

# Advising of Black Student-Athletes: Twelve Recommendations

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During the controversy about raising academic standards for intercollegiate athletics, the advising of black student-athletes was an issue that had not been specifically addressed. Since the passage of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Proposition 48, it has been assumed that student-athletes admitted to colleges and universities in Fall 1986 will be better prepared academically than their predecessors, and having met the minimum eligibility requirements, they should be able to make satisfactory progress toward their degrees and graduate within five years. This may not be true for black athletes. Although they have the potential, they might not succeed without the support of a quality academic advising program. For example, a "blue-chip" high school football player who manages to graduate from an inner city high school, reading at a tenth grade level, may meet the minimum criteria and qualify for an athletic scholarship and competition at a prestigious university. On the surface, it may appear that the student will perform well athletically as well as academically and graduate in four or five years—unless he chooses a professional football career and leaves school early. This example is a hypothetical view of the athlete as the raw material coming in, and not at the value added after the athlete enters the institution.

Academic advisors usually rely on external criteria when advising student-athletes, such as secondary school records; standardized test scores; placement tests; financial aid availability; and eligibility and institutional degree requirements. Instead of advisors relying on records and regulations, they should work more closely with the athletes as individuals after they enter the athletic program. Although these criteria are predictors of success, they leave out important components of academic advising and personal needs, and this exclusion could have a devastating effect on black athletes.

Black student-athletes at the university reflect the status of minorities in society at large, and present a problem in the academic arena. Although many federally funded programs, designed to raise the educational, social and economic status of minorities, have been implemented during the past 20 years, blacks still remain relatively low on the American economic scale; they are far from achieving the American dream of economic affluence.

In 1984, blacks in every income bracket sustained financial losses because of inflation while their white counterparts experienced income gains, according to findings of the Urban Institute. Research by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission shows that black students suffer serious harm when they attend predominantly black schools. Yet, most black children in urban areas attend schools that are predominantly black, while most white children attend schools that are predominantly white in suburban and rural areas. Because of their social, educational and economic status, black student-athletes bring problems to their institutions which need addressing. They may:

- lack social skills;
- have low self-esteem;
- lack maturity;
- have financial needs, and
- have to learn to deal with overt racism.

Academic advisors should become more aware of these needs and make efforts to address them with black student-athletes on an individual basis. Since American campus culture is oriented toward whites, black student-athletes should have access to black advisors who might be more sensitive to their needs and act as mediators between the minority and majority cultures.

Despite what appears to be impediments in the backgrounds of black athletes, they can attain knowledge and perform at the same level as other students when their coaches, advisors, and instructors have the same expectations for them. Many black athletes have the intellectual potential and talents which desperately need to be challenged. Advisors must not contribute to the pattern of white students graduating at a higher rate than black student-athletes by advising blacks to enroll in meaningless courses which differ in kind and content from those offered white athletes. This kind of steering indicates that academic expectations for blacks are lower than those for whites. Black student-athletes need to be held as academically accountable as their white counterparts. If they receive inferior academic advising, it should be no surprise that their graduation rates are lower.

To improve the retention and graduation rate of black student-athletes, it is strongly recommended that academic advisors consider the following recommendations that academic advisors should:

1. Interpret high school grade point averages and standardized test scores as measures of performance, but not as the academic potential of black student-athletes.
2. Regard ACT/SAT data and college placement tests as indicators of student areas of weaknesses that can be improved.
3. Recognize the maturity level of black athletes on an individual basis and avoid stereotyping; and each athlete should be given respect and provided an opportunity for personal growth.
4. Have a positive attitude toward black students and make honest efforts to build on their areas of academic strength. They also need to remain optimistic and maintain realistic expectations for those students.

5. Create and discuss goals and objectives for students on an individual basis, not collectively.
6. Have the ability to develop a personal relationship with black student-athletes and not react defensively to cultural differences. On the other hand, advisors must not foster parental relationships which could be described as patronizing. What is needed is an advisor-student relationship based on mutual respect and understanding, without imposing their personal values, and disregarding the students' cultural backgrounds.
7. Develop good listening skills to allow the real needs of the advisees to surface in the advising sessions.
8. Not allow jargon, colloquialisms, slang, or substandard English to deter them from making a genuine effort to communicate effectively with black student-athletes.
9. Be aware of the resources available to black students. Referrals ought to be done in a way that students are not singled out. For instance, if an athlete needs remedial reading help, the focus should be on the problem rather than on the "dumbness" of the "jock."
10. Identify instructors who are sympathetic to the cultural background and needs of black students, not to give the athletes easy courses or allow them an advantage, but rather to find instructors willing to refer them to tutorial services and hold them responsible for meeting class requirements.
11. Be able to assist in the establishment of a tutorial and study hall program, staffed by competent tutors with a representative number of black tutors. Emphasis should be placed on the tutors *assisting* the athletes, not doing their work for them, and operating the program with integrity. Finally,
12. Assist black student-athletes in developing clear and realistic priorities so they can see where they are now, and where they should be in five or ten years. Career objectives should be clarified and implemented as needed.

Many of the problems experienced by black student-athletes result from the expectations of advisors and others. If they are viewed as "dumb jocks" who cannot handle a full load of academic courses, then they will behave accordingly. The twelve recommendations, if adopted, would be an excellent foundation for helping black student-athletes achieve their full academic potential. Instead of being a part of the problem and blaming the student for not meeting academic demands, the academic advisor can become a part of the solution by providing a supportive atmosphere for black student-athletes, so they may gain the full benefit of the "student" part of their hyphenated "student-athlete" status. There is no doubt that the athletic potential can be realized at the optimal level in collegiate sports. What is needed, however, is intensive "coaching" on the academic side.