

The successful scholar-athlete – freshmen athletes’ first year experience

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ABSTRACT:

The presentation will highlight initial data collected on the “The Successful Scholar-Athlete Class”. Participants will leave the session with excellent ideas/activities supported by the research and documented by the class data on how they, as professors, may contribute to the on-going success of their students. These ideas/activities are applicable to all freshmen college students, athlete or not.

“The Successful Scholar-Athlete Course” is a first-year experience course designed specifically for freshmen (required) who will be participating on any athletic team which was implemented in the fall semester of 2014. The class assisted those scholar-athletes in successfully balancing the challenges of a rigorous scholastic schedule with the demands of a competitive athletic program. This course provided opportunities for discovery learning, instruction in learning skills, and assimilation into the social and academic cultures of the campus. Specific areas of focus were: identifying strengths/weaknesses of each scholar-athlete that will impact their college success, developing short-term and long term academic goals, creating time management systems that work, exploring majors and careers, developing study habits which will lead to academic success, improving communication skills, and honing critical thinking skills. The course work was coordinated with each head coach to facilitate study table activities and mentoring of each scholar-athlete. Activities within the class that are supported by the literature (Kuh, Bader, Habley and Brown) on freshmen retention, persistence, timely graduation, GPA and full-time enrollment were incorporated into the curriculum.

Keywords: retention, persistence, graduation, academics, freshmen

THE COURSE

“The Successful Scholar-Athlete Course” was a first-year experience (required) course designed specifically for freshmen who will be participating on any athletic team which was implemented in the fall semester of 2014 and is being continued in the fall of 2015. The class assisted those scholar-athletes in successfully balancing the challenges of a rigorous scholastic schedule with the demands of a competitive athletic program. This course provided opportunities for discovery learning, instruction in learning skills, and assimilation into the social and academic cultures of the campus.

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The Successful Scholar-Athlete course met twice a week for fifteen weeks for 75 minutes each session. Professor presentations, guest lecturers, power-point presentation, you-tube videos, peer-mentoring and supplemental materials were used during the semester. The actual activities will be described later in this paper under “Activities”.

THE TEAM

Research on successful college students shows that collaboration of faculty/staff/students in developing and implementing curriculum is one key to the success of those students (Bowen, et al. 2009). Therefore, The Successful Scholar-Athlete course was proposed by a team of faculty/staff/students called The Team. The Team in 2014 consisted of a School of Education professor (author and mentor of past scholar-athletes on campus), the campus athletic director, the men’s head basketball coach, the women’s head basketball coach, the women’s head volleyball coach, and one upper-level student scholar-athlete and was expanded to include three new sports for 2015, men’s head golf coach, men’s cross country coach and women’s cross country coach. Other coaches will be added to The Team as future athletic teams are approved for the campus for the fall of 2016. The course was taught by the author. Several meetings of the team occurred during the fall semester to monitor the progress of the scholar-athletes in the class.

THE GOALS

State funding for universities has evolved over the past few years, having a significant impact on the way in which those universities viewed their success. Until this evolution occurred, universities were financially state supported based on the number of students enrolled on their campus. Therefore, universities measured their success around enrollment. New funding guidelines highlighted and reimbursed universities for retention of their students (enrollment of students from fall to spring), persistence of students (enrollment from fall to fall), and timely graduation rates (matriculation within 4 years, 5 years and 6 years from initial time of enrollment) (Indiana Commission of Higher Education, 2012).

The Team researched the available data that the campus had collected on these three important funding variables to find that the historical campus freshmen rate for retention was 62%, for persistence was 45% and for timely graduation was 22%. The Team immediately began to search for proven methods of positively impacting these important funding variables. Two of the most significant factors gleaned from the research impacting those variables in a positive fashion were full-time vs. part-time enrollment of those students (Habley, et. al. 2012) and grade point average (Bader, 2011). Bader (2011) says, “A traditional definition of college success, based on outcomes such as high GPA... has a virtue of being easy to measure... The better the GPA, the more successful the student’s college experience has been” (p.17). Therefore, The Team established the following five goals to measure the success of the successful scholar-athlete course on these important variables:

1. Retention: The retention rate for these scholar-athlete freshmen registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 will exceed the rate for other first year students (above the historical campus rate of 62%) from the fall 2014 semester to spring 2015 Semester
2. Persistence: The persistence rate scholar-athlete freshmen registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 will exceed the rate for other first year students (historical campus rate of 45%) from the 2014-15 academic year to the to the 2015-2016 academic year.
3. Timely Graduation: The 4, 5 and 6 year graduation rate by the spring of 2020 for these scholar-athlete freshmen registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 will exceed the rate of other freshmen students enrolled in the fall of 2014 (above the historical campus rate of 22%)
4. GPA: The GPA of these scholar-athletes registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 will exceed the rate for other freshmen (historically 2.62) for all their classes in the fall of 2014 and continue to exceed the rate each semester.
5. Full-time Enrollment: The Full-time Enrollment of these scholar-athletes registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 will exceed the rate of other students (above the 83% historical campus freshmen rate)

The Team decided to track the 2014 freshmen scholar-athletes through the campus Office of Institutional Research on each of the five goals over the next six years (to include timely graduation rates). Data collection points were established for each semester within that six year time frame with the final data collection point being May 2020. This research will be completed for all future freshmen scholar-athlete cohorts.

THE ASSESSMENTS

The Team, with the assistance of the campus Office of Institutional Research, established the following assessment strategies for the five goals:

1. Retention: The Team will divide the number of scholar-athlete freshmen of 2014 registered for the classes for the spring of 2015 by the number of freshmen attending the Successful Scholar-Athlete class in the fall of 2014. This will provide the Retention Rate. This data will be compared to historical campus Retention Rate.
2. Persistence: The Team will divide the number of scholar-athlete freshmen of 2014 registered for the classes for the fall of 2015 by the number of freshmen attending the Successful Scholar-Athlete class in the fall of 2014. This will provide the Persistence Rate. This data will be compared to the historical campus Persistence Rate.
3. Timely Graduation: The Team will divide the number of scholar-athlete freshmen of 2014 graduating in 2018, 2019 and 2020 by the number of freshmen attending the Successful Scholar-

Athlete class in the fall of 2014. This will provide the Timely Rates. This data will be compared to the historical campus Timely Graduation Rate.

4. GPA: The Team will compare data of scholar-athlete freshmen registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 accumulative GPA each semester with the historical campus GPA of all other campus students of the same credit standing.

5. Full-time Enrollment: The Team will compare data of the full-time status of scholar-athlete freshmen registered for the Successful Scholar-Athlete Class fall 2014 with the historical campus Full-time Enrollment Rate.

The Team completed the first assessment (retention) in late December 2014 based on the Office of the Registrar's early registration system. They will complete the second assessment (persistence) in August 2015 from the same source. They will complete the third assessment (timely graduation) in May 2018, December 2018, May 2019, December 2019, and May 2020 based on the Student Alumni Association graduation data. They completed the fourth assessment (grade point average) in January 2015 and May 2015, and will continue to collect the data in January 2016, May 2016, January 2017, May 2017, January 2018 and May 2018. They may continue to collect this data on scholar-athletes who are red-shirted during these time frames. The Team completed the final assessment (full-time enrollment) in August 2014, January 2015, and will continue to collect the data in August 2015, January 2016, August 2016, January 2017, May 2017, August 2018 and May 2018. They may continue to collect this data on scholar-athletes who are red-shirted during these time frames.

THE ACTIVITIES

The activities within the Successful Scholar-Athlete class are all geared toward ensuring that the students become successful college students. Components of the class that are supported by the literature on freshmen retention, persistence, timely graduation, GPA and full-time enrollment were incorporated into the curriculum by the team. These include but were not limited to: Faculty Mentoring of Scholar-Athletes (Kuh, et. al. 2005), Peer-Mentoring of Scholar-Athletes (Kuh, et. al. 2005), Engagement in University of Scholar-Athletes (Bader, 2011), Full-Time attendance by Scholar-Athletes (Habley, et. al. 2012) and Participation in Collaborative Learning Communities by Scholar-Athletes (Bowen, et. al. 2009).

To address the Faculty-Mentoring component, the professor of the Successful Scholar-Athlete course (author) worked collaboratively with the coaches and assigned faculty mentors for each Successful Scholar-Athlete in the 2014 and 2015 courses. Assignments, completion of work, attendance, participation and grades were shared weekly throughout the semester. Feedback from each faculty mentor was collected and reviewed by The Team.

To address the Peer-Mentoring component, an upper level scholar-athlete was trained and assigned to attend each class during the semester. Scholar-Athletes completed six journals which were turned into and graded by the Peer-Mentor. These were used to provide feedback to the Scholar-Athletes relating to their ability with writing, punctuation, grammar and electronic formatting. Each Scholar-Athlete held one face-to-face meeting with the Peer-Mentor.

To address the Engagement in University of Scholar-Athletes component, each coach required their Scholar-Athletes to attend games of other sports teams on campus. Each Scholar-Athlete also had to have at least one written paper reviewed by the campus Writers' Room, complete a career assessment document to determine possible careers upon graduation, and complete a document listing each campus resource available to all students.

To address the Participation in Collaborative Learning Communities by Scholar-Athletes component, each coach established study tables for their Scholar-Athletes. Work assigned in all the Scholar-Athletes' classes were the topic of discussion and completed at these study tables. The Scholar-Athletes learned to share concerns and rely on each other not only athletically on the courts and playing fields but academically in the classroom.

These high-impact practices were reviewed, and will be revised and implemented in following years based upon evaluations of students, peer mentors, coaches, athletic director and professors. The Team served as the final review of all the above-mentioned materials.

THE PROJECTS

The projects within the Successful Scholar-Athlete Course were divided into three distinct units. Unit 1 covered Communications in the University Setting, Unit 2 covered Student Self-Regulated Learning and Unit 3 Critical Thinking Skills. Below are examples of just a few of the projects completed in each unit.

In Unit 1, Communications in the University Setting, the scholar-athletes were introduced to prior U100 students and their potential problems entering college as documented by those students while they were attending U100. The scholar-athletes then wrote journals to their peer-mentors expressing their feelings on the challenges they were facing in college. Bader says, "Still, time management is not just about avoiding procrastination. It is about actively managing the way that you spend your most precious resource. One of the best ways of doing this is to analyze how you actually spend your day." (p. 209). Therefore, the scholar-athletes completed a time log documenting where they spent their time for a full week while preparing for their first college test on a chapter concerning communications at the university level. They were asked to study for the test (pre-test) using whatever study skills they had learned in high school. Results of the test (pre-test) showed a class average score of 71.27% for the seventeen scholar-athletes with a high score of 97% and low score of 44%. Results of the 2015 cohort will be available at the end of the fall 2015 semester.

Bader's research stated that, "When you are failing, understand why you are failing" (p. 181). Therefore, the scholar-athletes completed a post-test reflection reviewing their time log, illustrating their study time and decided if they were satisfied with their efforts and their score. They understood why they had experienced success or failure on this initial test.

Bader continued to state that, "Cope with failure by rebuilding and forgiving" (p. 181). Over the next four weeks, these scholar-athletes learned to rebuild their study habits and forgive themselves for their unsuccessful test scores by learning different study skills, such as, changing their study environment (no noise, no distractions), distributing their practice instead of mass practice (no cramming), developed flash cards, outlines, concept maps and played communication jeopardy all in preparation for the next test (post-test). The results of the next test (post-test) showed a class average score of 81.33% with a high score of 98% and low score of 71%. The 44% from the first test improved to the 71% score. This was quite an improvement. Reflection comments from the scholar-athletes ranged from improving their study environment, managing their time better, spreading their studying over longer period of time with shorter segments of studying at each session, and using the flash cards, concept maps, and outlines as strategies for improving their scores. Results of the fall 2015 cohort will be available at the end of the semester.

In Unit 2, Student Self-Regulated Learning, the major project was the writing of a mastery paper. Students needed to answer three major questions, preparing an introduction to the paper, the answers to

the questions and a conclusion. They needed to take a rough draft to the Writer's Room for a critique of their work, and then revise the paper based on those comments. Final scores ranged from a low of 77% to a high of 99% with the average score at 95%. Results for the 2015 cohort will be available at the end of the semester.

In Unit 3 Critical Thinking Skills, the coaches of each sports provided presentations on topics covering character vs. skills in athletics, obeying the rules of sports, and the controversy surrounding performance enhancing drugs in sports. The final project was a Pay It Forward paper and oral presentation where each scholar-athlete expressed their opinions of the class to future scholar-athletes of the university. Each paper was to include a list of the five most important concepts that the scholar-athlete had learned during the semester. The five most cited concepts were: time management, using a calendar or planner daily, distribute study time or practice time instead of mass studying (cramming), use of flashcards, and study groups. This mention of study groups from the scholar-athletes confirms the research of Bader who said, "For generations, teachers have invented ways to make information 'stick' through the use of games and alternative discourse forms. These strategies worked not simply because they were fun, but because they embedded learning in real activities. The fact that so much educational research today is focusing on collaborative learning is evident of the recognition that people learn better when learning is integrated into normal social interaction and when information is shared rather than passed down" (p.179).

On a final (anonymous) survey of the scholar-athletes in the 2014 Successful Scholar-Athlete Course, results showed that 14 out of 15 said yes to the question: "Do you think all future freshmen scholar-athletes should be required to take U100 The Successful Scholar-Athlete Course?" In addition, 15 out of 15 responded yes to the question: "Do you think the Successful Scholar-Athlete Course was worth your time and tuition?" These results are encouraging to the Team in deciding to apply for a second year grant for the course. We received a second year Vision 2020 grant to continue our research. The results of the fall 2015 cohort will be available at the end of the semester.

THE RESULTS

Not all goals provided data that could be collected to date. However, below is a list of results so far for the Successful Scholar-Athlete course:

Goal #1 Retention: All (100%) scholar-athletes in the fall 2014 Successful Scholar-Athlete Course have registers for classes for the spring of 2015 compared to 82% for other freshmen.

Goal #2 Persistence: Collect Data in the fall 2015 semester.

Goal #3 Timely Graduation: Data will be collected in the future at the appropriate times.

Goal #4: GPA: Successful scholar-athletes had a fall 2014 GPA of 2.81 compared to all freshmen with a 2.60 GPA. They had a GPA for the spring 2015 of 2.96 compared to all freshmen 2.65.

Goal #5: Full-time enrollment: All (100%) scholar-athletes in the fall 2014 Successful Scholar-Athlete Course have register as full-time student for the spring 2015 semester compared to 72% of other freshmen.

With this preliminary data and the results of the projects with the class, the TEAM submitted and was awarded a second year Chancellor's Vision 2020 grant to continue the course.

THE FUTURE

Typically, the three existing athletic teams on campus recruit approximately fifteen freshmen scholar-athletes to campus each fall. Therefore, there was only one section of the Successful Scholar-Athlete offered in the fall of 2014. With the addition of the three new athletic teams in the fall of 2015, another fifteen – thirty freshmen scholar-athletes will be arriving. This means that there will be a need for two sections of the Successful Scholar-Athlete course in the fall of 2015. However, just after these classes were set for the fall 2015, the Team was informed that the university would be “inheriting” a baseball team from another local university who needed to eliminate it due to Title IX regulations. Therefore, the Team has now established three section of the course. Starting in the fall 2015, this course will be positively impacting nearly forty-five freshmen scholar-athletes by the fall of 2015. These freshmen scholar-athletes would be of both genders and various ethnic backgrounds who qualify for admission into the university. Finally, the university will be adding three more teams in the fall of 2016. Therefore, another thirty to forty freshmen scholar-athletes may be impacted by this program.

This Successful Scholar-Athlete course was self-sustaining (student tuition and fees) this year and will continue to be in the future. It also received designation by the Chancellor as a First Year Experience course on campus. With the above mentioned successful data and the positive responses from the scholar-athletes on the final survey, the Team submitted and was approved for a follow-up application for AY2 to perform work on improving the course based upon the afore-mentioned evaluations. In addition, the Team is available to other units on campus or other campuses to discuss implementing the high-impact and successful practices of this course.

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