal information channels, student athletes could participate in a "shadow curriculum" even if the academic advisors and the majority of student athletes were not aware of its existence and use of grade related mechanisms were not employed. Therefore, the Subcommittee attempted to determine if the distribution of majors among student athletes, in general and by team, was similar to that of the general student population. The Subcommittee asked that the distribution of majors for undergraduate student athletes be compared to the undergraduate student population for 1995 and 1999. The Subcommittee felt that this would allow it to determine distribution differences and the presence of a pattern.

While no pattern was detected in the 1995-1999 period, some statistically significant differences were demonstrated in the analyses. A statistically significant percentage of student athletes were found in general studies, communications, and sociology in 1995 and 1999. The general studies finding seems to be related to the progress toward degree requirements. All the student athletes in the general studies area were freshmen or sophomores. Student athletes must declare a major by their junior year. (The Subcommittee would expect to find statistically fewer junior or senior student athletes in the general studies population.)

The sociology concentration appears to be related to the fact that sociology does not require a minor, thereby allowing students greater course flexibility. Sociology also offers courses that may be of specific interest to athletes. The number of student athletes majoring in economics is low (six in 1995 and four in 1999). It is believed that at least one student athlete did major in economics while trying to raise the student's GPA in order to change majors to business. For communications, degree flexibility and popularity of the subject may be reasons for its selection. No information was found that indicated Academic Student Services inappropriately influenced a selection of a major.

Recommendations

Now that a mechanism has been developed that allows the distribution of majors by student athletes to be compared to the general student population, Academic Advising may find it valuable to continue to track majors by team on an annual basis. Such oversight may allow Academic Advising to pre-empt concerns about a "shadow curriculum" in the future.