

# Advising Student Athletes: An Examination of Academic Support Programs with High Graduation Rates

Joy L. Gaston-Gayles, Florida State University

*Seven directors of academic support services for student athletes with relatively high graduation rates were interviewed about the elements of their programs that contribute to student athlete success. Data on current graduation rates among six Division I-A conferences and the results from interviews with directors are presented. Implications for administrators of academic support programs and advisors of student athletes are discussed.*

KEY WORDS: administration, athletics, NCAA, retention, student athletes

## Introduction

Student athletes represent a special population of students at many colleges and universities across the country. Like most college undergraduates, student athletes attend classes and are a part of the social fabric of the university. However, unlike most undergraduates, student athletes are required to adhere to rules and regulations mandated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), participate in rigorous practice sessions, travel to competitions, and endure physical injuries (Watt & Moore, 2001). Some college athletes are admitted to universities under special permission. In such cases, student athletes need academic support services to increase their likelihood of academic success (Gerdy, 1997).

College athletes are constantly striving to balance academic, athletic, and social roles (Adler & Adler, 1991), and most cannot do it successfully without proper guidance and assistance. Academic support programs for student athletes provide academic assistance for college athletes who are attempting the delicate balance between their roles and responsibilities as students and athletes. In this article, I focus on aspects of academic support-service programs that contribute to success in graduating student athletes.

## Historical Overview of Advising Athletes

For several decades, some faculty members, students, and administrators have viewed intercollegiate athletics with skepticism (Gerdy, 1997). A major criticism cited by Hurley and Cunningham

(1984, p. 51) was that “colleges and universities have been accused of sacrificing their academic integrity in order to develop competitive athletic teams.” Some institutional affiliates believe that student athletes receive too many special services that are not as readily available for the general student body. However, because of NCAA regulations, student athletes are not allowed to receive support services that are unavailable for the student body. However, the perception of favoritism for student athletes is based on the fact that “student athletes are systematically exposed to these services through explicit cooperation between the athletic department and the advisor” (Hurley & Cunningham, 1984, p. 52). In addition to perceptions of unfairness, institutional stake holders have serious concerns about unethical behavior that has recently been manifested as cases of academic scandals involving plagiarism, grade changes, and other unfair academic practices. Furthermore, the structured nature of academic support services and the limited opportunities for student athletes to interact with the campus community at large hinder the student athlete’s development (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

Part of the negative image of academic support services for student athletes dates back to the 1970s when programs consisted of one or two individuals whose job was to keep student athletes eligible for competition (Gerdy, 1997). Athletic counselors were often ex-coaches or assistant coaches charged with monitoring athletic eligibility. Hurley and Cunningham (1984) described a process in which the counselor encouraged student athletes to take easy courses to improve grades while avoiding more difficult courses to circumvent low grades (which may over time cause a student to become ineligible). Coaches often held the academic advisor totally responsible for the student athlete’s academic success.

Since the inception of Proposition 48 and subsequent rules governing eligibility and degree progress, academic support programs have become more comprehensive; they are now much more complex than in the 1970s when academic advisors simply monitored eligibility. Most programs provide services in academic advisement, tutoring, study

table, career advising, and mentoring. At the dawn of the 21st century, these programs and services are more developmental or holistic than they were in the 1970s. The focus of academic support programs is not on maintaining eligibility to compete but reflects a greater concern for the development of the whole student through such support services as life skills development and mentoring.

Despite the comprehensiveness of the academic support services that are offered to college athletes, graduation rates continue to plummet for some institutions (NCAA, 2003). Most NCAA Division I academic-support programs offer the identical types of services (e.g., tutoring, academic advising, study table, mentoring, and the like); however, not all programs achieve the same level of success in terms of graduation rates. In this article, I describe in detail aspects that are perceived to aid academic support programs in successful graduation of student athletes.

### Models of Advising

Three models of advising are worth discussion, particularly as they relate to advising student athletes. All three models delineate the relationship between the advisor and advisee, and all three are distinctly different. Prescriptive advising is the most traditional model, characterized by an authority relationship between the advisor and the advisee (Crookston, 1994). In this relationship the student simply presents a problem and the advisor gives a solution. The involvement of the student in the decision-making process is nonexistent, or at best, severely limited. Under this type of advising, the responsibility is taken from the advisee and is placed on the advisor. If the advisor-proposed solution to the problem does not work, then the student can blame the advisor instead of taking responsibility for his or her own actions.

Another model, developmental advising, was defined by Crookston (1994, p. 6) as a relationship in which “the academic advisor and the student differentially engage in a series of developmental tasks, the successful completion of which results in varying degrees of learning by both parties.” Under the developmental-advising paradigm, the advisor and student develop a solution to the problem together, thus making the student responsible for her or his own actions.

Intrusive advising can be characterized as a combination of the prescriptive and developmental models. The basic assumption of intrusive advising is that students will not readily seek advice and guidance from advisors; therefore, advisors should seek

out students for advisement (Holmes, 2000). This model is often used in advising special populations of students who typically have high attrition rates, such as those on probation, students of color, and students with disabilities (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). This model has been reported to increase overall academic performance and retention for these special populations (Holmes, 2000).

Earl (1988, p. 28) defined intrusive advising as “deliberate and structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate students to seek help.” According to Earl, this model is based on three guiding principles. First, academic and social integration are the keys to persistence. Second, students can make adjustments in areas of deficiency by learning specific integration skills. Third, student motivation is not the cause but the result of intrusive advising. In other words, student motivation is enhanced through self-evaluation, learned study skills, and learned involvement in campus life.

### Research Questions

I examined academic support programs for athletes to assess those factors that are perceived to contribute to student athlete success within programs that have graduation rates above the national average. I used mixed methods of data collection and analysis to address the research questions in this study:

1. Which programs have been successful in terms of graduating student athletes?
2. What perceived factors contribute to higher graduation rates and success in academic support programs?

### Methods

#### *Participants*

Participants for this study included Division I-A institutions within 6 of the 11 Division I-A conferences. These six conferences were selected because the majority are research universities and have high profile athletic programs, particularly in football and men’s basketball. The six conferences chosen include The Atlantic Coast Conference, The Big Ten Conference, The Big East Conference, The Pacific Ten Conference, The Southeastern Conference, and The Big Twelve Conference. A total of 69 institutions are represented across these six conferences.

#### *Data*

The NCAA annually publishes graduation rates

of member institutions. Although graduation rates are problematic, they continue to be the most commonly used measure of success in the literature to date (Watt & Moore, 2001). Therefore, I used graduation rates as a measure of academic success at the institutional level. To address the first research question, graduation rates were examined for each institution within six Division I-A conferences. The latest graduation-rate report indicated that the national graduation-rate average for the cohort of student athletes entering college in 1996–97 was 62%, which is the highest rate to date (NCAA, 2003).

Graduation rates for the 69 institutions in this study were examined in two ways: a) the graduation rate for the 1996–97 cohort at each school and b) the 4-year class-average graduation rate at each institution. These rates were examined for both the student athlete population and students in the general population. In determining the institution with the highest graduation rate, the 4-year class-average graduation rate was used because it indicated an average graduation rate across four cohorts of students rather than for a single cohort of students.

To examine perceived factors that contribute to the success of academic support programs for student athletes as put forth in the second research question, I selected for study those institutions with the highest 4-year average graduation rates (i.e., above or equal to the national average) from each of the six conferences. The institutions with the highest 4-year average graduation rates from each conference were Duke University (89%), Notre Dame (87%), Georgetown (Washington, DC) (87%), Northwestern (89%), Baylor University (69%), Vanderbilt (78%), and Stanford (87%).

The seven institutions with the top graduation rates are private institutions. To adjust for this bias, I selected for further examination public institutions that had high graduation rates in the conference (compared to other public institutions within the conference). Public and private institutions are very different in terms of the campus culture and student body. Some inherent differences between these two types of institutions impact support services for athletes. In choosing public institutions to supplement the data pool, my design was consistent with suggestions from Patton (1990) regarding the importance of choosing cases that provide rich information. The following three public institutions were selected based on the graduation-rate and high-profile criteria used to select the private schools for study: Mississippi State University (65%), Virginia Tech (66%), and the University of Oregon (65%). To generate a comprehensive description of programs with

successful graduation rates, I kept Duke University, Northwestern University, Baylor University, and Notre Dame University in the analysis.

Qualitative research, specifically the phenomenology approach (Armino & Hultgren, 2002), allows for deep insight into a situation or phenomenon of interest. In this case, I wanted to understand, if possible, the perceived factors that contributed to the success of academic support programs for student athletes. Jones (2002) recommended that before collecting data qualitatively, the researcher should become familiar with the background of the phenomenon of interest. To that end, basic content and descriptions about each program were reviewed from institutional Web sites before interviews with academic support-program directors of the chosen institutions were conducted.

The interviews were structured but flexible enough to allow participants to expand upon each question posed. The protocol for each interview focused on the organizational structure, types of services provided, institutional culture, advising philosophy, and perceived aspects contributing to success in graduation rates. Interviews ranged from a 30 to 45 minutes. I tape recorded and transcribed verbatim each interview.

I used inductive analysis to uncover themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected through telephone interviews. I read each transcript and searched for themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

## Results

To address the first research question, I determined which institutions had relatively high graduation rates by identifying institutions that had graduation rates for student athletes equal to or above the national average. Tables 1, 2, 3 summarize the mean graduation rates for the athlete cohorts in the analysis by institutional type and conference. Of the institutions in this study, 69% had graduation rates for the 1996–97 student-athlete cohort greater than or equal to the national average for all college athletes (62%). Fifty-five percent of the 69 institutions in this study had 4-year average graduation rates greater than or equal to the national average for college athletes. One of the most interesting findings was that 30% of the institutions reported a graduation rate for the 1996–97 cohort of college athletes that was greater than or equal to the graduation rate for the 1996–97 general student population cohort. Four of these institutions had graduation rates greater than or equal to the student population at the institution, but not greater than the

national average for college athletes. In addition, 32% of the institutions had 4-year average graduation rates that were higher than or equal to the 4-year average rate for students in the general student population. Eleven of these institutions had 4-year average rates greater than or equal to the 4-year average rates for students in the general student population, but the rates were not greater than the national average for college athletes.

Through the second research question, I looked at perceived factors that contribute to successful graduation rates. These six themes were reporting lines, institutional size and affiliation, admissions procedures, institutional support and culture, athletic department support, and intentional advising.

### Reporting Lines

In the past, most athletic directors for academic support reported solely to the head athletic director. Today, a number of athletic academic-support programs have either dual reporting lines to the vice president for academic affairs and the athletic director or have been completely removed from under the athletic department. Of the seven academic support programs selected for this study, only one has personnel that reports to the head athletic director, and one has a dual reporting line to the athletic director

and vice provost for academic affairs. The remaining five programs are solely under the vice president for academic affairs (or equivalent). A director from a large state institution talked about how the structure contributes to the success of the program.

I think one of the best things [we] have going for us is that we're not a part of the athletic department. We work for the vice president for student life. I think that's a plus, no question, because...sure I work for the Athletic Department and I work for those coaches and everything, but I don't have a direct reporting line to them and they're not controlling my salary...my life...So that's a big plus right there.

Some individuals expressed the problems of reporting to the vice president as opposed to the athletic director. The director for academic support at a private institution with dual reporting lines stated,

If you move it out then the [*athletic director*] loses all accountability for academics. I want to be able to say to whoever that is what's going on in the athletic side. I don't want him shrugging his shoulders saying it's not my call anymore—it's not my business; they've taken it outside my department.

**Table 1** Mean graduation rates for students and athletes within 6 conferences (%),  $N = 69$

Cohort	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Student 1996–97	69.0	12.7
Student 4-year	67.4	13.2
Athlete 1996–97	66.0	11.4
Athlete 4-year	64.0	11.3

**Table 2** Mean graduation rates of athletes by institutional type (%),  $N = 69$

Cohort	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
4-year at public institutions	60.0	62.7
1996–97 at public institutions	62.7	9.7
4-year at private institutions	78.1	9.4
1996–97 at private institutions	77.4	9.9

**Table 3** Mean graduation rates of 4-year cohort of athletes per conference (%),  $N = 69$ , 1997

Conference	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Atlantic Coast	67.2	12.55
Big East	70.1	12.55
Big 10	69.2	8.85
Big 12	57.3	7.72
Southeastern	56.9	9.81
Pacific 10	62.6	10.86

Another director at a public institution who reports to the vice president's office expressed both the pros and cons.

I think we could be better funded if we were through athletics because they've got more money. But it does keep things pretty clean. I don't have an issue where I've got to watch myself around athletics. I can never be pressured by them to make decisions because it's as clean as you can probably get.

Overall, reporting to the vice president for academic affairs seems to be perceived positively because this structure keeps academic support for athletes in line with other academic support services for students in the general population. Furthermore, the athletic support staff has access to faculty members and administrators, which is a situation that may not be enjoyed by those who report solely to the athletic director.

#### *Institutional Size and Affiliation*

Directors of student support services at private institutions, as well as some from the smaller state institutions, expressed that institutional size played an important role in the success of their academic support program. Staff at academic support programs at smaller institutions are able to work more closely with students than can those from large state institutions. Small class sizes allow for increased interaction between faculty members and students, a point illustrated in the following comments from the director at a private institution:

[*My university*] has about 6,000 undergraduates, very, very small class sizes, a lot of contact with faculty. . . . It's very easy for them to communicate with us if somebody is not going to class, if they're struggling academically, or if didn't turn in a paper. Where at [*other universities*] in a class of 300 to 400 students, you just can't do those things.

#### *Admissions Process*

A number of academic-support program directors talked about how critical the admissions office is to their success in graduating student athletes. Not admitting students who are unlikely to be successful is directly related to having successful graduation rates. As one director indicated, "success breeds success." Another director from a private institution commented,

I think our greatest success at [*my university*] occurs in the admissions office. Part of the

problem in college athletics today is there's a mentality out there that if you put enough money into academic support and enough staff people, tutors, and learning specialists you can bring any kind of student into an institution of higher learning and make them successful. We don't believe that's the case. We just feel like if you don't bring quality students into a quality institution then you're going to have problems. Certain students would graduate, but the majority probably would not.

#### *Institutional Support*

Another theme that emerged as critical among those from successful programs was support from the institution; that is, respondents pointed to support from faculty members and administrators on campus. Although athletics can sometimes be viewed with skepticism by faculty members and administrators, the interviewed directors expressed a level of support from the institution in terms of the services it provides for student athletes. One director at a public institution talked about the support of the campus community, particularly faculty members and administrators. The administration at the director's institution asks the faculty to evaluate the academic support program annually to increase the effectiveness of the program. Another director at a public institution also talked about the support garnered from the campus community:

I think one piece that is unique to our program and that's been helpful is we run a summit for student athlete success twice a year, one in the fall and one in the spring. It's an opportunity for us to bring faculty, advisors, and other campus administrators together with our coaches and athletic department people. We throw out issues that are central for discussion and we build programming. It gives us a chance for dialogue, communication, new issues, and probably the biggest thing is just relationships. You get to see people face-to-face and build trust and integrity. What it allows is open minds for when there are issues with students we can come together and try to resolve those before they become big issues. Now we haven't solved world peace through this whole thing. It's been a really positive relationship overall.

#### *Athletic Department Support*

Similar to the support of the campus community, a number of the directors expressed that having supportive coaches and athletic administrators was

vital to success in graduating students. Without support from coaches, many of the directors felt as though the program may not have been as successful as it has been. Support from coaches was expressed in terms of retaining the coaching staff, recruiting good students, and being in accord of the academic support office. A director at a private institution stated,

We've got very little turn over on our staff. Our coaches just don't leave. We pay fairly well. It's a great place to live and work, and we bring in pretty high quality people, and we expect that they support what we're doing academically. If they don't, they're reprimanded, and that doesn't happen in a lot of places. I think having that support is really critical.

### *Intentional Advising*

Some of the directors in this study talked about how they advise and work with student athletes on their campuses. Much of their descriptions can be labeled as intrusive advising as cited in (Earl, 1988). This approach to advising consists of providing a great deal of support for freshmen and sophomores and less support as students approach their junior and senior years. One director at a public institution commented,

We really try to almost handhold our first-year students through the process. We've got people out checking their classes to make sure they're there. The study hall program, tutoring, mentoring program, and transition classes—all that is designed to help them be successful that first year. As they grow and mature into the experience, it's more of them asking us or telling us what they need rather than us forcing it on them. So we walk them through holding their hand the first year and then slowly let go and watch them do it on their own from then forward.

These programs focused heavily on graduation as opposed to just maintaining eligibility. The directors expressed that they place a lot of emphasis on earning a college degree and impress this goal upon the student athlete population at their respective institutions. One director at a public institution stated, "We seldom talk about eligibility; we talk about graduation. If they're on-line for graduation, eligibility will take care of itself."

### **Conclusions**

Through this initial study, I sought to determine which programs have been successful in graduat-

ing its student athletes as well as the perceived factors that contribute to the success of these programs. The findings of the descriptive analysis showed that the majority of the institutions within the six conferences studied had graduation rates greater than or equal to the national average for NCAA institutions. These results suggest that student athletes are graduating despite increased academic standards imposed by the NCAA, such as Proposition 16, which was approved in 1992 (NCAA, 2003). Since Proposition 16, academic standards continue to increase, and in the fall of 2005, the standards will increase once again.

The results also indicate that private institutions had higher graduation rates than did public institutions. Graduation rates may be higher at private institutions because of institutional size, admissions standards, and campus culture. Private institutions generally have smaller enrollments. As a result, classes are smaller and are usually taught by professors as opposed to teaching assistants. Private research universities are generally highly selective; therefore, they attract high ability students. The results from the qualitative analysis support the notion that private institutions have a high expectation for all students who enter to graduate.

Some may be surprised that the themes did not include specific services, such as tutoring, study hall, and mentoring as salient to support programs with high graduation rates. Instead, the directors of successful programs talked about reporting lines, institutional size, institutional and athletic department support, admissions, and advising approach. Although the directors interviewed did not discuss advising-session techniques or programs, their comments are applicable to those who advise college athletes at Division I institutions, and the implications of their discussions can be used to improve academic-support service programs for college athletes.

### *Implications for Advising and Advising Programs*

One of the most salient perceived factors contributing to success in graduating athletes was the dual reporting lines for student services directors. The respondents felt their programs benefited because the directors reported to the vice president for academic affairs and the athletic director or only to the vice president's office. Several authors have written about the benefits of this dual organizational structure (Gerdy, 1997; Suggs, 1999). Several Division I-A institutions have adopted this structure, whereas, at other institutions student services directors have always reported to the vice

president's office. One of the first institutions to make this shift was the University of Virginia (Suggs, 1999); however, other institutions, such as Notre Dame, have always had this dual structure.

Institutional support should be solicited from advisors of academic support programs, and opportunities for faculty members and administrators to interact with student athletes and support services staff should be highly encouraged. Astin (1999) showed that students who are engaged in the campus community are more likely to graduate. Furthermore, increased opportunities for athletes to interact with the faculty and the campus community can enhance their overall development as college students (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

While a director of student support services or an advisor cannot do much about an institution's size, they can work to make a large institution seem small by developing close relationships with student athletes and finding ways to create community among students, faculty members, and administrators. Academic advisors within support programs also benefit from having supportive athletic departments. Athletic directors should be strongly encouraged to hire coaches who understand the importance of earning a college degree and who are willing to communicate its importance to college athletes. Furthermore, everyone at the institution should work hard to retain coaches who support the academic mission and efforts to increase the retention of student athletes. This level of cooperation between advisors, coaches, students, and the institution creates positive environment for all parties involved.

Although the directors did not elaborate on specific advising techniques or theories, they expressed that the approach taken to advising was critical to the student athlete's academic success. Advisors must stress to college student athletes that earning a college degree is an important and attainable goal. They need to stress the importance of academics from the very beginning of the student athlete's college career—as early as recruitment and orientation. The focus of advising within support programs should be on graduation and degree progress as opposed to maintaining eligibility. Advisors should be encouraged to utilize an intrusive advising approach with athletes in their first 2 years of study because this approach has been effective for other special populations (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). However, student athletes should be encouraged by advisors to take responsibility for their own academic well-being as they approach the junior and senior years of study.

### *Directions for Future Research*

A few limitations should be noted regarding this study. I did not attempt to assess institutions with graduation rates below the national average. Therefore, one cannot determine if the perceived factors are unique to institutions with high student-athlete graduation rates. The perceived factors related to success are based on self-reported data from administrators at institutions with graduation rates equal to or above the national average for athletes. Future studies might include a more direct comparison between institutions with graduation rates above the national average and those with graduation rates below the national average.

Future researchers might also include data on grade-point averages (GPAs) in assessing programs that have experienced success in graduating its student athletes. For example, an institution with a 72% graduation rate for student athletes who maintain a 2.4 average GPA may exhibit a different advising approach than an institution with a 72% graduation rate and student athletes who have GPAs that average 3.0. Level of success can be more fully examined when information on GPA is included in the analysis.

Despite the limitations, this preliminary study offers insight into perceived factors of success at institutions with high graduation rates. Advisors and administrators at similar types of institutions can benefit from the results of this study. The ultimate goal for academic support programs is to graduate athletes. This study offers some helpful suggestions from those who have experienced success in graduating athletes and serves as a basis for generating further research on the advising needs of college student athletes.

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#### Author's Note

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