

## Warming Up

### Building Relationships: Support Services Personnel and Collegiate Coaches

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One of the most challenging situations facing those who work in student-athlete support services is: How do I build a successful working relationship with the coach? As providers of support services to student-athletes, we must recognize the fact that the real “power” over student-athletes is held by coaches, who extend scholarship offers and control playing time. Without the support of the coach, we often lose some of our ability to guide, instruct, and ultimately help student-athletes. Unfortunately, counselors/advisors often speak of the “nightmare” their coaches are, and how impossible it is to work with them in support of student-athletes.

It might benefit support services providers to take a “time-out” from blaming coaches for difficult working conditions—after all, we can’t control the coach’s behavior. We may be able to influence her or him, but we will never be in a position to dictate the actions, choices, and decisions that person makes. The principles of control theory and reality therapy suggest that the area we do have control over is our own behavior and that needs to be our focus (see Bartolini, 1994; Glasser, 1989).

The point of this short article is to provide some direction as to what *we*—as support services personnel—can do to build and improve our relationships with the coaches at our collegiate institutions. Communicating, attending practices and competitions, providing coach-specific services, and selling your program are four of the ways relationships with coaches can be enhanced.

#### Communicate

We often say we need to do a better job of communicating with others, but rarely do we execute as well as we would like. We must communicate with coaches not only when it’s absolutely necessary, but also when it’s simply a courtesy. Unexpected and nonessential but courteous communication can be an important instrument of goodwill. When coaches do a nice job with something, whether it’s helping to get a certain student-athlete to study table or winning a big game, let them know that you appreciate their efforts. Always offer more positive rein-

forcement than negative—coaches shouldn’t always cringe when they see us walking down the hall or hear our voices on the phone.

Involve coaches in the process of helping their student-athletes get a quality education—even if it appears they don’t want to get involved! Send them weekly (or bi-weekly, monthly) support services updates for their teams. You could include the results of academic progress reports that were returned by instructors, make notes of the interactions (when appropriate) you had with particular student-athletes, chart study table attendance and tutor utilization, and/or simply write down your impressions of the progress individual student-athletes are making in terms of their education. Many additional bits of information could be included in the update, but the essential point remains the same: Communicate with your coaches on a personal as well as professional level; keep your coaches consistently informed using a combination of in-person, written, and verbal contacts; involve them in the process of developing their *student-athletes*.

#### Attend Practices and Competitions

Not only is it important for support services personnel to attend practices and competitions for the benefit of the student-athletes, but also it makes a positive impression on the coaches. Even though our focus is on academics and career and personal development, we must acknowledge and respect that part of student-athletes and coaches that loves sports. Sport is a large part of their total being, and to be more effective in our jobs, we need to recognize and support that. If we don’t already, we must begin to view attending practices and games as an integral part of our work. The excuse that we are too busy to attend is not acceptable. Going to the women’s field hockey game is probably just as important as the tasks we are performing in our offices at that same time.

#### Provide Specific Services to Coaches

Just as we provide services to student-athletes, we also need to provide them to coaches. Offer coaches workshops on topics relevant to them. For example, have a public relations professional come in to speak about dealing with the media or ask a sports psychologist to teach a seminar on developing leadership or mental skills in athletics. If we can’t offer these workshops ourselves, many times it’s not expensive or time-consuming to find someone who can. In fact, the appropriate person may be on your campus already, working as an instructor or studying as a graduate student. In addition to workshops, it’s helpful to offer materials such as research articles, newsletters, videos, and newspaper clippings to coaches that are applicable to their own professional knowledge and development. For example, you could review an article and provide coaches a summary of the salient points, as well as suggestions for turning theory into practice with their own team. If you complete one of these reviews each month, and add some clever formatting, you have a useful newsletter to present to your coaches.

## Sell Your Program

Always keep in mind that foremost on the coach's agenda is one central goal: winning games. Just as counselors and advisors are evaluated by the quality (and quantity) of educational and personal support they offer student-athletes, coaches are evaluated to a great extent on their won-lost records. Use every available opportunity to let coaches know how the services you provide can help them fulfill their professional goals. For example, coaches are beginning to realize how valuable you and your program can be during recruiting—especially the favorable impressions parents/guardians may form of the school as a result of your meeting with them. Also, no matter how productive a certain player is in their sport, they are not helping the coach win games if they are ineligible to compete. Obviously, eligibility is related to academic performance and progress towards a degree—two areas in which our services can be extremely meaningful and helpful.

Other examples of effectively selling your program would be to develop a brochure describing your services or offer story ideas to sports information and local media regarding special student-athletes. You could ask student-athletes who work with you on a regular basis to provide testimonials on how you've helped them and present those to the coaches. Remember, three things are particularly important in making a sale: price, service, and value. Demonstrate the quality of your program to coaches along those dimensions.

Stress to coaches the fact that working together will prove most effective in order for each of the vested parties to meet its goals. Maybe then, counselors, coaches, parents, and student-athletes can agree that enhancing educational and personal development as well as winning games are not mutually exclusive objectives in the context of university life.

## Conclusion

Without question, utilizing these suggestions whenever possible does not ensure perfect relationships with coaches; sometimes it may be appropriate and necessary to address your concerns in writing to the coach as well as members of the athletic administration (including the athletic director, senior women's administrator, etc.). However, if we strive to communicate more effectively, attend practices and games, provide services designed specifically for coaches, and sell our programs, we dramatically improve our chances of developing strong relationships with the coaches as well as becoming more successful professionals in an extremely worthwhile profession. On behalf of the student-athletes, let's take control over our own behavior and work hard at nurturing and developing our relationships with our partners in coaching.

## References

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## Author Note

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