
Envisioning Scholar-Practitioner Collaborations

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CHAPTER 5

COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT PROFESSIONALS

The Career Transition Scorecard as an Instructive Model

Eddie Comeaux

The need to forge more forward-thinking, progressive, and innovative approaches to enhance the quality of Division I college athletes' educational experience has become clear. Recently, NCAA President Emmert (2014) asserted:

[The] Division I Board and I are searching for solutions to ensure that student-athletes maintain a better balance between academics and athletics with an emphasis on dedicating additional time to academic pursuits to promote their success once their playing days are over. (para. 46)

Indeed, we need a more precise understanding of the kinds of effective data-driven practices that foster and facilitate meaningful learning,

retention, and school-to-career transitions for this special population of students. Collaborative efforts between academics—faculty, postdoctoral fellows, or doctoral students—and academic support professionals within athletic departments are important. In particular, this type of work is necessary for coordinating academic resources, research agendas, and student assessment activities, and ultimately for promoting college athlete academic success (Comeaux, 2015b).

This chapter examines a steadily growing body of research on the benefits and challenges of collaboration among academic and student affairs, and introduces the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS) for athletes. The CTS, an antideficit and data-driven approach, is a promising practice and instructive model for athletic department stakeholders seeking to form effective collaborations with academics for facilitating college athletes' academic success and developing a positive campus climate (Comeaux, 2015b). It is anticipated that readers of this chapter will advance their understanding of how to create, facilitate, and sustain effective and successful collaborations that serve students well on their own campuses. To begin, I first discuss the existing research that can shed light on collaboration between academic and student affairs professionals.

RESEARCH ON ACADEMIC-STUDENT AFFAIRS COLLABORATION

At present, almost no empirical research exists on integrated academics and athletic department personnel models or approaches, largely because these campus stakeholders have very little coordination or collaboration through, for example, shared research agendas, goals for student development, or data-gathering instruments. Put another way, integrated academics and athletic department personnel models or approaches are simply not the norm, nor does there appear to be a keen interest in collaboration. Instead, academics generally take an unsustainable, traditional approach of working with participating athletic departments on research projects or student development activities.

Academics are generally considered outsiders by athletic departments. Nevertheless, they might seek to influence practice by identifying a problem, collecting and analyzing data from a participating athletic department, and reporting the findings to athletics stakeholders (see Comeaux, 2015b). The problem with this traditional approach is that the pseudocollaborative efforts between academics and athletic department personnel rarely lead to real, sustainable, integrated communities. There is rarely follow up on these projects, nor is there long-term commitment to building on project strengths or addressing problem areas.

Because of the current lack of research on collaboration between academics and athletic department personnel specifically, in the remainder of this section I highlight the growing body of research on the benefits and challenges of collaboration between academic and student affairs professionals more generally. This literature can serve as an instructional model for informing, building, and strengthening alliances between academics and athletic department personnel. I first summarize the benefits of collaboration, and then turn my attention to the obstacles.

Benefits of Collaboration

Calls for collaboration of all types have echoed throughout the higher education community (e.g., American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998; American College Personnel Association, 1994; Keeling, 2004, 2007). Unfortunately, however, there are few studies that identify aspects of effective collaboration between academic and student affairs staff. Notably, Kezar (2001), in a national survey of senior student affairs professionals, examined their view of areas including: reasons for and types of collaboration; barriers to collaboration; structures or models of facilitating collaboration; successful strategies for collaboration; and outcomes assessment of collaboration. All of Kezar's survey participants reported being engaged in some form of collaboration on campus, and many noted high levels of success. Cooperation, student affairs staff attitudes, common goals, and personalities were named as essential factors. Participants pointed to counseling, first-year experience programs, orientation, assessment of learning, and recruitment as successful collaborations.

Kezar's (2001) survey findings shed light on cultural and structural strategies to create, facilitate, and maintain effective collaborations between academic and student affairs. Valuable cultural strategies included cross-institutional dialogue, common language development, shared vision, opportunities to generate enthusiasm, and staff development. At a structural level, combining fiscal resources, systemic change, incentives, planning, changes to promotion and tenure requirements, restructuring, reward system changes, and clear expectations and accountability were all viewed as important. Survey participants reported that cultural strategies were, on average, used more frequently than structural strategies.

Banta and Kuh (1998) advocated for collaboration between faculty members and student affairs professionals, particularly on activities associated with student outcome assessments. The authors provided examples of successful collaboration at various colleges and universities, and noted

the benefits of such endeavors, including that they bring together multiple perspectives, save time and money, allow for shared resources, develop common definitions and language for student learning and development, and improve educational outcomes. The researchers concluded that active engagement and collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals are necessary if higher education leaders seek to precisely promote and assess student gains during college.

Barriers to Collaboration

Before campus stakeholders engage in collaboration, it is important that they understand the potential barriers. Kezar (2001) noted the most frequent obstacles to collaboration between academics and student affairs professionals are lack of faculty and staff time, faculty disciplinary ties, faculty resistance, and lack of established goals. Moreover, Bohen and Stiles (1998) identified common obstacles to collaboration between academics and student affairs professionals, including that faculty are not trained to work together, the academic system does not reward collaborative work, and administrative structures do not support collaboration. As well, many collaborative endeavors are not successful because of different priorities and expectations (Ferren & Stanton, 2004), varying cultural beliefs faculty and student affairs professionals (Arnold & Kuh, 1999), and distrust, lack of a shared vision, and competing beliefs about student learning (Schroeder, 1999).

Magolda (2005) once argued that we should not “just accept collaboration as a way of life in higher education.... [P]artnerships must be meaningful, reciprocal, and responsive” (p. 21). This can be a tall task. In the next section, before describing one potential approach to this type of collaboration, I first describe the current state of academic support centers for athletes and discuss the role of practitioners in organizational learning.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTERS FOR ATHLETES

Division I athletes are a unique subset of the broader student population in higher education. They encounter tremendous demands and expectations, challenges, and stresses inside and outside of the classroom as a consequence of their participation in sport, requiring support for their personal and academic needs. For example, on average, Division I college athletes devote more than 40 hours per week to sport-related activities, not including additional hours potentially lost due to mental or physical fatigue or nagging injuries (Wolverton, 2008a).

In 1991, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) implemented Bylaw 16.3.1.1, which mandated that member colleges and universities provide general academic counseling and tutoring services to all Division I athletes. As such, academic advisors, learning specialists, and tutors have been employed in an attempt to “protect and enhance the educational experience of student-athletes and to assure proper emphasis on educational objectives” (NCAA, 2013, p. 379). The importance placed on a comprehensive array of support programs and services for athletes continues to grow, and athletic departments have more than doubled their spending on academic support (Wolverton, 2008b, 2016).

Despite the development and expansion of academic support services for Division I athletes over the years, the reality is that these intentional efforts largely comprise new rhetoric and language, while delivering, at best, mediocre educational experiences and subsequent outcomes for the students they are designed to serve. On average, 45% of Football Bowl Subdivision football players—who generate millions in revenue for their universities and are disproportionately Black—are not receiving degrees (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Madsen, 2014). As well, many academic support centers overemphasize simply maintaining academic eligibility, which creates a subculture of low academic expectations, thus diminishing the chances for athletes to engage and re-engage in a practice of active learning at their colleges and universities (Comeaux, 2015c).

The emphasis on maintaining player eligibility is shaped by a variety of externalities including television networks, NCAA, boosters, and alumni. For example, the NCAA supports commercial policies that shape athletic department operations in ways that may or may not be aligned with the academic values of American higher education (Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008). Relatedly, Brown (2011) reported that Division I men’s and women’s basketball players tend to miss the most classes during an athletic season—2.4 and 2.5 per week—respectively largely due to coaches’ demands and television networks’ dictation of schedules and times for games. I refer the reader to other works for a more thorough explanation of how these external forces shape the academic and athletic experiences of athletes (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Clotfelter, 2011; Comeaux, 2015a; Toma, 2003).

Lastly, in a survey of advisors and counselors in academic support centers for athletes at Division I colleges and universities, less than 3% of participants reported that their various programs and services included assessment activities to measure their impact on athlete learning outcomes (Comeaux, 2015d). This suggests that practitioners in academic support centers are more prone to relying on intuition, hope, and anecdotal information than on evidence to make decisions about the academic strengths

and problem areas of athletes. In the absence of data-driven practices, practitioners generally rely on assumptions and in some cases develop internalized biases and deficit-oriented views toward athletes (Benson, 2000). Comeaux (2015c), in a discussion of practitioners' cognitive frames, noted:

Practitioners who are guided by a deficit cognitive frame may care deeply about the academic well-being of their athletes, but they are likely to ascribe differences in team APR scores and overall academic performance of athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport to cultural stereotypes or alleged internal deficiencies linked to the athletes themselves (e.g., low cognitive ability or a lack of motivation). (p. 7)

It is clear that practitioners (and faculty) who hold this type of deficit-thinking orientation tend to view academic underperformance as a problem with the athlete rather than with the college or university system. In contrast, practitioners who are guided by an anti-deficit and data-driven cognitive frame tend to believe that *all* college athletes are capable of learning. Thus, they deliberately draw on empirical research findings to identify structural inequalities and institutional policies and practices that impact athletes' academic performance within all racial and ethnic groups, in both genders, and across all sports, rather than placing blame on the athletes themselves.

Given the absence of assessment activities in academic support centers that serve athletes (Comeaux, 2015d), it is reasonable to conclude that practitioners have not been particularly effective in using data for planning, decision making, evaluation, or accountability. It is necessary—as well as possible—for practitioners to identify fresh perspectives and creative ways to address these internal deficiencies, while ensuring athletes maximize opportunities to develop their academic talents. Yet new ways of thinking about the role of practitioners in organizational learning are rarely discussed and certainly deserve greater attention. For example, because of the chasm between research and practice in academic support centers for athletes, collaborative efforts between academics and athletic department personnel would be a useful and innovative approach, and a reasonable first step to addressing internal deficiencies and enhancing the overall well-being of college athletes.

In light of Kezar's (2001) survey findings, I discuss assessment activities as a meaningful way to help facilitate collaboration between academics and athletic department professionals and to enhance the quality of experience for college athletes in the next section. In particular, I focus on the Career Transition Scorecard for athletes as promising tool in this work.

THE CAREER TRANSITION SCORECARD: AN ILLUSTRATION OF COLLABORATION

Over the past decade as an academic, I have worked closely with athletic departments across NCAA divisional classifications and within community colleges. In this role, I have learned that building collaborative and sustainable work relationships between academics and athletic department professionals can be very complex and challenging—and it certainly requires mutual effort from the two stakeholder groups. Collaborative efforts are more likely to lead to desired experiences and outcomes when these two groups use data to inform and shape policies and practices that promote learning for college athletes and success for athletic departments (Comeaux, 2015c).

One of the most encouraging but under-discussed and under-utilized opportunities for collaboration involves bridging the gap between research and practice in academic support centers for athletes (see Comeaux, 2015b). It is a meaningful collaborative activity in which academics and athletic department professionals can mutually benefit and help one another better understand the college athlete experience. In particular, few, if any, athletic departments hire or engage full-time researchers to facilitate student outcome assessments, which is a glaring internal deficiency. And academics who study the interplay of athletics and higher education indeed share an interest in the roles of student *and* athlete, and too often seek access to athletic departments for their own research agenda.

The CTS, as an example of collaboration between academics and athletic department professionals, can help to bridge this gap. The CTS for athletes focuses on student outcome assessments and athletic department climate assessments. It is an equity-minded and action-oriented approach to accountability and change. Comeaux (2013) designed the CTS for athletes to challenge both individual and collective assumptions in athletic departments; address the lack of explicit and positive learning environments designed to influence desired educational outcomes for athletes across race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport; and to enhance the quality of athletes' school-to-career transitions. Thus, the CTS generally aims to improve educational outcomes for athletes and to bring about change at the individual and organizational levels.

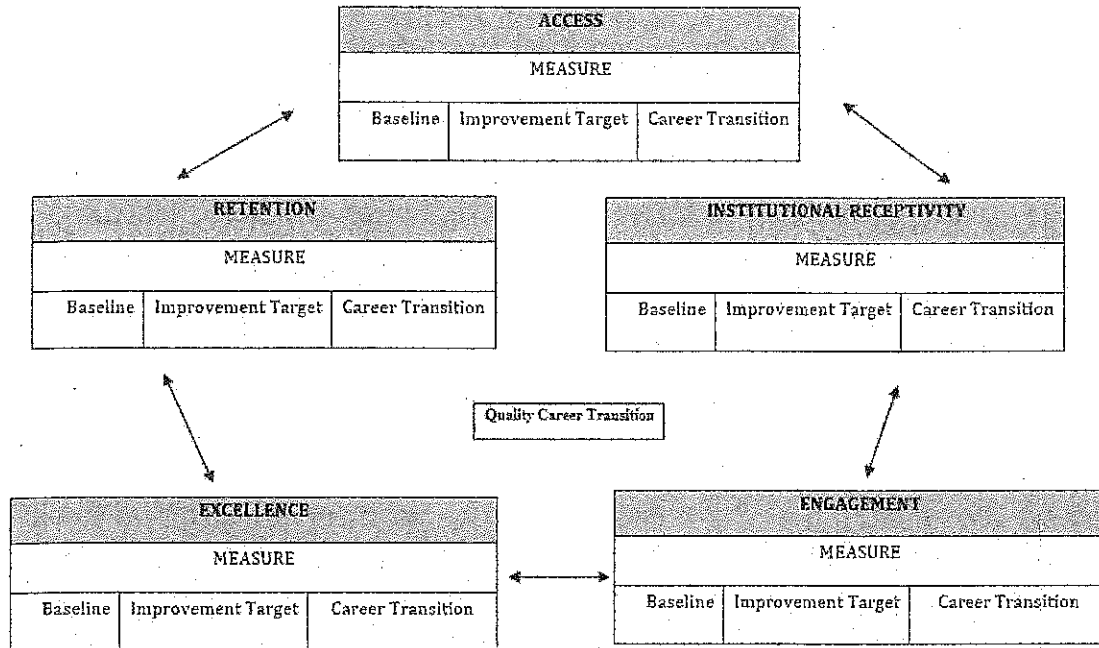
So that practitioners can truly recognize patterns and conditions of college athletes that are linked to desired outcomes, the CTS uses the practitioner-as-researcher model developed by Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo (2004) as an alternative methodology of knowledge production. In this model, "individuals conduct research about their own institutions, and by doing so they acquire knowledge that they can use to bring about change in these institutions" (p. 108). This approach requires

practitioners within an academic support center for athletes to become researchers in order to work with academics (outside researchers) who take on the role of professional facilitators of the process. Academics work closely with the team of practitioner-researchers to engage in critical thinking and dialogue in order to improve their practice in a collaborative, data-driven, reflective, inclusive, action-oriented, learning-oriented, and results-oriented way (Toole & Louis, 2002). Moreover, academics determine the conceptual framework and research agenda, but the practitioner-researchers conduct the actual research. They work closely with the academics to compile, analyze, and interpret data on athletes' campus experiences and to develop and implement concrete action plans. Likewise, the practitioner-researchers maintain existing data on the college athlete experience to produce a collaborative "culture of evidence" that champions the use of data-driven practices within the athletic department. During this collaboration, multiple perspectives, common goals and visions, trust, mutual respect, and resources are shared.

The CTS includes a climate survey administered to college athletes in participating athletic departments. It also comprises five "performance perspectives" (identified as fundamental to achieving quality career transitions) to assess department performance: access, retention, institutional receptivity, excellence, and engagement. Each of these five performance perspectives uses baseline disaggregated data, targets a measurable improvement, and then defines quality career transition for each (see Figure 5.1).

Each participating athletic department might have different needs and interests within the CTS framework, and they might select specific performance perspectives on which to focus. As such, academics and practitioner-researchers work collectively to examine available data on the five performance perspectives. Then, based on this examination, they create an individualized version of the CTS that might include measures such as participation in purposeful engagement activities, enrollment in STEM majors, academic honors and awards received by athletes, or racial and ethnic composition of staff in comparison to the athlete population. In addition, athlete participants provide feedback through journal writing and storytelling about their experiences under each selected performance perspective. This approach allows them to assess how athletic department professionals perform in facilitating quality career transitions of athletes across race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport.

After deliberately creating the CTS and examining data disaggregated by subgroups, both academics and practitioner-researchers share their findings with the academic community via written reports and formal presentations. In doing so, practitioner-researchers essentially become knowledge *makers* rather than merely knowledge *users*. Moreover, with



Analyze Data Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sport within the Framework of the Five Performance Perspectives

- **ACCESS:** majors, departments/schools, internships, graduate and professional schools.
- **RETENTION:** course-taking patterns, degree completion rate.
- **INSTITUTIONAL RECEPTIVITY:** diversity of coaches, staff and administrators; organizational climate and culture.
- **EXCELLENCE:** course grades, GPA, academic honors and awards, career placement postgraduation.
- **ENGAGEMENT:** interaction with faculty and nonathlete peers, cross-racial interaction, study groups, undergraduate research projects, writing groups, clubs and organizations, internships, tutorial sessions, volunteerism.

Figure 5.1. An illustration of the career transition scorecard (CTS) for athletes framework.

this collaboration on assessment, academics are granted access to comprehensive data within participating athletic departments that might not otherwise be possible. This data-driven approach is a sharp departure from practitioner reliance on anecdotal evidence and intuition that had previously informed decision making and practice within athletic departments. Noteworthy is that the assessment of athletes' campus experiences is ongoing and can lead to resourceful and sustainable collaboration.

In athletic departments that use the CTS framework, academics have already observed shifts both to practitioner practices and to their ways of thinking about data use in academic support centers (Comeaux, 2013). Structured interviews are ongoing. At one athletic department where the CTS was implemented, members of the practitioner-researcher team were surprised to learn how many athletes had not participated in purposeful engagement activities such as internships and research projects with faculty. When disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport, the numbers were more alarming, prompting rich discussion among academics and practitioner-researchers about ways to interpret and address this ongoing pattern. Members of the team were aware that presenting their findings to the academic community was simply an initial step in the CTS project. The long-term intent is to monitor patterns and conditions of college athletes linked to their established CTS benchmarks while developing and implementing intervention strategies. When asked to comment on their overall commitment to the CTS project, one member of the practitioner-researcher team stated, "I am eager to get started with the next phase of the project and the opportunity to work with my team.... A lot of interesting data to explore here."

CONCLUSION

Currently, sustainable collaboration between academics and athletic department professionals on student assessment is relatively rare. Nonetheless, the goal of this chapter was to highlight one effective framework that is low-risk but offers opportunities for high reward. The CTS for athletes has the potential to create sustainable collaboration between academics and athletic department professionals on student outcome assessments and athletic department climate assessments. It creates opportunities for dialogue and encourages academics and athletic department professionals to develop a broader, more inclusive understanding of the highly commercialized and complex nature of the athletics enterprise. Collectively through the CTS, these campus stakeholder groups can develop a common language of learning; acquire college athlete-specific data; bridge the chasm between research and practice in academic support centers; challenge individual and collective assumptions about athletes across race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport; create positive learning environments for athletes; and enhance the quality of school-to-career transitions for athletes.

There is much more to learn about creating sustainable collaborations. Nevertheless, the CTS can serve as an instructive model that pushes traditional boundaries and inspires ongoing collaboration between academics and athletic department professionals, leading to an enriched learning

experience for college athletes. For now, it is hoped that collaborations between academics and athletic department professionals, using the CTS for athletes and other innovative tools, are approached with purpose, creativity, and enthusiasm, and ultimately with the intention of pursuing a shared goal of student learning and development.

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