

READERS RESPOND . . .

STUDENT-ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT: BALANCE IS THE KEY

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Editor's Note: This article inaugurates a new feature of the Academic Athletic Journal. To encourage lively discourse on articles included in this journal, readers are invited to submit their reactions in essays of approximately 1000 words. Responses may be edited for considerations of format and space. Please see the "Submission Guidelines" elsewhere in this issue.

John Gerdy, in "Student-Athlete Development: Institutional Responsibility," has provided academic advisors for athletics with an excellent article on the holistic development of student-athletes in higher education. In examining this issue, Gerdy focuses on recruitment, orientation, self-governance, academic support, the student-athletes' time commitment to their respective sports, and the utilization of data collected from senior exit interviews. Serious questions are raised regarding who is responsible for fostering holistic development in these areas and what is the best way to deliver the needed services. Gerdy asserts that institutions sponsoring major NCAA Division I athletic programs have failed to mainstream student-athletes primarily because of the conflict between academic and athletic interests. This is an issue that has been debated hotly in higher education in recent years.

One question which Gerdy has not addressed directly is, "Why did athletic departments assume responsibility for the total welfare of student-athletes?" On many campuses, athletic departments were responsible for bringing in atypical students such as minorities and first-generation students long before their institutions became involved in that kind of recruiting. It is also true at many institutions that athletic departments have more resources to devote to academic support programs than other units. However, control and support of academic support programs should be determined by the local

institution, regardless of the source of funding or staffing. Cooperation between student affairs and athletic departments can provide a balanced perspective for student-athletes.

I agree that student-athletes are a unique subgroup on campus much like other subgroups, e.g., international students or greeks. But how many of these groups are totally integrated into the campus community? We should be careful not to expect more from student-athletes than we expect from other students. Many subgroups on university campuses (like the greeks) manage to successfully participate in university-administered activities as well as their own. The athletic perspective is very important to student-athletes and therefore should not be ignored. In our attempts to mainstream student-athletes, we must be careful not to make unrealistic or unfair demands upon this group.

The role of student affairs in the holistic development of student-athletes is of critical importance. Gerdy states on several occasions that participating in a university-administered program is more beneficial than participating in one administered by the athletic department. While I agree that participation in a university program is both beneficial and important, I do not think that a student-athlete should be forced to choose between the two. Since both the university and athletic department perspectives are key to the holistic development of student-athletes, a balanced approach appears to be a more effective option.

Another critical issue raised by Gerdy was the education of athletic department staff members regarding the role of student affairs. While his idea of a mandatory program to orient the coaches to the university is an excellent one, I do not think it is sufficient. Athletic staff should go a step further. Serious consideration should be given to requiring those athletic personnel hired to perform student affairs functions for student-athletes to be trained as student affairs professionals. They should also interact with the campus student affairs staff on a regular basis, and the rest of the athletic department staff must be integrated into the campus community as well. It is important that they lead by example. Another important issue concerns the assurance that student-athlete rights are upheld. If student-athlete affairs staff members take a more active role in monitoring that process, who is responsible for dealing with a coach who knowingly violates institutional rules and regulations? Here again, an educated and cooperative approach between student affairs and athletic personnel seems worthwhile.

I also agree with Gerdy that student-athlete exit interviews can yield important information. The interviews should involve more than just athletic department personnel; the results should be widely distributed beyond the athletic department and should be utilized in planning programs for student-athletes. Perhaps the NCAA could require each institution to provide a summary of the results each year.

In my view it is a myth that the social and academic interests of student-athletes are often in direct conflict with the interests of athletic

departments. However, cooperative planning of activities on the part of athletic, academic, and student affairs officials is important in order to achieve the proper balance for student-athletes.

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