

# The Role of a Code of Ethics in Athletic Academic Counseling

Ann M. Mayo  
Athletic Academic Consultant  
Men's Basketball Program  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

## Abstract

The following article offers an argument for the development of a code of ethics for the profession of athletic academic counseling. The effects of recent scandals in athletics and the need for the establishment of athletic academic advising as a profession, call for an examination of the development of a code of ethics. The role of a code of ethics, as well as the possible dysfunctions of such a code are examined.

Reports of scandals and exploitation in intercollegiate athletics in recent years have opened a Pandora's box of inquiry into the problems of college athletics. Questions of how and why decisions are made in intercollegiate athletics are addressed daily in some part of the media; and athletic academic advising is certainly not immune from such attention. Everyone, it seems, is an expert on the ethics of advising student-athletes. For these reasons, we as professionals, must immediately address the problems that we encounter in our daily decision making through a code of professional ethics.

A code of professional ethics requires that we operate basically from a sense of "fairness" and that we practice without distortion to fit the needs of any one person's point of view, be it the coach, the student-athlete, or ourselves. There is a basic truth reflected here: "Ethical restraints are especially necessary where one's self-interest, passions, commitments, and prejudices are involved. While it is sometimes difficult to fool others, it is simple to fool oneself" (Seigal, p.171). Without some general ethical principles, we are unable to make reasonable decisions in those situations in which we are in doubt. The purpose of a code of ethical behavior is to avoid confusion and minimize dispute by specifying standards of accountability.

While public outcry has called our attention to the problems and the need for more awareness of our behaviors, there are also very serious dangers in addressing ethics for athletic academic advisors. These dangers can be classified under the same five headings Dr. Franz Ingelfinger, the editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, used in describing the dangers inherent in approaching medical ethics: "First is the righteousness with which people in

the current climate of ethical opinion point the finger at the horrors of the past. This action is no more justified than it would be to accuse a current Southern landowner of being responsible for previous Southern landowners thinking it ethical to have slaves. Ethical principles change and there is a great deal of righteousness in the horror stories that are getting so much attention about" athletics (Davis, p.167). "Second, this reaction is amplified by the desire of the media for sensationalism. Third, a more basic problem is how to balance concern over individual rights with concern over society's needs." The fourth danger that Dr. Ingelfinger mentions is bureaucratization. The fifth is trivialization. This has begun to happen in athletics with enormously detailed rules and a dilution of real issues with many trivial issues. "If we continue in this direction highly motivated people may be driven away from the field, since more energy, time, and money will go into filling out forms than into actions that are of benefit to" student-athletes. We have all begun to feel this frustration.

As academic advisors for athletes, we are in a unique position. We serve as advisors, counselors, teachers, and researchers. And, thus, I would suggest, there are three areas in which we as academic advisors for athletes need to be concerned with ethical behavior. The first is the area of advising and counseling. We need to be concerned with some of the ethical concerns of counseling: confidentiality, consultation, record keeping, referral. We need to remain dispassionate and objective, and free from practices and ideas which are value laden. The second area of concern is that of teaching. We must be concerned with questions of academic freedom, objectivity versus indoctrination, knowledge versus opinion. The third area of concern is research. We must be concerned for our student-athletes as subjects of research, and yet realize the value of such study. We must weigh the benefits versus the risks. We must be concerned about the violation of privacy of our student-athletes. And, we must deal with issues that are very specific to the world of athletes.

Some specific examples of alleged ethical misconduct in academic advising might include:

1. Blatant disregard for the established rules of the NCAA, the conference, or the institution.
2. Sexual relations between counselor and student-athlete (hetero- or homosexual).
3. "Bartering" for grades with favors such as season tickets, etc.
4. Neglect of responsibility—excessive absence, inadequate preparation, careless advising.
5. Racial and/or sexual prejudice.
6. Advising which disregards a student's interests and ultimate goals for a better chance of eligibility.

Note that this list is only partial, random, ill-assorted, and does not assess the seriousness of each example. It merely gives us an idea of the myriad types of

misconduct about which we need to be concerned as academic advisors for athletes, and as professionals.

"One of the beliefs of every professional organization is that its members must perform their professional duties according to an established code of professional ethics. Without an established code, a group of people with similar interests cannot actually be considered a professional organization." (Allen, p.293.) This view was also held by Donald Super, who established the first Ethical Practices Committee of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) in 1953. The role of a code of professional ethics is to serve as a basis for articulating the professional responsibilities of a member of a profession.

Medicine has again served as the "focus of contemporary debate regarding what the content of an ethical code should be, who should decide that content, and what role the code should have in the profession and in society" (Mabe and Rollin, p.294). There are certain basic items necessary to a code of ethics. These include: "(a) the specific duties or rights that differ from ordinary ethical requirements, (b) the specific duties or rights that may simply be the application of general ethical principles in a particular professional area, (c) a reiteration of certain ordinary ethical requirements that need emphasis for some reason, (d) aims or general goals that the profession should aspire to realize, (e) requirements that relate to coordinating or protecting the interest of members of the profession, and (f) a statement of responsibility of members of the profession for reporting code violations or other violations" (Mabe and Rollin, p.294). Of the above items, it would seem necessary to stress (a), (c), and (f) in establishing a code of ethics for the profession of academic advising for athletes. The requirements of (a) would stress those areas which are different in our profession; (c) would stress those areas which create the most difficulty and need emphasis; and (f) would allow for a system of reporting violations and hopefully avoid some of the scandals of the past.

While the purpose of codes is to avoid confusion and minimize dispute by specifying standards of accountability, problems may occur in the process of attempting to eliminate all vagueness. First, disputes will tend to reappear over the precise meaning of certain standards. Second, "badly drafted or merely overdrafted codes do not necessarily reduce disputes." And, third, "codes may waste (in the quest for completeness) innumerable hours of faculty, student, and administrative time trying to anticipate an almost infinite number of 'what if' situations" (VanAlstyne, p.83). The problem in the creation of codes is sometimes knowing where to stop.

There are other problems and limitations in the use of a code of ethics; and it would be wise to consider these as they have been demonstrated in other professions, before further pursuing a code for athletic academic advising. Mabe and Rollin point out six limitations in their examination of a code of ethics for counselors. These include: "(1) There are some issues that cannot

be handled in the context of a code. (2) There are some difficulties with enforcing the code, or at least the public may believe that enforcement committees are not tough enough on their peers. (3) There is often no way to systematically bring the interests of the client, patient, or research participant into the code construction process. (4) There are parallel forums in which the issues in the code may be addressed with the results sometimes at odds with the findings of the code (e.g., in the courts). (5) There are possible conflicts associated with codes: between two codes, between the practitioner's values and code requirements, between the code and ordinary morality, between the code and institutional practice, and between requirements within a single code. (6) There is a limited range of topics covered in the code, and because a code approach is usually reactive to issues already developed elsewhere, the requirements of consensus prevents the code from addressing new issues and problems at the 'cutting edge' " (Mabe and Rollin, p.295). An awareness of these limitations is a first step in the development of an adequate representation of what we do as a profession.

However, while a professional code is necessary to the development of any group as a profession, it is not sufficient. A code of ethics establishes "a framework for professional behavior and responsibility, and also serves as a vehicle for professional identity and a mark of the maturity of the profession" (Mabe and Rollin, p.294). As academic advisors for athletes, we must look to various sources for guidance. We must look within ourselves and within the codes of other professional counseling organizations. We must realize that a code is only a part of the basis for explicating the responsibilities of the members of our profession.

#### REFERENCES

- Allen, Virginia B. "A Historical Perspective of the AACD Ethics Committee," in *Journal of Counseling and Development*, V.64, No. 5, January 1986.
- Davis, Bernard. "The Scientific Versus the Adversary Approach in Bio-Medical Research," in *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: Prometheus Books, 1977).
- Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants*. American Psychological Association, Inc. (Washington, D.C.: APA, 1973).
- Hook, Sidney. "Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibilities," in *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: Prometheus Books, 1977).
- Mabe, Alan R. and Stephen A. Rollin. "The Role of a Code of Ethical Standards in Counseling," in *Journal of Counseling and Development*, V.64, No. 5, January 1986.
- Seigal, Seymour. "An Ethical Approach to Bio-Medical Research," in *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: Prometheus Books, 1977).
- VanAlstyne, William. "Faculty Codes and Professional Responsibility," in *The Ethics of Teaching and Scientific Research*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: Prometheus Books, 1977).