

PRO-ACTIVE ACADEMIC INTERVENTION STRATEGIES  
FOR STUDENT ATHLETES AT SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

By

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Quality education consists not in offering the same thing to all students in a token gesture but in maximizing the match between the talents of the individual and the teaching resources of the institution. Historically, the concept of academic intervention for student athletes is reactive in process. In other words, the student athlete must be in academic jeopardy before any attempt is made to provide a possible solution to his problem. In most cases, extra "tutoring" in the course or courses is the method employed to try salvaging failure.

Too often student athletes become reflections of Watson's Law of Academics "no one is entirely useless, you can always serve as the horrible example". But they need not -- that is the point! With direction through decision, the Southern Methodist University Athletic Department is establishing a successful model to intervene the national trend of academically underprepared students. Instead of being reactive, Southern Methodist University, through the leadership of Dr. Gerry Gurney, is making a quantum leap in implementing a pro-active, reality based academic intervention system for student athletes.

From his position as Assistant Athletic Director for Academic Affairs, Dr. Gurney consulted with Martha Tips, Director of ORACLE, a nationally recognized program for learning efficiency taught in SMU's Reading Center. Together, they formulated a plan of action for assessing student athletes' learning skills, identifying and selecting participants, designing the overall structure to the course of study, and hiring a special instructor trained in behavior modification and computer assisted instruction as it relates to reading/learning skills.

A total of seventeen freshmen student athletes were selected through assessment with the Nelson-Denny Reading Test and a study skills inventory. Results of the pretesting indicated the possibility that academic performance in university courses could be unsatisfactory. Thus, they were enrolled in a special Student Athlete Intensive Reading program (SAIR) that was designed realistically and pro-actively for these student athletes. The

program evolved around a complete laboratory of computer assisted instruction in SMU's Reading Center. Successful learning strategies were taught in three specific skill areas: (1) Self Direction; resource management - time, energy, attention, positive projection - helping shape your own future, imaging - anticipating, planning (2) Effective Reading; paragraphs - main ideas, details, verbal reasoning - inferences, conclusions, critical reading, flexible reading rates - textbooks, technical data, improving vocabulary - reading for pleasure and (3) Effective Study; memory education - outlining-notetaking - questioning logic - learning from lectures - testwiseness. Every student athlete knows what you don't use, you lose. Therefore students were urged strongly to apply each learning skill mastered in the student athlete intensive reading program directly into their university courses. The student athletes learned how to play the academic game and win.

The effectiveness of the program can be readily measured by the percentile increases in the standardized test used as the pre-post instrument. On the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, the student athletes showed an average growth of 27 percentile points in vocabulary, 27 percentile points in comprehension, 28 percentile points in total reading, and 56 percentile points in reading rate. This represents highly significant growth in all areas. Although total success was not achieved in every university course, GPA's for the student athletes were higher than anticipated. A second semester of the SAIR program is planned in order to maintain reading/learning efficiency.

Reaching student athletes before a failure mode is established and offering realistic and humanistic opportunities for higher education is a major concern at the Southern Methodist University Athletic Department. The SAIR delivery system for reading/study/learning skills offers viable alternatives to all learners. Flexibility is the key word in describing the teaching; multiple-option is the key word for the learner; success is the key word for the program; and total commitment is the philosophy at Southern Methodist University.