

A WINNING TRANSITION PLAN

Helping high school athletes navigate the college recruitment process requires some extra steps. Make sure you're on top of eligibility requirements and parental expectations.

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Navigating the college admissions process can be confusing enough for most high school students. This process is even further complicated when a student athlete must stumble through the collegiate athletic recruitment process. School counselors play a unique role in this process and should be prepared for myriad obstacles that will inevitably arise when working with student athletes in the recruitment process.

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which oversees Division I and Division II athletics programs and athletes, in 2013 there were more than 444,000 student athletes and 18,000 teams. Over the last 10 years, the number of student athletes competing at the collegiate level increased by more than 75,000. With more and more colleges and universities adding teams each year, more students

then ever are competing at the collegiate level. Although the numbers have increased, support for these students has remained relatively stagnant. The NCAA website and NCAA Eligibility Center are both a wealth of information, but many first-generation college students and their families find the information new and confusing.

Supporting student athletes and their families is a process that begins early in high school. The NCAA recruitment policy expressly forbids prospective student athletes from hiring agents or representation. As their school counselor, you will fill many roles, such as point of contact, advisor, advocate, educator and guide. Some schools are fortunate enough to have extremely knowledgeable coaches to guide student athletes through the recruitment process. These coaches have specialization within their

sport, but they may be unaware of specific recruitment and academic eligibility requirements.

Identifying talented student athletes early can simplify the recruitment process. The biggest obstacle in student athlete recruitment comes with students who begin the recruitment process in their senior year. Identifying prospective student athletes early is imperative to educate both the students and the parents on academic requirements for the NCAA and potential colleges and universities they may want to attend. School counselors should work in collaboration with coaches and the school's athletic director to identify these students and help set them on the right academic path should they end up wanting to play college sports.

An amazing athlete without strong academics will receive less interest from





colleges and universities (despite what the media has been reporting in recent years). Historically most colleges and universities have a stringent admissions process whether a student is an athlete or not. Educating parents and student athletes on the academic requirements early will guarantee more doors are open to the student athletes in their senior year. One of the biggest obstacles in this phase of recruitment can be teaching parents that athletic talent does not trump academic eligibility.

A common misconception in the athletic recruitment process is that students must simply have good grades and a good GPA. Academic eligibility is far more complicated and requires in-depth knowledge of eligibility requirements. NCAA requires student athletes to have a minimum GPA in 16 core courses. This GPA is based on the student's 16 core courses in high school and does not include grades in areas outside of the core courses in math, English, social studies and science. Many student athletes are under the misconception that they can get A's and B's in elective courses and C's and D's in core courses. They incorrectly assume their cumulative high school GPA determines their NCAA academic eligibility.

In addition to core GPA, NCAA requires minimum scores on either the SAT or ACT. Student athletes who take the SAT will simply use their overall score. Student athletes who take the ACT will be given a sum of their ACT subscores. Either one of these tests can be used for academic eligibility so encourage your student athletes to take the test with which they are most comfortable.

To further complicate the academic eligibility process, NCAA uses a sliding scale to match student core courses GPA with standardized test scores. You can find this initial eligibility academic sliding scale on the NCAA Eligibility Center website for quick reference, www.ncaaeligibilitycenter.org. Student athletes and parents need to be aware of these requirements at the beginning of high school, not during their senior year.

It's also important to keep in mind that changes are coming to NCAA eligibility requirements. College-bound

student-athletes first entering an NCAA Division I college or university on or after Aug. 1, 2016, will need to meet new academic rules to receive athletics aid (scholarship), practice or compete during their first year.

The Identification Process

When the student athlete counseling process begins, you may need to temper parents' expectations. It is important to maintain an encouraging and supportive relationship with both the student athlete and parents during this process. As many school counselors know, parents can project their dreams onto their children. Provide parents and student athletes with numerous resources on college programs that match both students' interest and ability with parental expectations. In some instances, you may need to bring parents down from the clouds.

Maintaining support while educating parents can be tricky, but you can do it with statistics on admissions rates and biometric data on current collegiate athletes. This information is almost always readily available on college websites in the form of a "Freshmen Profile" in addition to team rosters on the college's athletic website. Begin by sitting down with the student athlete and the student's parents, and establish a set of criteria for selecting a college and athletic program that is the best fit for the student athlete. Have the student athlete and parents identify colleges offering majors in which the student is interested. Have them take financial considerations into account as well.

With your guidance, parents should identify three sets of schools: schools the student athlete can attend without receiving athletic scholarships, schools the student athlete can attend with partial athletic scholarships and schools the student athlete can only attend with full athletic scholarships. According to NCAA, only 2 percent of college students will receive some type of athletic scholarship. Even fewer student athletes receive full athletic scholarships; therefore, it's important for parents to set realistic financial expectations.

This is an excellent opportunity to work with student athletes and their

parents on setting academic goals that will increase a student athlete's attractiveness to colleges. Guiding parents toward setting both academic goals and athletic goals early on will help them cope with potential financial need come enrollment time.

Finally, in an initial meeting, establish the criteria of academic support potentially given once at college. Parents should identify, with your help, what type of support they can expect from the college sports team once their child is enrolled. Establishing these criteria early allows you to provide exceptional support later during the most crucial step of recruitment – committing.

How Recruitment Works

After initial meetings to establish the student athlete's criteria for a college and team, begin to educate student athletes and parents on the actual recruitment process. Strong division I or II prospective student athletes will begin receiving contacts anytime between their sophomore and senior year, with offers extended in their senior year. Before student athletes can be formally recruited, they must complete NCAA Eligibility. Student athletes should complete the NCAA Eligibility Center at the beginning of their junior year. Once students have completed this, they will be assigned an NCAA ID number. This will then allow recruiters to speak with the student athletes and/or their parents.

This is often one of the most confusing steps in the process for student athletes and parents. It helps to sit down with student athletes and walk them through the process either one-on-one or in small groups. The NCAA Eligibility Center requires a fee, but if this cost is prohibitive, a fee waiver is possible. Contact your school's NCAA administrator, often the athletic director, to request a fee waiver for the student athlete.

The NCAA Eligibility Center website also contains minimum academic requirements. Review eligibility requirements for each student athlete, and provide individualized information to parents early to help student athletes maintain academic eligibility. Some high school courses will

not meet NCAA academic eligibility requirements, so it is important to review approved courses before the student athlete selects courses each year.

Working with parents and student athletes early by giving them a toolbox of questions to ask future recruiters will additionally guarantee a more straightforward process. Educated questions from student athletes and parents help weed out hollow promises from recruiters that will occasionally arise. Encourage parents to ask:

- What type of academic support will my student athlete receive at your college?
- What is the college's graduation rate for athletes in my student's sport?
- How many other athletes are being recruited for my student athlete's position?
- When can we set up a time for an official campus visit?
- If offered a scholarship, what percentage of tuition could we expect to be covered the first year?
- If my student is injured in his or her senior year of high school, will this offer stand?
- How long have the coaches been coaching at this university?
- What does an average day for an athlete on your team look like?

Throughout the recruitment process, encourage student athletes, parents and coaches to keep game statistics and film. Student athlete recruitment is enhanced greatly when there is a body of evidence to support the student's ability. In many sports this is relatively easy. In track, student athletes' fastest official time in their event can be sufficient. For many other sports it is far more vague. Filming games and maintaining official team statistics should be the duty of all coaches, but in schools where this is not the norm you may want to collaborate with the athletic director or administration to advocate for their student athletes. In larger cities many newspapers and websites track this data, but encouraging the school to maintain official records will assist a student athlete through direct access and knowledge.

College coaches and recruiters may contact you to verify or request records for a student. Maintaining school

counseling records for your student athletes can aid in efficient and accurate conversations with coaches. Maintaining FERPA requirements in this case is paramount. Confidentiality is key, as information regarding the student's academics and athletics should remain confidential until the student athlete's parents give express written consent. Once a student has applied to the university and signed a release of records for individual universities, you can provide this information. Keeping these releases on file, in addition to academic and athletic records will allow a streamlined conversation with the coach or recruiter.

As the school counselor, you are often the individual most familiar with the student's academic eligibility and current course schedule. You will often be the main contact for a transcript request from the college coach. Occasionally you will be asked to provide verbal references for students as well. This is an opportunity to advocate for your students beyond the letter of recommendation that may have been written for their application. Verbal references can also be an excellent opportunity to connect the college coach with the high school coach. Connecting coaches can be a complicated process if the student's coach does not work in the high school during the day. Passing on contact information for the student athlete's coach can expedite the recruiting process and allow you to focus on supporting student athletes and continuing to educate their parents.


The most stressful time in the recruitment process comes when student athletes and their parents must make a decision on which college to attend. Many top student athletes will receive multiple offers, and the stress that comes with making a final decision can be paralyzing for a student athlete. This is where you can shine. Throughout the recruitment process, you will have learned what student athletes want to study, which university they wanted to attend the most originally and which university may meet the families' financial situation the best. There are hundreds of factors that come into play when a student athlete finally commits



WATCH

the NCAA eligibility webinar to learn more at www.ASCASchoolCounselor.org, or attend the author's session at the ASCA Annual Conference.

to a college, but above all else you should counsel student athletes and their parents toward the best fit based on the criteria the family established earlier on in the process without making the decision for them.

Once the student athlete commits to a university by signing the National Letter of Intent, your job still isn't done. If student athletes participate in a fall sport they may be required to attend summer training camps and move onto campus earlier than their peers. Maintain an encouraging and supportive relationship as your student athletes begin to cope with the transition of leaving home and beginning their collegiate athletic career. Frequent check-ins with student athletes at the end of their senior year will help them maintain their grades and smoothly transition out of high school. In many instances, the only reason a student athlete makes it to a collegiate team isn't because of talent but because of the guidance from coaches, administrators and school counselors along the way. 

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