



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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HOOS on the Team? Maximizing the Academic Performance of Student-Athletes

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"Student-athletes are difficult to teach in discussion sections because of the constraints on their time, and their frequent absences. Because of the need to travel with the team, they frequently miss section and lectures; and, because of their practice schedule, they cannot make my office hours. I wish that we had more flexibility in working with them."

– *U.Va. Religious Studies GTA*

"The most difficult thing about being a student-athlete is having so little time, and having my time occupied from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. nearly every day. I never knew it would be this tough."

– *U.Va. Student-Athlete*

"Teaching student athletes is difficult because typically they are trained to seek their identity in non-intellectual pursuits, which means that the majority of their focus is on their sport. The University tends to prioritize athletics over academics, and this can present a serious problem."

– *U.Va. Faculty Member*

"We are not eligibility brokers. We help each student-athlete become a self-sufficient, successful student. The goal is to make our services obsolescent."

– *Academic Affairs-Athletics Official*

Competing priorities. Missed classes. Exhausting schedules. The construction of a \$150-million basketball arena in a time of unprecedented budget cuts. Teachers at the University of Virginia are familiar with the concerns and controversies swirling around student-athletes. Yet for teachers who strive to maximize the learning of all students, the central question remains: How best to *teach* the student-athletes in class?

Because I wear two hats regarding student-athletes, I see that the right hand often does not know what the left is doing. By day, I teach in the Religious Studies Department and have served as its Head Teaching Assistant. By night, for the past five years, I worked as a tutor and mentor for the Department of Academic Affairs-Athletics. I find that while many instructors acknowledge the potential problems concerning student-athletes, few provide practical advice or prevent those problems. On numerous occasions, I have been asked by faculty to clarify both my role as a tutor and the Academic Affairs-Athletics structure. Faculty and teaching assistants often lack the tools necessary for addressing the issue of student-athletes—namely, a comprehensive awareness of student-athletes and their responsibilities, the resource network surrounding student-athletes, and the role that network can play in supporting both teachers and students. Below, I provide an introduction to those tools by offering four practical guidelines for maximizing the performance of student-athletes in class.

♦ Understand student-athletes and their diversity.

Without accurate information, bias based on stereotypes can seep into one's teaching and attitudes. Instructors should first strive to understand the facts about student-athletes and their diversity.

The 653 student-athletes at U.Va. (370 men, 283 women) are as physically, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse as their non-athlete colleagues. They comprise nearly 5% of the student population. Although many think of basketball or football players when imagining the stereotypical student-athlete, the majority do not play a high-profile sport. Student-athletes may not sand out in

class, particularly if they are out of season and not traveling. At the University 224 student-athletes (34%) receive no form of athletic scholarship. SAT scores for athletes range from 800-1500, with an average of 1100. All athletes train year-round, spending between 30 and 40 hours a week on their sport.

Although there is no such thing as a “typical” athlete at U.Va., they follow much the same schedule. The normal day of a student-athlete involves waking at 6 a.m., training at 7 a.m., classes in the morning, and practice throughout the afternoon until dinner. Study hall (Sunday through Thursday from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.) is mandatory for all first-year student-athletes and may be required for others. Study halls are supervised, and athletes required to attend must log a certain number of hours per week in order to participate in their sport.

♦ **Increase your awareness of the resource network surrounding student-athletes.**

Many faculty members do not know about compulsory study halls, nor about the tutors available during that time. Each year, Academic Affairs-Athletics employs about 30 graduate student tutors, who are recommended by the faculty from their respective departments. Tutors receive a copy of NCAA regulations addressing appropriate forms of assistance, training by Honor Committee Members, and instruction by the Academic Affairs Compliance staff. Tutors are monitored and evaluated. They do not serve as editors or proofreaders; indeed, tutors are forbidden to write on a student-athlete’s paper. For writing assistance, student-athletes are directed to the English Department’s Writing Center, a service available to all students.

Tutors typically do not know the details or content of all the courses they tutor. I serve as the tutor for many courses that lie outside my specialty. My job is to help students develop the skills necessary to learn the material on their own. I review students’ class notes and daily readings with them to assess comprehension. I then provide study skills advice

and reading strategies. After each student’s tutoring session, I submit a written evaluation of her/his progress and a description of the session’s content. I tell my tutees that seeing me does not replace interacting with their TA or professor.

In my department, where the chair has made it known that I am the Religion tutor, it is not uncommon for a professor to encourage a struggling student-athlete to meet with me. Doing so conveys to the athletes that the faculty member knows about the relevant resources and intends to hold student-athletes accountable for taking the initiative to exploit those resources. Open communication between faculty, tutor, and student has improved student-athlete performance in numerous cases.

Faculty and TAs are often unaware of the general structure of the athletic program. In Academic Affairs-Athletics, the Director answers to both the Director of Athletics and the Provost, and also serves as Association Dean. Five Academic Coordinators are assigned to different sports, one of whom is also a Learning Specialist at the Curry School. While a majority of student-athletes do not need monitoring, a few fall into the high-risk category, owing more to the time constraints of their sport than to lack of academic preparation.

Specific mechanisms and formal avenues of communication exist should an issue arise with a student-athlete. Early in the semester, the Academic Coordinators send faculty members a letter asking if they have an interest in further contact from Academic Affairs-Athletics. Some faculty members prefer not to know who the student-athletes are in their classes, a prerogative honored by the Athletic Department. To those who welcome further contact, the Academic Coordinators identify the student-athletes who are being monitored and ask for performance feedback. Many faculty members request the names of all student-athletes. They pass this information along to their TAs, who in turn send a quick summary to the Athletic Department, a tool that helps anticipate and prevent problems. Kathryn Jarvis, Associate Director of Academic

Affairs-Athletics, states unequivocally that their communications do not represent an attempt to garner better grades for athletes. The goal of Academic Affairs-Athletics is the same as that of the University's instructors—to help student-athletes become better students. The purpose of their early communication is to assess performance while it is still possible to improve. With regard to performance evaluation, "no surprises" is the unofficial motto of Academic Affairs-Athletics, an attitude consistent with that of the University's teachers. The Academic Coordinators' aim is to help student-athletes develop time management skills and learning strategies toward the goal of becoming self-sufficient, self-motivated, thriving students at U.Va.

- ♦ **Anticipate issues particular to student-athletes and implement appropriate policies.**

Understanding the situation of student-athletes does not imply preferential treatment; it merely involves anticipating issues and developing policies to deal with them. For example, student-athletes may have numerous excused absences. How can you best grade participation on days absent, and how will absences figure in to the computation of the final grade? Is offering make-up work appropriate? Convey your expectations clearly and in writing on your syllabus. Express to the class that it is each student's responsibility to

contact you with a written excuse (student-athletes are provided a letter from their coach) and to arrange for the rescheduling of missed exams and homework assignments.

Additionally, consider that if you have late afternoon office hours, student-athletes may not be able to attend. Similarly, if you have films or review sessions in the evenings, know that these might conflict with study hall hours. One option is to contact the Academic Coordinator to arrange for student-athletes to receive study hall credit for attending extra-class activities.

- ♦ **Be a team player, and use the resource network to your teaching advantage.**

In addition to instructors, student-athletes are accountable to Academic Coordinators and mentors. If a student-athlete is struggling, instructors can help connect that athlete to the resources they need to become better students. With one quick e-mail notice, a student might be referred to a Learning Needs Specialist, or be required by their coach to set up a weekly tutoring appointment. Keeping the lines of communication open with those who work toward the same goals can help maximize students' performance. "No surprises" is a desirable goal for both academics and athletics. In the end, we might just discover that we are on the same team after all.