

INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION OF ACADEMIC AND ATHLETIC PROGRAMS: RESPONSE FROM FOCUS GROUPS AT COLORADO COLLEGE

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We were delegated the task of coordinating a campus workshop with representation from faculty, athletics, admission, students, student affairs, and academic affairs to respond to a series of questions to capture:

- Already existing overlaps between academics and athletics
- Possible overlaps to develop between academics and athletics
- Challenges for building overlaps between academics and athletics

We approached this by inviting a group of sixteen people to join us over a one-and-a-half hour lunch for an introductory session. Then we split the group into two and held a second 1-1/2 to 2 hour session with each group a few days later. Responses to the series of questions are listed below under each question followed by a brief summary of ideas.

Attending the luncheon: Peggy Berg, Professor of Dance, Sara Burst, Residential Life and Housing Coordinator, Liz Campbell, Head Coach for Women's Basketball, Julie Chesley, Professor of Economics, Kristi Erdahl, Professor of Psychology, Geoff Falen, Director of the Career Center, Bob Jacobs, Professor of Psychology, John Lauer, Director of Residential Life, Jeff Noblett, Associate Dean of the Faculty, Ken Ralph, Director of Athletics, Julie Stockenberg, Director of First-Year and Sophomore Studies and Advising, Rick Swan, Head Coach for Volleyball and Assistant Athletic Director, and Jane Newberry, Executive Assistant for Athletics and Transcriber. Several students were invited, but unable to participate at the last minute. These people were divided into two groups for follow-up discussions.

Summary remarks addressing the three bullets above concerning overlap follow immediately below. Then, comments from the three focus group meetings are summarized under the heading of the most appropriate question below.

Summary of Focus Group Comments on Existing and Potential Overlaps, and Challenges:

Existing Overlaps:

At Colorado College, the traditional overlaps between athletics and academics have disappeared. Where once all the coaches either were faculty or had faculty status, the professionalization of coaching has eliminated that overlap. No coaches are teaching regular block courses. Where once the College awarded one-eighth credit for physical education courses, the college no longer does this. However, the College has created new programs like Sports Medicine (with a tenure-track position and a Lecturer) and has hired a number of faculty whose scholarship is directly tied to athletic issues (e.g. sports psychology, sports economics, exercise physiology). Adjunct (quarter-credit) courses in dance and activities like Yoga, Tai Chi, and Aikido, sometimes taught within the context of full-credit courses have appeared. The time may be appropriate for a discussion of larger issues than athletics and academics, but of student wellness within the context of a college experience.

The College sponsors some programs that take advantage of overlaps. The Dean pays for admission to cultural events for athletic teams travelling to a game. Faculty advising for Division I sports supports players with very full schedules. The Block Plan itself is conducive to athletes seeking an experience abroad, when a semester away may be difficult for them. The expectation that Division III athletes chose to come here for the education, makes it easier to work with students faced with absences (during a fast-paced block) for games.

Potential Overlaps:

The core values of the College set goals we have for all students. It might be a useful exercise to determine to what degree participation in athletic events (whether organized team sports or rock-climbing) helps students to meet these goals. The Partnership for Civic Engagement has developed a certificate program for students who integrate their service work and community action with particular courses that examine aspects of such engaged citizenship. How would such integration look for athletics or wellness in general? Could a program be developed in a way that all students would be able to participate?

Location of facilities is also a key overlap to be considered for improving overlaps. The physical isolation of all practice and workout facilities at the edge of campus has raised questions about alternative designs. Should we bring some facilities into dormitories (how would these be supervised)? The location isolates coaches as well.

How could we bring the expertise of coaches (real-life statistical analyses for instance) into classrooms dealing with a relevant theory? The relationship among coaches, admissions, and faculty may be a place to develop. Several suggestions noted the role of the coach in selling the college and thus the need of a coach to be intimately familiar with admissions standards and the academic program and even to have faculty to call on for assistance. What would entice faculty to help a coach-perhaps knowledge of the student's likelihood of success at the college?

Challenges:

Challenges are abundant. Old stereotypes about the role of physical mastery in the life of the academic are abundant. How many faculty were student-athletes and comprehend the challenges of such an integrated life? How many coaches have taught full-block courses and really understand the rigors of the Block Plan for faculty and students? What level of communication needs to be developed to overcome such concerns? Our focus groups had a number of suggestions for social gatherings that would allow coaches and faculty to intermingle, for faculty engagement in athletic activities (from intramural teams to sideline professors), for coaches to sit in on classes, for faculty and coaches to attend each other's meetings, and so on to improve relations between two groups that rarely cross paths. Lack of facilities that would encourage interaction is a critical issue.

Responses and Suggestions of Focus Groups to the Four Key Questions:

1. What is **currently being done** on your campus to integrate athletics and academics?

First Year Experience student-athletes must attend programs like everyone else. They have to be more careful with their schedules to avoid extended away times from campus (week in Baca, etc.) Volleyball loves the New Student Orientation trips and finds them to be a useful bridge between the seniors and the first years. FYE administrators need to assure that new student orientation staff works together and first years get to attend all events.

At the beginning of the year when we have the all campus faculty-staff forum or kick-off event coaches should (and do) participate. Hockey Coach Scott Owens and players gave a seminar; Anne Goodman James presented a seminar with a professor. Have coaches' biographies printed and available for faculty perusal at the event.

The Dean's office pays the admission costs for providing cultural trips such as Alcatraz, Georgia Aquarium, Shakespeare play, Civil Rights Museum for teams travelling. Are the trips appropriate? Should students write a paper or make a presentation upon their return? Do student pre-read or reflect when they attend cultural opportunities? Write a report as an e-mail to the Dean.

Identify courses that contain sports as part of the curriculum. Some such courses include courses in the Sports Science Program like Introduction to Human Nutrition, Sports Medicine, Exercise Physiology, Human Anatomy, Biomechanics, and Human Physiology, as well as courses in other fields such as Sports Psychology, Sports Economics, and various student theses.

The movement of the anatomy lab from an old gym to a modern space in the Barnes Science Building is a good step.

The Block Plan makes it more feasible for study abroad (one block) opportunities. We can improve our communication of these opportunities to student athletes.

The Division 1 faculty advisor provides some integration. Propose a similar arrangement for Division III teams— assign faculty person to each sport, although this does not count as committee assignment.

2. Consider also the **overall campus climate** as it concerns academic and athletics integration. Is there general agreement about the importance of this endeavor?

If one were to focus on the athletics effects on academics, athletics graduation rates are 96% and athletic retention is 98%, both well above the college averages. One problem is misunderstandings, lack of knowledge regarding GPAs, graduation rates, retention rates of student-athletes.

How does Athletics affect campus culture? Need to compile data on gender, home community, socio-economic diversity.

No integration (per the Athletics Board) is the perception. There is non-support of athletes being excused from classes by the faculty. Faculty resent students leaving class or missing class for athletic events/contests. Missing class time embitters faculty and builds no goodwill.

Hostility: seen in the suggestion for the elimination of Division I sports at a faculty meeting, and in students' antagonism towards athletes. This may be more indifference rather than antagonism. You do your own thing on your time, I will do my thing on my time, is a common theme amongst faculty and non-varsity students.

The barrier between athletics and academics is both spatial and temporal. The athletic facilities are located on the western edge of campus across the street from all academic activities and beyond the student dormitories and housing. Academics tends to occur between 9:00 and 3:00 during the day (Faculty Handbook policy requires most classes to end by 3:00) and athletics (practices and contests) are held later in the day or the in evening.

76% of students participate in intramurals. The student body values these programs. They choose to play in a more relaxed yet still competitive manner. Students show up to watch these contests.

"Athletes have privileges" is a complaint by non-varsity athletes, and they do not understand the work and responsibility that accompanies said privileges.

No culture of entitled student-athletes. They deal with everything most students do. "Going to class and getting to play." They want to come here for the education. Athletes must be admitted, no preferential treatment (n.b. except for Division I athletes).

Faculty appear to foster hostility towards athletics. How many really are hostile? Is this true, or is this a false appearance put forth by a vocal minority?

Athletics is said to interfere with academic life (unattributed comment).

Do students integrate their sports into their academics?

For the course on Yoga: theory and practice, do students enter into the philosophical piece or merely the physical?

Zero data. Is this a problem? Is it a perception problem?

3. What are some possible **strategies** your institution could develop to make a stronger overlap between academics and athletics?

Expand Concept of Athletics to be More Inclusive:

- Athletics should be part of whole person. We define athletics to include club, intramurals and recreational athletic opportunities. Many schools require a physical education component. Do we consider that?
- “Wellness” or “health” – nutrition, time management, etc. These are vital parts of athletics. Athletes tend to be experts at responsibility and time management.
- Establish new traditions. What is the landmark game of homecoming? Model of team sports seems retro—hiking, biking, rock climbing should be presented as sports. Events that support alternate sports. A yoga circle for homecoming instead of a competition.
- Intramural, club – more conscious environment for sports. Funding to support all, the ice rink in particular. The school needs to support all the sports.
- Include non-campus (varsity) sports as campus athletics or activities: hiking, slack-lining, rock scrambling.
- Capture broad support for the whole student. Athletics is broader than varsity sports: Mind/body; whole person.
- Should we integrate athletic facilities (exercise rooms, climbing walls, etc.) into dormitories?

Recruiting:

- Coaches identify potential recruits during their junior high school year, initiate contact, conversation, gauge level of interest, determine if they fit. Get test scores, identify, watch at tournaments, identify, start interest, try to get student to campus. Phone calls once per week, more e-mails. Contact teachers, coaches, guidance counselors. Home visits with the family. The coach sells the school (CC) to the student. When a student applies to admissions they are not always admissible. Convince student CC is the right place. Start with 250 contacted; filter to 30 applicants, perhaps 5 applicants accepted. 75% of coaches’ job is recruiting.
- Should a recruit meet with faculty? Admissions sets up a visit, that is not controlled by the coaches. Some coaches rely on players to bring students to their classes. Some faculty present didn’t like idea of faculty meeting recruits. They are too busy and overworked/overscheduled now.
- Geographical areas in which athletes are recruited? Does that change community support? Home-grown audience from home recruits. Coaches are recruiting students currently that will graduate high school in 2010.

Commingle of Faculty and Coaches:

- Correct the synergy with faculty and non-faculty/teachers. Recognize coaches as educational professionals.

- Family activities are a way to bring faculty and athletes together. Introduce a “Bridgers” club that bridges the gap and get people to meet each other in a social situation.
- Just attend! Faculty must attend athletic events to see the student-athletes in action.
- Increase sense of support for all athletes. Teams have featured “teacher of the game.” Athletes must ask faculty to attend games.
- Faculty to attend athletic department meeting. Bring someone in to update athletics staff. “Featured faculty member” per meeting or per athletic contest.
- Athletics should track where team members are in courses. Have a particular faculty member attend department meetings and speak to how the students are doing.
- Get real about the schedule; include pre-requisites and meeting times/days of classes in the course catalog. Even a general sense of “meets mornings” or “meetings until 3:00 p.m.” would be useful.
- Introduce the Dean at faculty meeting and bring up scheduling as the Dean’s fault, take the blame away from athletics. (n.b. This refers to a late change in the academic calendar that occurred well after athletic events and music festivals were scheduled, but improved the academic calendar)
- Require coaches to attend one class per semester?
- Every department could adopt a sport and rotate yearly. The faculty would attend events. Faculty need to allow the support staff to attend athletic events during the work day. Challenge other classes, other faculty in intramurals.
- Faculty mentor program. Assign a faculty mentor to a team and work with coach. Study sessions to be run by faculty advisor – sometimes.
- Have the Athletic Director give updates at faculty meetings such as standings, outstanding times, etc. Have each coach attend faculty meetings.
- Would coaches like to think of themselves as faculty? Get in the presence of faculty. Attend faculty lunches. Open them to everyone. Have a meet and greet. Gauge coaches’ interests and scholarship. Integrate biographies with the faculty.
- Attend courses? Attend lectures? Increase the level of trust between faculty and coaches.
- Professors and students do not understand what’s involved with being a Division III athlete. Communicate what’s involved better to students and faculty.
- Beer with the chaplains-type meetings.
- Chili cook-off
- Attend one class, attend one game exchange of faculty and coaches.
- Meet administrative staff – meeting coaches is useful for everyone. The career center – internships, etc.

Faculty as Advisors to Student Athletes:

- What would a faculty advisor's responsibilities be? Travel with a team? Go on the "field trips" with the team? It would take money. Select what cultural experiences a team would visit? "Quicker trips" can't always fit in the times for visits/field trips; educational opportunities cannot happen every time due to time/location constraints.
- Bob Jacobs, as advisor to D-I Hockey talks to first year students, discusses honor code, runs one study table per block, tracks grades. The athlete sees Bob if s/he is struggling. Bob attends some practices, builds relationships. Bob offers independent study courses to some of his advisees. Sends Hockey Coach Scott Owens updates, helps find tutors.
- Multiple classes – typically a professor has a student once or twice. Who would be a natural link as an advisor?
- Incentive would be needed for professors such as getting credit for committee work.

Academic Credit for some form of Physical Education:

- Teach athletic adjunct courses (quarter-credit) by faculty– how could we finance these? Grant teaching relief besides pay? All participation comes at a cost.
- Would coaches have time for this? Tie in with intramurals? Techniques courses?
- Include non-traditional sports such as, exercise fitness, kettle bells, swiss balls.
- Review the goals of the college for its students. What are the learning outcomes the college desires of its students? How many of these are met or enhanced by participation in athletics? Should these be acknowledged with academic credit?
- What is important about wellness and the mind/body connection? Perhaps this is a path we can explore.
- Do we make athletics more academic or academics more athletic? True physical education, not in the high school sense, should be offered, including nutrition, leadership, time-management, etc.
- Bring classes into the gym for different purposes
- Dancers to work with trainers? Would that be a way to utilize some of the staff in El Pomar? (Colorado state law prohibits work on non-varsity athletes).

Coaches as Teachers:

- Integrate athletics into teaching. Athletics would like to support courses– El Pomar has equipment and space to support some course projects, for instance, in Sports Psychology. Create small bridges showcasing space. Utilize athletics staff for academic components of various classes: statistics, planning, can relate directly to students. Coaches can demonstrate real-life applications, they are educated professionals, and participate in lives of students. Share scholarship of the coaches so faculty can see bridges.

- Phenomenally intelligent people (coaches) who interact with a subset of the student population. Broader exposure to the campus – should/can coaches act as guest speakers? Can faculty use the El Pomar spaces to teach their courses?
- Athletics members do serve on staff searches. Faculty serve on athletic searches (coaches, administrators), but no athletic staff serve on faculty searches. Should they be asked to? Does that “add value?”
- Professional coaches can’t be coaches and professors.

Other:

- Work closer with the Service Learning Center – develop special New Student Orientation trips scheduled for athletes; or One Day of Service for teams – coordinated with the Service Learning Center. Be sure the staff in the Service learning Center know to contact the Athletic Department when requests for help come to the college.
- Career center – when one member of a team visits; within 2-3 weeks twelve more will come in. Engage as a group; but an individual can jump start the process.
- Scholarship evening- have senior students present thesis or capstone research (construct website in the Athletics Department to showcase such work annually). Have underclassmen hear these experiences.
- Communication would help everyone.

4. What are the **key challenges** (both financial and attitudinal) to realizing the strategic goals identified above.

What are the barriers between academics and athletics? Currently they are physical – as well as psychological. Can integration work? Should it?

Facilities are a key challenge. The El Pomar geographic isolation encourages loss of educational experience. No mechanism is in place to integrate students/faculty on a daily basis. Due to our lack of space, we do not have a location for faculty, staff, and student interaction in casual recreation or structured sports. The completion of a facility that encourages that interaction is essential for improving integration.

Faculty hesitate to focus on something that may take away from their area of interest. This can apply to students too.

The business office offers resistance to any dollar expenditures. What would be the strategy if we had money for athletics/faculty luncheons. Would they be social with specific departments?

Athletics is perceived as a closed world. The worlds don't mix well.

The 2009-2010 academic schedule was changed at the last minute and hurt the athletic schedule. The administration needs to be more pro-active in contacting/working with athletics. Schedules are set at least a year in advance for athletic contests.

The school does not support athletes. Women's soccer is faced with missing a week of class for championship competition because of the change in the academic schedule.