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Put Me in, Coach! Making the Academic Learning Community an Option for Student-athletes

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition among researchers and practitioners alike that student-athletes are an "at risk" group of students in higher education today. More specifically, research has identified several specific negative conditions that impact student-athletes and threaten their success in college. Learning communities, on the other hand, have a longstanding and successful approach to supporting new college students, and many of the traditional benefits of learning community participation line up closely with the needs of student athletes. From our perspective, this close alignment presents an opportunity to leverage the powerful potential of learning communities to support a group of students who have not traditionally participated in these programs. In this piece, we put forth a research-based rationale, as well as a call for action, to consider the needs of student athletes in learning community design and recruit them into these unique programs.

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Contemporary research in the 21st century literature base has increasingly posited that first-year student-athletes are *still* first-year students*,* and consequently share many of the same challenges commonly experienced by their peers as they transition to college (Kidwell, 2005). At the same time, student-athletes must also overcome additional, unique obstacles—specifically related to their participation in sport (Broughton, 2001). Regardless of the source of the challenges, those familiar with learning communities will not be surprised to learn that strengths of the learning community approach align well with student-athletes' needs and have a strong potential to support their success in college. What *is* surprising, though, is that so few learning communities have been designed explicitly for student-athletes or with their needs in mind (Jolly, 2008; King, 2008; Petitpas & Danish, 1995). Indeed, since Meiklejohn's *Experimental College* in the 1920s, learning communities have been adapted to support many distinctive student populations at almost every type of institution in higher education—from Hispanic women studying ESL at a community college (Yaquab, 2010) to African-American students pursuing STEM disciplines at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) (Freeman, Alston, & Winborne, 2008) to students at a Big Ten research university (Schroeder, Brower, Bruffee, & Zeller, 2002). Descriptions of these communities and the students they have served are numerous (e.g., Levine, 1999; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004) and the evidence of the positive impacts of learning communities consistently grows. Still, while student affairs literature on the first-year experience (i.e., Eggleston & Mitchell, 2005; King, 2008) now highlights the need to consider how to best serve student-athlete populations during the transition to college, these scholars note few learning communities that specifically considered the needs of student-athletes. From our perspective, given the powerful potential of these programs to serve unique populations in transition, we must continue to explore how student affairs practitioners can enhance the first-year experience for student-athletes. To this end, the overlap between the needs of athletes and the strength of these programs reveals ways we might better serve these students through participation in formal learning communities.

First, in order to explore this overlap, we must ask what the special needs or considerations of first-year student-athletes are. To recap, despite experiencing "universal" first-year challenges (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Kidwell, 2005; Parham, 1993) as well as additional academic, social and psychosocial challenges related to sport participation (Broughton & Neyer, 2001), student-athletes are infrequently singled out as an "at risk" group by many in higher education. This is despite research suggesting that many college athletes, in direct relationship with their participation in sport, tend to have difficulty: (a) balancing dual roles as student and athlete (Adler & Adler, 1989); (b) combating feelings of isolation from the student body and faculty (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Chartrand & Lent,

1987; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993); (c) undergoing appropriate cognitive and psychosocial development (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001); and (d) engaging in meaningful academic, career, and professional development within athletic department practices such as academic clustering—all of which can limit their academic options (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Knobler, 2007). Each special need contributes toward student-athletes' status as an "at risk" group but also provides an initial context for thinking about how each might be addressed through thoughtfully designed learning communities.

First, we can consider the challenges both students and student-athletes experience of balancing dual roles during the higher education experience. During college many students, including athletes, struggle to strike an appropriate balance between academics and other competing demands in their lives—especially in the first-year. Student-athletes often experience further tension between dual roles as both a student and an athlete and face negative consequences when the latter role overshadows the former (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001). In addition to negatively affecting campus integration and student engagement (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009), this role tension may promulgate a type of identity foreclosure analogous to when a student commits to a particular major without adequately exploring available options (Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Moreover, scholars have posited that those focusing primarily on their athletic roles neither adequately engage in the process of exploring a major, nor participate in meaningful long-range career planning (Bell, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Navarro, 2012).

Second, significant isolation—from both faculty and peers—is also evident early on in the student-athlete college experience (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993). Practice and travel schedules, the multifaceted psychological and psychosocial aspects of their sport, and even restrictive NCAA policies frequently keep student-athletes isolated from the general student population (Watt & Moore, 2001). Since student development literature (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001) notes the importance of campus integration and development of social networks to successfully transition to college, the separate athletics world that student-athletes often operate within can further isolate them from the regular student body.

A third but related issue centering on unique challenges student-athletes face concerns cognitive and psychosocial challenges. Howard-Hamilton and Sina (2001) have documented ways that student-athletes' first-year experiences can have a long-term impact on their psychosocial, identity, and cognitive development processes. They recommend that institutions dedicate resources and seize opportunities to actively support athletes' cognitive and psychosocial, as well as physical and athletic development (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

Similarly, Harris, Altekruse, and Engels (2003) recommend that first-year student-athletes participate in psycho-educational programs after showing that participants reported improved relaxation, lowered stress, and better transitions to college through group experiences and networking opportunities that helped them manage their athletic and academic responsibilities.

Finally, Case et al. (1989), Fountain and Finley (2009), and Knobler (2007) discuss "academic clustering," a specific challenge unique to the student-athlete college experience. Fountain and Finley (2009) define this as a process by which practitioners advise student-athletes to pursue a limited set of undergraduate courses and majors that help students maintain athletics eligibility but that do not necessarily forward their educational or career desires. The practice can further complicate meaningful student development for the student-athlete population. Moreover, this practice can exacerbate many of student-athletes' career and identity development issues as they begin to view class and major choice as a way to maintain eligibility rather than a way to prepare for life after sport (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Navarro, 2012). Often the method of course and major selection can further inhibit personal reflection and engagement with the teaching and learning process.

To combat the challenges student-athletes face, many researchers prescribe specialized training, segregated from the student body, to help athletes successfully navigate college (Blann, 1985; Jolly, 2008; Watt & Moore, 2001). Such measures have been developed widely but have demonstrated mixed results. From another perspective, Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah (2006) suggest that while programs that continue to segregate student-athletes from the general student body may help student-athletes adjust to college in some ways, they also often contribute to isolation and the many related challenges that follow. In contrast to practices common in the field, they suggest moving away from the specialized and segregated training and instead advise integrating athletes into the general student body for a more purposeful and holistic development (Harris et al., 2003; Jolly, 2008). While it is still not clear whether student-athletes benefit from separate or integrated programming, what is clear is the desperate need to balance dual roles as students and athletes and to focus beyond just the athletics environment during the academic experience (Bell, 2009).

Today institutions have developed a range of programs to support student-athletes during the higher education experience (Bell, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). These approaches include specialized advising, individualized tutoring, and ad hoc student development units housed within athletic departments. However, these contemporary approaches to support student-athletes have produced mixed results. While it is clear that much more can be done and improvements can be made, what approaches can provide *the best* support for this unique population, given the challenges they face? Umbach et al.'s (2006)

questions about the practice of segregating student-athletes provide evidence that we may need to reconsider how to best serve student-athletes who often associate more with athletics than academic roles. If keeping student-athletes isolated from other students has arguably contributed to many of the undesirable outcomes discussed above, perhaps we should look toward deliberately integrative strategies as an alternative. In what follows, we match the needs of student-athletes with known strengths of learning communities to evaluate their potential as an explicit strategy to support this unique group of students. In addition, we present two unique learning community models to meet the needs of students based on the two current frames of thinking in student development literature: (a) total integration of student-athletes with the regular student body via an inclusive learning community model and (b) separate programs for student-athletes via an exclusive learning community model. To this end, we hope to demonstrate how issues such as role conflict, isolation, cognitive and psychosocial development, as well as practices such as academic clustering, can be addressed for student-athletes through participation in learning communities.

While student-athletes often experience difficulty establishing strong "student" or academic identities, participating in a learning community has been shown to promote students' ability to find an academic and intellectual home on campus. Brower (1997) found that the experience benefitted students' self-esteem and self-efficacy and increased their use of academic resources and opportunities on campus. Other studies have described participants as being much more likely to engage in academically oriented activities overall (e.g., Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, Russo, & Parsley, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). From another perspective, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) reported what participants in learning community programs valued most about the experiences including: (a) a sense of belonging; (b) intellectual energy and confidence; and (c) a new perspective on their own learning process. Each of these qualities contributes positively to participants developing an identity as a college student and would likely have a similar impact on student-athletes.

Due to competition, practice schedules, and segregated support programs that keep them apart from the campus community, many student-athletes experience isolation. Learning communities—as their name implies—bring students together. Most programs provide a shared academic schedule in which small groups of students co-enroll in a set of classes, work closely with faculty and staff, engage in collaborative learning, and establish friendships along the way (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Indeed, this central theme of *togetherness* in an academic setting, or as Tinto (2003) called it, "learning better together," is ubiquitous in the learning community literature. The bottom line is that participants enjoy the benefits of a pre-formed community rooted in academics that support the work of being a college student. It is likely that student-athletes,

even those constrained by competition and practice, would feel less isolated with such a community of academic peers.

Where student-athletes experience challenges with respect to psychosocial and cognitive development, learning community participants frequently experience several benefits. The learning environment in these communities is often described as more complex, demanding higher participation and responsibility from students. As a result, students have exhibited increased complexity on instruments that measure intellectual development (Landa, 1981; Gabelnick, Howarth, & Pearl, 1983; MacGregor, 1987). Elsewhere, learning community students have shown more complex thinking and worldviews, greater openness to ideas different than their own, greater intellectual richness, and greater intellectual empowerment (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Like all learning community participants, student-athletes, too, would benefit from these fertile learning environments.

Finally, we must consider the practice of academic clustering. The pre-requisite to all of the learning community benefits described above is—simply put—participation. And yet, few student-athletes participate in *academically-oriented* linked course programs, in part, because so few learning community programs consider their needs. More importantly, most athletes are advised toward course clusters designed to accommodate schedules and eligibility standards, as well as—anecdotally—the availability of tutors who can be retained by athletic departments. Though a historically negative practice, course clustering for athletes—through intelligent adaptation—could be made more beneficial for student-athletes if an exclusive model is indeed the most successful for student development (Case et al., 2009).

There are two basic approaches to promoting learning communities as a viable option for student-athletes. One approach is to design for student-athletes' *exclusive* use learning communities that take several of their needs into consideration. These could include avoiding conflicts with team schedule demands; they might also include NCAA compliance standards and progress-toward-degree requirements. Linked courses could include necessary general education requirements, exploratory or introductory courses, courses offered at convenient times, or courses that have historically been beneficial for first-year athletes. The overall theme could also be organized around majors in which athletes have frequently shown genuine interest and be targeted toward athletes (they might be recruited) while at the same time remaining open to general population students. While taking into consideration scheduling concerns, the key would be to shift the primary organizing principle of the cluster toward academic considerations.

In another approach, student-athletes could be integrated into learning communities open to the entire student body. They could choose from among the

various opportunities offered by their school and be given free choice of topic or themed options. The challenges in this approach are almost exclusively logistical. Many learning community programs already cater to the needs of special majors, degree programs, academic certificates, or—alternatively—unique student populations, and these options frequently take into consideration special time or day requirements during the design process. Cooperation and communication between an athletic department, a campus learning community program, and one or more academic departments could result in options that take athletic schedules into consideration but are still aimed at the general student population. Simple innovation such as this could bring the learning community opportunity to more student-athletes with little additional cost other than coordination.

As far as we have uncovered, few programs have intentionally taken student-athletes' needs into consideration in learning community design. That is not to say that none exist. However, in reaching out to our professional colleagues through email, networking, and through recent conference presentations on the issue, we have found little explicit evidence of the kinds of efforts we described above. Even a thorough scouring of the research literature suggests that these approaches are not widespread or at the very least, have not been studied. Only two recent dissertation manuscripts explore these practices—and results from those studies suggest some promise (Hall, 2007; Leon, 2011). More research, however, is needed.

Sadly, limited study within this unique nexus—the overlap between learning communities and student-athletes—severely limits our ability to make empirical claims about these recommendations. Prior research and theory developed around learning community participation, however, does strongly suggest that this approach to undergraduate education could greatly benefit student-athletes. Beyond the significant benefits enjoyed by all participants, the unique needs of student-athletes clearly line up with the strengths of the learning community approach. Work remains, however, to test that fit, and that process must begin with increased participation of student-athletes. This requires buy-in from athletic departments, learning community programs, academic departments, athletics practitioners, and student-athletes themselves. We present the charge to campus level practitioners to best deliver programming—via an inclusive or an exclusive model—that best meets the needs of their student-athlete population.

For almost a century, the learning community has produced a *community benefit* for a diverse array of student populations—at almost every type of institution in higher education. Today, backed by a strong rationale rooted in research and practice, we have a unique opportunity to extend that same benefit to student-athletes throughout our colleges and universities, and, in doing so, to better support success in their undergraduate educations.

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