

REVIEW OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

February 25, 2008

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Purpose of the Review

The review committee was charged by the Provost to conduct an internal audit of academic support services for student-athletes on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus. The committee focused on five areas in its review:

- 1) Academic support services, with particular focus on those provided through the McNamara Academic Center for Student-Athletes, which is located conveniently for the student-athletes in the Bierman Field Athletic Building, but reports to the Office of the Provost;
- 2) The extent to which student-athletes are encouraged and assisted in reaching attainable academic goals of their own choosing;
- 3) When individual student-athletes have special academic needs, the extent to which their needs are addressed;
- 4) Whether there is a commitment to the fair treatment of student-athletes in their academic role as students;
- 5) Academic support elsewhere in the University, especially collegiate units and central services, and coordination among all the contributing units.

Sources of Information

Recent studies and reports: There have been a number of fairly recent studies and reports addressing the academic side of athletics, written by other groups within the University of Minnesota. The committee reviewed these as background for its current work. The documents included the Academic Support and Performance for Student-Athletes Task Force Report (Kane and Leo, co-chairs; January, 2007); Intercollegiate Athletics Audit for NCAA Compliance (June, 2007) and Management Response (June, 2007); Report of the Faculty Academic Oversight Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics Ad Hoc Committee on the Process to Enhance the Academic Performance of Men's Basketball (October, 2006); Academic Integrity Audit, Men's Hockey (Athletic Compliance Office, June, 2005); NCAA Academic Performance Program report (2006); Senate Committee on Educational Policy, minutes of report from Faculty Academic Oversight Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics (October 31, 2007).

Interviews: The review committee gathered information from a wide variety of sources through interviews with various groups. A structured set of questions was developed for each group, tying back to the five areas of inquiry outlined above (i.e. academic support services, the availability of academic program choices, addressing of academic needs, fair treatment, and relationships with colleges and central services).

Interviews were conducted with the following: (1) Academic Counselors and Life Skills program staff in the McNamara Academic Center (MAC), (2) Learning Specialists in MAC, (3) Student-Athletes, (4) Coaches, (5) Collegiate Academic Advisers, (6) Athletics and Compliance Administrators, (7) Office of the Registrar staff, (8) chairs of the Faculty Academic Oversight Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics (FAOCIA) and the Advisory Committee on Athletics (ACA).

Selected Peer Websites: Information about academic support services for student-athletes was gathered from websites of the University of Wisconsin, Michigan State University, and Penn State University.

Summary of Findings

Academic Support Services: The MAC is structured into three groups of support staff under the Director, Mark Nelson. Roughly, Academic Counselors are involved with advising students on the majors and schedules, and track their academic progress and achievements throughout the year. Learning Specialists are involved with the day-to-day tutoring of students and the monitoring of student progress in their individual courses. There is also a CHAMPS/Lifeskills program focused on student-athlete welfare. All groups work with all student-athletes, though special attention is paid to academically fragile student-athletes. There are extensive academic support services available to student-athletes, as well as physical facilities that are convenient, valuable to students, and heavily used.

The committee asked questions concerning the adequacy of resources available to support student-athletes. Across all of the athletics groups interviewed, and among those who are most knowledgeable about MAC services (students, coaches, athletics administrators, and MAC support professionals), there was unanimity that there are a great deal of resources available for the academic support of student-athletes, and that the array of services was very helpful. The facilities related to academic support in the Bierman Field Athletic Building received very favorable comments from student-athletes and others, with specific strengths being the availability of computer labs, space for meeting with counselors, learning specialists, and tutors, and study space. There were some concerns from staff regarding whether there is sufficient private space for one-on-one meetings with students. Apparently MAC lacks a scheduling system that would enable staff or students to book space. Students and coaches understand the different roles of Academic Counselors and Learning Specialists, and which group they use the

most seems to vary (by coaches) across different sports, and by students, which may depend on their varying needs.

Availability of Academic Program Options: The committee asked questions concerning whether student-athletes are able to pursue academic programs that suit their interests and abilities. All of the groups interviewed felt that the University provides a wealth of choices. Some MAC counselors felt that there are not enough majors that student-athletes are interested in, and that other universities (e.g. Indiana, Michigan) offer more. However, counselors, academic advisers, learning specialists, and coaches noted that there are roadblocks in terms of lack of availability of courses at times that fit the tight schedules of student-athletes (including summer), rigid sequencing of courses in some majors, majors tightly packed with required courses, single exam times for some large courses, barriers to changing majors due to curriculum structures and eligibility constraints.

Addressing Individual Academic Needs: In interviews with Academic Counselors, some felt there is not enough support for academically fragile students, especially with regard to availability of graduate assistants for one-on-one tutoring (instead of relying on Learning Specialists and undergraduate tutors). The Counselors indicated that in their experience, the use of individualized graduate tutors for academically fragile student-athletes is common at other Universities. On the other hand, Learning Specialists report spending approximately 75% of their time in weekly meetings with the at-risk students who are assigned to each of them (approximately 15 students per Learning Specialist). Collegiate academic advisers feel that the first year is most critical, and therefore resources should be focused, as well as on the academically fragile students. They also feel that it is desirable for student-athletes to have more contact with their colleges earlier. This includes more career counseling up front, tutoring help in the colleges, and interaction with other students who can be good role models. The Summer Bridge to Academic Excellence program, offered for the first time in summer 2007, was mentioned favorably as a promising new resource by collegiate academic advisers, MAC academic counselors, and students.

Fairness of Treatment: The review committee asked all groups whether they perceived that student-athletes are treated fairly throughout the University in their academic roles as students, and all responded affirmatively, with a few caveats. Some students indicated that they are cautious about some instructors, for example, choosing not to wear their letter jackets. Some perceive that some instructors carry an assumption that student-athletes will not be good students. Group work can be a problem, especially scheduling group meetings to accommodate athletes' practice schedules.

Collegiate and University Services and Coordination: One of the issues that arose in interviews with several groups concerns problems associated with using the APAS system as a certification tool. Our understanding is that APAS takes a conservative approach towards marking course credit to graduation in order to give students flexibility in their choices. APAS was uniformly praised as an advising tool and as a graduation

check; however, its conservative approach may not be optimal for continual NCAA certification of progress towards graduation.

Emphasis on meeting eligibility requirements attracts the attention of MAC staff, whereas some college-level academic advisers feel this tends to limit students in their exploration of academic areas of potential interest. This is further complicated by the use of APAS as an eligibility tool rather than just as an advising tool.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the concluding section of this report, and based upon the findings summarized above, the review committee will describe the strengths of the academic support services at the University of Minnesota--Twin Cities, the weaknesses we observe, and our recommendations.

Strengths:

- 1) MAC reports to the Office of the Provost, rather than to athletics administration. However, organizational arrangements within athletics support effective integration of MAC with athletics administration, which in turn is a strength for student-athletes. Specifically, the MAC director reports to the Office of the Provost, and also sits on the management team for athletics. Other members of the management team serve in liaison roles with various sports. The result seems to be effective communication, collaboration, and control across organizational lines, where the interests of student-athletes are at the center of this matrix-like network of relationships.
- 2) Resources available to support student-athletes in their academic pursuits are extensive, seem to be effectively deployed, and are widely used by the student-athletes. Specifically, there are currently 7 academic counselors and 4 learning specialists working directly with students. In addition, there is administrative leadership, and support staff, including tutors, study monitors, and technology professionals for the computer labs.
- 3) The committee was favorably impressed by the qualifications, engagement, and commitment of the MAC staff that supports student-athletes. MAC staff maintain close contact with student-athletes, coordinate with coaches, and overall exhibit a very high level of professionalism. Several of the groups interviewed noted that the stability in the staffing, and reduction of turnover, was very positive.
- 4) The MAC facilities are excellent.
- 5) From all sources interviewed, the overall view is that MAC is on the right track and that trends are positive.

Weaknesses:

- 1) Coordination between Academic Counselors and Learning Specialists is not optimal (though there was no indication that it affects students directly).
- 2) Students are not always able to access academic support staff at hours when they need them. This could be addressed by staggering hours and making use of graduate assistants or tutors.
- 3) APAS is a good tool for advising and graduation planning, but it poses significant problems when used to certify progress.
- 4) The lack of availability and timing of classes poses problems for student-athletes. Many majors are tightly packed with required courses. Required sequences of courses reduce flexibility. There are some bottleneck courses. All of these factors impinge not only on athletes, but affect all students. For advisers, these factors exacerbate the problems associated with using APAS as the certification tool.

Recommendations:

- 1) The MAC should continue to work on clarifying and communicating (to all stakeholders) how the roles of Academic Counselors and Learning Specialists are differentiated.
- 2) The MAC should evaluate whether the hours of availability of professional staff matches students' needs (especially in the evening hours), and whether the configuration of and access to meeting room space could be improved.
- 3) The MAC should evaluate whether graduate students could be more effectively used for tutoring than undergraduates, and consult with academic advisers to determine whether tutoring within the colleges could be used more effectively.
- 4) The MAC and the Office of the Registrar should reevaluate the use of APAS as the primary tool used for eligibility certification. If it continues to be used, it should be determined how to improve the coordination between MAC, the Office of the Registrar, and collegiate advisers, in order to improve the efficiency of the certification process.
- 5) Other University task forces and initiatives are underway to reduce barriers to four-year graduation by students. With regard to student-athletes, who have demanding practice schedules and competitive events, special attention to the scheduling of classes, offering more than one section, and increased summer offerings would be desirable.
- 6) The Summer Bridge to Academic Excellence program was offered for the first time in summer, 2007. It is a promising program, but warrants continued monitoring in order to ensure that it continues to improve.

The members of the review committee appreciate the cooperation of all parties that allowed so many productive interviews to be scheduled and information to be gathered. The professionalism and dedication of staff across the University that support the academic pursuits of student-athletes was evident in all of our interviews. We hope our findings and recommendations demonstrate that the support for and treatment of student-athletes is strong at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities,

and that the commitment to regularly look for ways to improve the effectiveness or efficiency of the support services will lead to continued, positive trends.