

# 3

*This chapter describes the marginalization of student athletes and provides case studies and recommendations for institutions interested in better supporting, encouraging, and responding to the needs of students within this population.*

## Developing an Institutional Culture toward Degree Attainment for Student Athletes

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College athletes are often labeled as privileged, lazy, incapable, and disinterested students who are motivated to enroll in higher education only for the sole purpose of participating in athletics (Sailes, 1993; Watson, 2003). These students are also often stigmatized by their faculty, coaches, and non-athlete peers (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Simons and colleagues (2007) identified a stigmatized individual as one who has attributes that are deeply discredited and seen by others as tainted.

Within higher education, the label “student athlete” has been severely discredited and tainted by the actions of a few, relatively speaking, misdirected and misguided coaches and student athletes (Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Sailes, 1993). Their actions have led to the proliferation of negative perceptions which reinforce the dumb jock, low intelligence stereotype. These perceptions, combined with institutions’ low expectations for athletes’ academic performance and goals, have had a significant impact on students’ collegiate experiences, social engagement with nonathlete peers, and ability to be academically successful (Beilock & McConnell, 2004; Harrison, 2008). Inevitably, student athletes begin to accept and own these perceptions as reality, which is a process Steele (1997) termed *stereotype threat*. Specifically, stereotype threat is the process in which an individual lives out negative stereotypes that have been placed on him due to his group membership or how he self-identifies. In turn, institutions use these resulting student behaviors to justify placing even lower expectations

on athletes' behavior, both in and out of the classroom; thus, the cycle leading to marginalization of student athletes continues.

The goal of community colleges and athletics programs should not be to maintain watered-down expectations to give the illusion that student athletes are truly being successful. Rather, the goal should be to set expectations that challenge and enable individuals to do their best at becoming the best student, athlete, and citizen they are capable of being. In order to properly assist student athletes to be the best they can be, institutions must find ways to transcend the negative perceptions and stereotypes their student athletes are confronted with on a daily basis.

Toward this end, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the marginalization of student athletes and to (1) present data collected from case studies illustrating how institutions have been intentional in promoting student success and degree attainment for student athletes; and (2) highlight best practices used to empower, encourage, and support athletes. This chapter aims to provide institutions with pragmatic examples of programs and services that have been successful in creating institutional cultures that are dedicated to preparing student athletes to be competitive in the classroom and on the field of play. By highlighting these institutions, the author provides examples of ways institutions can work toward developing a culture that both challenges (i.e., maintain high expectations for student athletes' behavior) and supports (i.e., provide the necessary programs and services) student athletes to meet or surpass their own expectations, as well as the expectations of their respective institutions.

## **Student Athletes as Marginalized Students**

In 2004, Berta Vigil Laden edited a volume of *New Directions for Community Colleges* in which several scholars and practitioners discussed how community colleges “recognize and respond to the academic, co-curricular, and cultural needs of their emerging majority student populations” (p. 1). The present chapter and NDCC volume builds on and advances Laden and colleagues' (2004) conversation. This is carried out through several focused discussions of student groups that have been historically marginalized within higher education, and more specifically at the community college. This chapter, in particular, focuses attention on student athletes as a marginalized group and the ways in which they are continually marginalized by institutions and members of the academic community.

Many may ask, what is a marginalized group, and how are student athletes marginalized? Previous scholarship has provided varying definitions of what a marginalized group is, as well as examples of ways in which this marginalization is manifested. These definitions and examples supply the rationale and justification for the inclusion of athletes within the conversation of marginalized groups. For instance, Kagan and colleagues (2004) suggest that marginalized people “have relatively little control over

their lives and the resources available to them; they become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes” (p. 3). Sue (2010) defined marginalized groups and individuals as those that “are perceived negatively, given less status in society, and confined to existing on the margins of our social, cultural, political, and economic systems” (p. 5).

Furthermore, Kagan and colleagues (2004) discussed marginalization as a “shifting phenomenon linked to social status” (p. 2), in which certain individuals or groups enjoy at one point high social status, but when social change occurs, these same individuals may lose their status and become marginalized. As athletes, individuals are glamorized for their athletic performance in their given sport; but as students, they are vilified for their substandard academic abilities and their lack of focus and attention devoted to their academic studies (Simons et al., 2007). As such, student athletes are confronted with layered marginalization due to their status as a community college student, student athlete, and when applicable, as a member of an underrepresented ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic group.

This marginalization is carried out through microaggressions, which are “hidden demeaning messages that often lie outside of the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrators” (Sue, 2010, p. 4). For example, a coach might encourage an athlete to enroll in a course that is not listed on his degree program of study but will ensure an “A,” rather than to enroll in a more rigorous course on the student’s degree program plan of study that could impact his athletic eligibility if he does not successfully complete the course. The hidden message here is “I do not believe you are smart enough to successfully pass this course and your athletic eligibility is more important than your academic studies.” Or a faculty member might say, “Don’t worry about doing your homework for my class this semester because I know you have a busy athletic schedule.” The hidden message: “No matter how hard you try, you will never pass my class so don’t waste your time or mine. It is probably better to focus your time and attention on your athletic future.”

These subtle and not-so-subtle messages reinforce the idea that student athletes are neither capable nor interested in their academic studies and further enforce negative stereotypes.

## **Methods: Case Selection and Sample**

Data for this chapter were drawn from multiple sources to provide the richness and depth of each case description (Glesne, 1999). These methods included: (1) semistructured telephone interviews and (2) collection of Internet resources and primary documents from institutions regarding the goals and mission of their athletic program, student athletes’ academic performance, and support services provided to student athletes. Data collection took place over an 11-month period, from November 2009 to October 2010. To identify case studies, Google alerts were created

using the key words *community college* and *athletics* to capture local, regional, and national news articles pertaining to athletics at the community college level. Over the 11-month period, alerts were reviewed weekly, and a list was compiled of institutions that had been recognized for having high-performing student athletes. Independent Web searches were also conducted in addition to recommendations solicited from colleagues that work with or are familiar with exemplary-performing athletic programs.

From these initial steps, personnel at the selected institutions were contacted via e-mail and phone and invited to participate in a semistructured telephone interview. Five institutions were selected and agreed to participate. However, only one institution completed the study in its entirety.

### **Institutional Case Studies**

Institutions were selected as case studies due to their record and focus on the academic success of student athletes at their respective institutions. For instance, during the 2009–2010 academic year, 24 student athletes from Owens College, located in Toledo, Ohio, received Academic All-Conference Honors by the Ohio Community College Athletic Conference (“News Releases,” 2010). Likewise, over the past 12 years, Lake-Sumter Community College, in Leesburg, Florida, has had six athletes achieve NJCAA Distinguished Academic All-American Honors; 17 have been Academic All-Americans; and 115 former student athletes have made the FCCAA All-State Academic Team in their respective sports (Matulia, 2010). Between the fall 2006 and spring 2008 terms, 64 student athletes at Southwestern Illinois College (SWIC) earned an associate’s degree (59) or certificate (5). During this same time period, student athletes at SWIC successfully earned 83 percent of the credit hours they attempted, and just over 34 percent of all athletes were selected for the academic honor roll.

#### **Creating a Culture of Success: “Tradition Never Graduates”.**

There are several essential aspects that must be present when developing an institutional culture that supports, encourages, and responds to the needs of student athletes. Part of building this culture is establishing a tradition of excellence. The development of a tradition of excellence is salient to the demarginalization of student athletes and altering the negative perceptions concerning their academic abilities and goals. During one of the interviews conducted for this study, an athletic director stated that at his institution “tradition never graduates.” He further stated that “our tradition of academic integrity, our tradition of community and behavioral integrity, our athletic integrity . . . never graduates. . . . It [tradition] stays here and the next group has to live up to that same concept” (AD#1, 2010). The following section provides a discussion of some of the traditions that were identified at the examined case studies.

**Integrity.** Integrity should be at the center of any athletic program that strives to elevate the academic performance of its student athletes. A

focus on integrity must encompass both academic and behavioral integrity. Programs with academic integrity place students' academic studies as paramount because they understand the benefit of students receiving a quality education and obtaining a degree or certificate. Such programs also take steps to ensure that students are advised properly and are taking courses that lead to a credential at the community college or to the ability to transfer to a four-year institution where they can complete a bachelor's degree. For these programs, meeting minimum requirements to maintain athletic eligibility is a product of the student's hard work in the classroom. Meeting these standards is not the ultimate goal, but surpassing them is. Such programs value athletic success, but not at the expense of the student's education.

Programs that have integrity recruit students of character and set high standards for student behavior both on and off the field. A coach at Lake-Sumter Community College noted, "We want student athletes with character and I believe that by stressing academics along with athletics, we can find those players" (Jolley, 2010, n.p.). Not only do programs with integrity set high standards for student conduct, but they hold students to these stated expectations. For instance, Southwestern Illinois College currently has a substance abuse policy in place that allows for the random drug testing of all student athletes. Though not common at most community colleges, this practice underscores this particular program's focus on protecting the integrity of the institution and athletic program and on the well-being of student athletes.

**Teamwork.** It takes a community effort to build a tradition of excellence. First, coaches must be intent on recruiting quality students that are able to handle their academic and athletic responsibilities. The caliber of student athletes that are recruited by coaches demonstrates to the academic community the priorities of the athletic program. Second, athletic directors, coaches, administrators, and faculty must work together to develop program goals and academic support services for student athletes. Most often, it is the faculty that first notice potential academic problems with athletes. Maintaining an open line of communication with faculty will help with identifying students who are struggling academically or socially and can provide these students the assistance they need before the problem(s) become too severe.

Third, athletic programs should be open to involving parents and guardians in activities and conversations concerning their students' academic studies. Providing opportunities at the beginning of the academic year for parents, students, and athletic program staff to meet to discuss program goals and expectations can provide coaches additional support, as well as parents the opportunity to be involved in their students' success.

**Commitment.** To truly develop a culture that supports and encourages student athletes' success takes a commitment on the part of the athletic program, institution, and student athlete. Athletic programs that are exemplary are committed to educating the whole student. They value the

educational and athletic experience equally. Institutions that are committed to reversing negative perceptions of student athletes are committed to providing the best possible environment for learning to take place. This includes providing both human and financial support. And finally, students themselves must be committed to changing the negative stereotypes about student athletes by doing the right things in the classroom and in the community. If students are striving for excellence, the community will undoubtedly take notice.

## Conclusion

A primary aim of this chapter was to discuss ways in which student athletes have been marginalized and provide recommendations for enhancing the experiences and academic outcomes of student athletes. The hope is that the presented information will inform practice, which will in turn help to decrease the marginalization of student athletes. When working with student athletes at the community college we would be wise to keep in mind the words of Johann W. Goethe. He suggested, “When we treat a man as he is, we make him worse than he is. When we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be” (cited in Kerensky & Melby, 1975, p. 59).

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