Assisting High Academic Risk Athletes: Recommendations for the Academic Advisor

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There has been a recent explosion of dialogue concerning scholarship athletes in higher education and the ability of many of them to achieve academically in that setting. (Evans,[1] Hannon,[2] Heath,[3] and Wittmer, et al.[4]) In response to this issue many athletic departments have established academic support systems which include assistance in study skills, tutoring and academic counseling/advising. This article has as its intent several purposes: to describe a program offered to high academic risk athletes at a large midwestern university which implemented the advising process from the perspective of student development; to survey and report athletes' views concerning the people and events in their environment which they believe affect their academic performance; and to offer recommendations to academic advisors who are working with this unique college population.

Academic advising has been defined from the perspective of student development as a process which . . . "stimulates and supports students in their quest for an enriched quality of life; it is a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational and personal goals through the full range of institutional and community resources."[5] If educators are to implement academic advising from the perspective of student development, then *seven (7) key program* conditions are necessary. According to Ender, et al.,[6] they are:

[1]Evans, J.R. *Blowing the whistle on intercollegiate sports.* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1974).

[2]Hannon, G.H. *A report to the American Council on Education into the need for and feasibility of a national study of intercollegiate athletics.* Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, March 22, 1974.

[3]Heath, D.H. Wanted: A comprehension model of healthy development, *The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 58,* (1980). 391-399.

[4]Wittmer, J., Bostic, D., Phillips, T.D. & Waters, W. The personal, academic, and career problems of college student athletes. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 60,* (1981), 52-55.

[5]Ender, S.C., Winston, R.B., Jr. & Miller, T.K. "Academic advising as student development." In R.B. Winston, Jr., S.C. Ender & T.K. Miller (Eds.), New Directions for Student Services: Developmental Approaches to Academic Advising, 17 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, March, 1982). p.8.

[6]Ender et al., page 8.

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idition #1 — Advising is a continuous process with an accumulation of personal ·ts between advisor and advisee — these contacts have both direction and purpose;

idition #2 — Advising must concern itself with quality of life issues and the advisor esponsibility to facilitate the quality of the student's experience while on the college is;

idition #3 — Advising is goal related and goals should be established and owned by visee — these goals should include academic, career and personal planning areas;

idition #4 — Advising requires the establishment of a caring human relationship — which the advisor must take primary responsibility for its initial development;

idition #5 — Advisors should be models for students to emulate — specifically istrating behaviors which lead to self-responsibility and self-directiveness;

idition #6 — Advising should seek to integrate the services and expertise of both nic and student affairs professionals; and

idition #7 — Advisors should seek to utilize as many campus and community ces as possible.

above definition and program conditions of an "ideal" advising program may ap- nore grandiose than practical. Many times developmental programs never move he theoreticians' written page to the programmatic stage of implementation. What s is a description of a program designed and implemented to actualize developmen- /ising and the above seven program conditions with a unique college population — gh academic risk scholarship athlete.

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haps the best way to introduce this program is to describe my own personal situa- In the summer of 1982, I moved from a large southeastern university to a school of r size in the midwest. One of my responsibilities in the new position was to co- ate the institution's study skills program which consisted of academic classes offered gh the College of Education and taught by staff members working in the University's seling Center. Having experienced a degree of success working as an academic ad- for high academic risk scholarship athletes at my past institution, I approached the ic Department with an offer to teach a special section of study skills for athletes would combine several topics I believed appropriate to implement the theoretical pts of developmental advising. Since this approach advocates an accumulation of cts between advisor and advisee (*condition #1*) the class approach is most ap- iate. In order to increase the likelihood of coverage of several key topics which affect y of life issues (*condition #2*) with every student whom the advisor worked, the group ach was the only practical method possible.

am Participants: A Profile

· Athletic Department identified over fifty students they thought could benefit from ogram, and twenty-two were chosen to participate. They were chosen by a review

panel consisting of the Assistant Academic Provost, staff members representing Student Affairs (the Director of Minority Affairs, the Director of Academic Assistance Program and myself) and an academic counselor representing the Athletic Department (*condition #6* — developmental advising involves collaboration between academic and student affairs). The primary factors affecting this choice were class rank, the students' past involvement or lack of it in the study skills course, and the severity of the grade point average.

Among the twenty-two chosen to participate, there were four women basketball players, one woman trackster, three men participating in varsity basketball, and fourteen men participating in varsity football. Eleven were second semester freshmen, ten were in their sophomore year, and one was a first semester senior. The group had twenty students from minority backgrounds. The group's mean grade point average in the semester prior to the intervention was 1.55 (standard deviation = .88). Nineteen of the twenty-two were on academic probation, and only four students could identify their "real" academic advisor. The rest were self-advised with the assistance of athletic counselors, coaches, and other student athletes. Most were enrolled in what could best be described as an "eligibility curriculum." The population was not atypical of other high academic risk athletes encountered at my previous institution.

The Program

In the meeting where the students were chosen to participate, the representatives of academic and student affairs made recommendations concerning appropriate class schedules for each student during the semester in which the intervention would take place. Each was enrolled in twelve to sixteen hours of study. The schedule consisted of rigorous academic classes and others that were most participatory in nature. Every student was enrolled in the study skills class taught by the advisor/study skills teacher for three hours on a credit/no credit grading basis.

Each area of study covered in the course represents topical areas academic advisors should be in a position to address with all students they encounter. Many are intentionally designed to implement one of the seven key conditions of an ideal advising program — all were expected to affect *condition # 2* (quality of life issues).

The topics included (an instructor's guide and course syllabus can be obtained by writing the author):

A. Teaching students how to schedule classes, and understand the *Bulletin* and line schedule of classes;

B. Discussing characteristics of successful students and assessing one's own behavior in light of those characteristics;

C. Helping students plan their semester (developing weekly and monthly time management procedures);

D. Teaching effective college study skills (note-taking, test-taking, environmental management, and methods to improve concentration);

E. Demanding that students establish concrete goals (in both academics and their varsity sport) (Condition #3 - developmental advising is goal related);

Introducing the notion of career planning and alternate career opportunities;

Insisting that students develop a two-year curriculum plan consistent with a major mpus;

Pointing out institutional policies and procedures and requiring students to visit and on various campus resources (Condition #7 - developmental advising utilizing the inge of institutional and community resources).

class was taught in such a way that the first weekly meeting introduced a topical nd the second was devoted to applying the topic or technique to the student's nic experience. The third session was used to provide tutorial assistance, stressing ation of the study skills learned to courses taken throughout the university. Each stu- vas required to have two formal interviews with the study skills teacher/advisor. of these interviews took place during the third weekly class session. The primary in- each interview was to establish a personal relationship with each student in the class *tion #4*).

dition # 5, advisors modeling self-responsible, directed behavior was implemented students through a variety of methods, which included being prepared and prompt class sessions and interviews; sharing professional and personal goals when ap- ate; modeling hard work and intensity of purpose; and attempting to be consistent eliefs and behaviors. One example may be helpful to illustrate the last point. At the f intervention two points were continuously stressed: the importance of personal nd the necessity of hard work to complete goals which are worthwhile. The in- ion took place during the winter when I was training very hard for an upcoming 20 ter road race. The class was aware of this and during their goal-setting sessions ged me to set a goal for my race, similar to the goal setting principles I was teaching ealistic, reachable, and yet forces an individual to stretch oneself). I set my goal, a less than 85 minutes. The class session after the race was exciting. I passed my run- atch around for all to see. I had run a time of 84 minutes and 57 seconds. I had bare- ned my goal but I had proven a point. All advisors are not runners but all should be orating methods to be a model of what is right and proper in their work with ad- — especially behaviors which manifest the principles of self-responsible, directed or.

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en of the twenty-two students raised their spring grade point average compared to semester. Fifteen, however, remained on academic probation. The group mean oint average rose to 1.86 (standard deviation = .77). The group was compared to other high risk athletes who were among the fifty originally identified by the : Department. This group was selected by matching as closely as possible the s of gender, grade point average, and varsity sport. This matched group's fall oint average was 1.64 (standard deviation = .60). They finished the spring r with a group grade point average of 1.53 (standard deviation = .61). A T-test culated between the spring semester mean grade point average for the two groups. ough statistical significance at the .05 level was not obtained when the group means mpared ($t = 1.57$, $df = 38$, $p < .10$) significance was approached.

Given the "hard" statistical data one might question if the intervention was worth the time and effort. The answer is a resounding *yes*. Several unique outcomes did occur. Perhaps the most important was the rise in the intervention group's grade point average. A rise of one-half of a letter grade in one semester is very good for this population. Note, the compared group's grade point average dropped during the spring term. Also, and perhaps more important the members of the group who participated in the intervention began the process of changing their behavior in respect to academics. They went to class consistently — a first for many of them. They began to discuss academic majors and look for career opportunities outside of professional sports. They began to understand how the institution operates and how they could take advantage of its many resources. All this occurred because they had met a faculty member (myself) who sincerely cared about their potential as college students. The number of contacts I have had with these students since the completion of the intervention has been substantial, and at times overwhelming. Progress has been made with this group, but much more must take place if they are to obtain a college degree.

If the goal of a degree is to be reached by this group and other athletes like it throughout the country, institutions and academic advisors should take advantage of all resources available to them. I wondered, knowing the effort being put forth at my own institution, how the athletes perceived the assistance being offered, by myself and other institutional representatives. In order to shed some light on this question a data gathering process was implemented with the group to identify both people and structured events in their environment they believed affected their academic progress during the semester. The remainder of this article is a description of the process, the results, and recommendations for advisors to consider when working with this special group of college students.

Data Gathering Procedure

The procedure consisted of gathering two rounds of data from the students. First, each individual in the group was asked to list all the people and events in their environment which they believed affected their academic performance — either positively or negatively. A second and final round of data was collected by collapsing all the data collected in round one into one list of people and one list of events which represented the entire group. During the second round each student was asked to respond to each person or event. They were to rate each using the following scale: positive influence (+), negative influence (−), neutral (N), or not applicable (NA). Students were instructed to complete both phases anonymously and to give reasons when a positive or negative rating was used.

The Students' Perspective

Table I identified individuals the athletes ranked in respect to affecting their academic performance. The *study skills teacher/advisor* was included in the ranking. Nineteen of the twenty students identified this person as a positive influence, because of the close relationship that had developed between the students and the teacher/advisor during the semester. Many hours had been spent together in individual and group formats with one agenda being the development of a personal, caring, supportive relationship. The high

Table 1

Significant Others
(Treatment Group N = 22)

Individual	+ *	%	− *	%	N *	%	NA *	%
dy Skills/Advising Teacher	19	95	1	0	0	0	0	0
m	17	85	0	0	3	15	0	0
mmates	12	60	3	15	5	25	0	0
l	11	55	1	5	1	5	7	35
friend/Boyfriend	11	55	1	5	2	10	6	30
ition Coach	10	50	1	5	3	15	6	30
ther	9	45	0	0	7	35	4	20
tball Head Coach	9	45	1	5	3	15	7	35
ight Coach	8	40	0	0	4	20	8	40
ors	8	40	2	10	3	15	7	35
ter	7	35	0	0	6	30	7	35
letic Academic Counselor	7	35	2	10	9	45	2	10
glish Teacher	5	25	2	10	6	30	7	35
ndship Group	5	25	2	10	5	25	8	40
sketball Asst. Coach	3	15	0	0	3	15	14	70

+ = positive influence
− = negative influence
N = neutral
NA = not applicable

Table 2

Significant Events
(Treatment Group N = 22)

Event	+ *	%	− *	%	N *	%	NA *	%
dy Skills/Advising Class	19	95	1	5	0	0	0	0
sity Sport	15	75	4	20	1	5	0	0
ortal Program	10	50	0	0	3	15	7	35
dy Table	10	50	4	20	3	15	3	15
anizations	5	25	1	5	6	30	8	40

+ = positive influence
− = negative influence
N = neutral
NA = not applicable

ranking in many ways validates the effort that had been extended to this group. For example, the reasons given for the positive rating included, "He cares about me as a person," "Helped me understand how the system worked," and "During the times when I felt like giving in to the work pressure he helped me get back my self-motivation." These statements represent outcomes of the developmental advising relationship and give support for its importance in higher education—regardless of the student population the advisor is serving.

The frequency in which the students cited *mom, dad, brothers,* and *sisters* as a positive academic influence was a surprise. Reasons given by the group for these positive ratings included, "I wanted to do well so I could help mom out," "My parents brag about me and I do not want to let them down," "I want them to be proud of me," and "They want me to do well so I can earn a degree." These results, even though the sample was small, were well worth the advisor's consideration. In some way the advisor should attempt to draw on this strong family influence. Academic departments should encourage or insist that athletic departments involve and orient parents in the academic programs in which their children are enrolled. Maybe orientation of parents by coaches should begin during the recruitment and signing process, informing them of the following:

— Parents should know the academic skills level of their children and the importance of their involvement in developmental advising and other academic support programs.

— Parents should be encouraged to stress the importance of these programs with their children/athletes.

— Parents' follow-up concerning such issues as class attendance, completion of assignments, and utilization of academic support programs could make a significant difference in the academic performance of these students.

Teammates were cited as a positive influence by a majority of the group. Reasons given for positive ratings included, "Teammates encourage me," "We're all in this together," "We want to do well academically so we can play ball together," "Had classes together and we studied with one another," "They told me to keep my head up when I was down," and "They encouraged me to get my grades." The negative responses on this item were explained by reasons such as, "They took me away from my studies," and "They wanted me to party too much." I felt that teammates could be a positive influence for one another and this was one reason why I wanted only a group of athletes in the intervention. I used some specific interventions during the semester to enhance teammate influence. They were:

(1) During the one-to-one interviews I challenged each to be academic role models for their teammates;

(2) In a class session, I asked the group to discuss how they might assist one another throughout the semester; and

(3) I challenged them to be responsible for one another's academic success by making sure teammates attended class, completed work assignments, and studied on a regular basis. These are techniques an advisor might use with any group of students who are constantly in contact with one another. These ideas follow the strategies described by Heath as he points out the strong maturational effect of the peer group. Heath believes we can affect student maturity in positive ways by expecting and encouraging students to be

ɔonsible for the growth of others; consistently encouraging the active involvement of student in his or her learning experience; and by encouraging students to rehearse and ctice new behaviors.[6] These principles were easily implemented during the study ls/academic strategies intervention.

was surprised with the *boyfriend/girlfriend* category. Eleven (55%) of the respondents icated that these people were a positive academic influence. Reasons cited included, "I n't want to let her down," "I did not want her to think I was stupid," "She supports ," "I do not want to embarrass her," "She made me go to class," "He wants me to get a ree," and "She helps me talk out my problems." These athletes, like all college lents, were identifying the need and importance of interpersonal relationships. The of the advisor in this area is to be available to students when these relationships cause ss and concern. After the semester started I became aware of two situations where lents were experiencing difficulties in their relationships, and they approached me to uss their problems. In the first case the young man had fallen in love (infatuated would better word) and was beginning to think of only one thing—the young woman! The ɔnd case was a student experiencing major difficulties in his relationship, and these e interfering with his ability to complete assignments. My intervention in these inces was to be a good listener, allowing them to talk out their problem. Advice was not red, but alternatives were pointed out. I believe this to be the proper role for the ad- r to take when dealing in the interpersonal problem area.

is interesting to note the response of student athletes when reacting to the category *endship group.*" Eight of twenty students found this group to be not applicable. These lts continue to confirm my belief that many athletes (especially those with weak lemic backgrounds) feel isolated from the student body. Advisors working with such a ıp should encourage them to meet new people in classes and residence halls, seek out ly groups which consist of others outside the athletic peer group, and in other ways lenge them to identify with positive role models from among the "regular" college ulation. One could point to the study skills/advising intervention and question ther I contribute to the issue of group isolation. This issue was considered before the rvention was established and dismissed due to the unique problems of the group. lents reported in one-to-one interviews that they liked being together in this group so they could "be themselves." Questioning this, students disclosed a feeling of embarcment in many of their other classes. This feeling, caused primarily by academic skill ciencies, contributed to a lack of participation in many of their other courses. In this rvention they felt comfortable contributing in class discussions and many found it to fresh and rewarding experience. Advisors should explore this issue on their campus. high risk athletes (and other students in the high risk category) feeling intimidated and arrassed in the classroom—to the point of being passive, not attending, and ultimately ng?

ıe last people variable which I believe needs exploration is the *coaches* of the athletes' d. Out of fourteen football players in class, thirteen completed the second phase of collection and nine identified the *head coach* as a positive influence. Additionally, ten ıese students identified *position coaches* as a positive influence, and eight also iden-

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tified the *weight coach.* Six of the seven basketball players in the group completed the second phase of data collection. Three of these students identified an *assistant coach* as a positive influence. Reasons cited in this area included, "Inspired me," "Motivated me," "Lays down the law," "Could take our scholarships away," "Gave me an ultimatum," "Wanted to prove to him I could do it," and "He would like to see me make it." Advisors must realize coaches are powerful, important influences in the world of the scholarship athlete. Advisors must work closely with these coaches, insisting they stress the importance of academics in their contacts with students. Additionally, coaches must insist that their proteges are behaving like students—attending class, completing assignments, and utilizing all means of academic support available. This group will not be successful in higher education without the coaches' support. They serve as the athletes' role model and mentor. The powerful nature of this relationship must focus attention on the academic world of the athlete.

Table 2 displays the results of how the group rated the influence of structured events in their environment. In many ways the results parallel those in Table 1. The *study skills class* was cited most frequently as a positive influence, followed by sport participation (football = 10; basketball = 4; and track = 1), the tutorial program, study table at night, and organizations (fraternities and sororities). Discussion of these events will be limited to the two supported by the Athletic Department—the tutorial program and the study table. In both of these programs the Athletic Department helped finance the intervention.

The *study table* was a mandatory experience for all fifty students originally identified by the Athletic Department with the exception of varsity basketball players (male). The experience lasted two hours each evening of the week. Most who cited it as a positive experience said it helped them to discipline themselves to study, allowing them the opportunity to accomplish more academic work. The negative remarks about the experience were that it was disorganized, sometimes noisy, and at times disruptive. Some felt resentful for being told they had to go. Advisors should encourage a study table concept. Ideally, this experience would be financed by the Athletic Department and staffed by individuals representing Academic and Student Affairs. One major key to the outcome of this experience is organization and planning. An environment should be created which supports and encourages rigorous academic work augmented by support personnel. In order to be successful, the study table must be supported by coaches.

Students responding to the questionnaire and utilizing the services of the *tutorial program* (N = 13) said it was a favorable experience. Tutorial programs can be a strong institutional resource for advisors to utilize. Early linkage between the athlete and the service is necessary if the intervention is to be successful.

Summary

When working with the high academic risk scholarship athletes advisors are encouraged to:

1. Create interventions which group these individuals together for the purpose of developing appropriate academic behaviors. Design the intervention so that it is highly structured and organized. Encourage athletes to be academic role models for

one another and insist that they take some responsibility for the success of their teammates in the area of academics.

2. Involve coaches in the academic world of the athlete. Perhaps the faculty member/advisor who views his/her advising role from the perspective of student development would be the ideal person to approach coaches stressing the multiple roles they must assume with their athletic proteges.
3. Design interventions which would be offered throughout the athlete's freshman year, because students should immediately become involved in eligibility curriculums. The advisor who attempts to intervene after the athlete reaches late sophomore and junior standing may find little left to salvage.
4. When advising athletes for classes, remember they will be under tremendous pressure and physical burden during the playing season of their sport (of the six in this intervention whose grade point average declined from fall to spring semester, five were competing in basketball and track). At this time class schedules should be reduced in terms of course difficulty and time commitments. However, each semester's schedule should show some progression toward the degree.
5. Do not let the high risk athlete "con" you. Many are excellent at saying what you want to hear. Following through with this population by the advisor is critical—make sure they are taking advantage of resources available to them.
6. Find ways to draw on the support of parents and family members.
7. Be a source of emotional support to this population. They are abused in many ways and need both your caring and support—the relationship will have meaning for both of you.'

This article has described an intervention used by one academic advisor when implementing the principles of developmental advising and the results of a survey indicating positive academic supports in the athletes' milieu. Advisors are encouraged to consider these results as they work with similar populations on their campuses.

FEATURED ARTICLE

A Trilogy of Academic Concerns for the Academic Advisor of Student-Athletes: General Advising; Litigation; and NCAA Proposal Number 48

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GENERAL ADVISING

It is important for the academic advisor at an institution of higher learning to realize that there are students who require special advising because of unique conditions. They are:

- Students who come to the institution with limited exposure to classes in advanced mathematics, advanced laboratory sciences, and computer science. (These students must be carefully screened so that they are placed in the appropriate classes.)
- Students who come to the institution with learning disabilities and/or physical handicaps. (These students must be treated with skill and understanding.)
- Students coming from schools where they did not have an opportunity to make academic choices and have made very few decisions regarding their academic future. (These students must work with their academic advisor in order to make decisions concerning their academic future.)

Student-athletes also present a unique advising situation. Student-athletes, like students who have made few academic decisions, may have had little control over their educational development. In high school, student-athletes often take subjects recommended to them as "easy" so that they have more time to contribute to high school athletics. Like the students who have learning disabilities, student-athletes must be treated by the academic advisor with skill and understanding. The academic advisor must have special knowledge, understanding and empathy. The special knowledge of the advisor relates to being familiar with relevant regulations formulated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and other athletic associations and conferences. Understanding and empathy of the advisor apply to the academic advisor's familiarity with the conditions and situations that apply to student-athletes. However, the academic advisor must assist student-athletes as students first and athletes second.