

Associated Colleges of the Midwest Thoughts About Academic-Athletic Integration

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The genesis of this conference evolved from an Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) initiative contemplating the development of an ACM athletic conference. A variety of reasons—both logistical and financial, with the onset of the recession—led the consortium’s Board of Directors to table the concept for future consideration. Consequently, these preliminary discussions involving presidents, academic deans, and athletic directors led to both consortium-wide and individual institutional discussions about maximizing the educational value of ACM athletic programs. To that end, ACM Deans applied for and received a grant from ACM’s Mellon-funded Faculty Career Enhancement (FaCE) Project to consider the *“Intentional Integration of Academic and Athletic Program—support for collaborative work between faculty and coaches at ACM institution that would*

- *strengthen ties and respect between faculty and coaches,*
- *identify and strengthen the existing overlap of student learning that occurs both in the classroom and through participation in sports, and*
- *create new and innovative ways to increase the overlap in an intentional way both in the classroom and out of the classroom.”*

Perhaps surprising to some, the ACM consortium has its roots in intercollegiate athletics. In 1958 a group of 10 presidents representing Midwest Athletic Conference schools met to discuss ways in which the grouping might collectively “enrich the curricula” of member institutions through a variety of academic collaborations. Since that time ACM has developed an international reputation for educational excellence, but the consortium’s athletic ties have loosened, with member institutions splintering into four separate Division III conferences (the Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, Midwest Conference, Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, and Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference).

There are some aspects of the ACM “integration initiative” that are perhaps unique when compared to similar efforts by Division III athletic conferences. First, and perhaps foremost, is inherent in ACM’s core mission: a mandate to develop a variety of educational opportunities that complement more formal academic programs. Second, a distinctive spirit of cooperation exists among consortium partners. This level of cooperation is not apparent in some athletic conferences, where the quest for competitive success may trump broader educational goals. Third, there is great interest on the part of some in the consortium to identify ways in which curricular opportunities that take advantage of coach and faculty expertise and student interest in sport might be further developed and put into motion. Finally, consortium partners understand the importance of a holistic approach to integration and recognize a true interdependency in virtually any educational endeavor on a small college campus.

THE CASE FOR AN INTEGRATION INITIATIVE

The impact of intercollegiate athletics on liberal arts college campus culture is undeniable, and this is certainly the case for ACM institutions. On average, approximately one in every four ACM students participates on intercollegiate teams. Indeed, at some consortium schools more than 30 percent of matriculants play a varsity sport, and athletic administrators estimate that it is not unusual for more than 40 percent of students to have represented a school team at some point during their college years. Compare these figures to the low single-digit participation rates found at big-time, Division I-A universities where thousands of students enjoy a fan experience but a relatively select few can point to athletics as an integral aspect of their educational experience. And it may be important to note that for at least some ACM schools a vibrant intercollegiate athletic program is seen as an indispensable part of the institution's student recruitment and retention efforts. Finally, while the overwhelming majority of ACM athletes are initially attracted to consortia schools because of the outstanding liberal arts education they provide, there can be no doubt that the opportunity to play the sport they love is most often a non-negotiable requirement.

Just how important is the ACM athletic experience to students and, in a larger sense, their institutions?

While students typically spend between 12-18 hours per week in traditional classroom settings, how they choose to spend the remaining 100+ hours has an increasingly dramatic impact on the undergraduate experience. In his extensive study of how students might make the most of college, Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Richard Light concludes that learning outside of the classroom, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities, is vital. When Light asked students to identify a seminal incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, 80 percent cited a situation or event that had occurred outside the classroom. Those students went on to emphasize the importance of relationships they had developed with various mentors, professors, resident advisors, counselors, and, yes, coaches and other members of the athletic department.

And, make no mistake about it, the amount of time Division III athletes spend on their sports has increased, in some cases dramatically, over the past two decades. While it is true that in most cases participation in small college athletics is viewed as less of a job than at Division I counterpart schools, the oftentimes popular perception that playing in Division III requires only an intramural like commitment is patently false. Any list of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Tournament results and national rankings will inevitably include a number of ACM schools, and this level of excellence is not achieved without a focused devotion to perfecting individual skills and team cohesion, as well as an associated time commitment. For example, at some ACM schools the non-traditional season, once an opportunity for team members to play and train informally, has become an increasingly intense practice period. Indeed, at some Division III schools athletes indicate spending 30 or more hours per week on sport related activities during "traditional" seasons.

Finally, the level of resources, both financial and otherwise, that liberal arts colleges devote to supporting strong, competitive sport programs is considerable. ACM athletic facilities are among the finest in the nation, and in many cases represent a massive capital investment. With the seemingly ever-growing specter of sport specialization, coaching and athletic support staffs are larger than ever, and represent yet another significant athletic-related fiscal commitment. On most liberal arts college campuses, the intercollegiate athletic budget represents one of the largest institutional operating expenditures. Factor in the significant investments of student time, facilities, and various human resource components associated with college athletic programs, and one might conclude that ACM partners would be missing the boat if they did not think long and hard about how college sports might best interact with the most ambitious educational goals.

“INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION” DEFINED

What do we mean by “intentional integration”? In a general sense, any comprehensive integration initiative might best be defined as a focused effort to encourage the athletic, academic, and student life dimensions of colleges and universities to work jointly in attempting to align athletic programs with educational missions. A perhaps more useful definition was developed at one of the ACM member institutions campus meetings, where a group of campus colleagues concluded that integration might be best viewed as a “multi-dimensional concept” exemplified by: (a) communication; (b) identification and appreciation of the unique contributions of each line of activity to the liberal arts mission of the college; (c) shared values; and (d) the sharing of time and talent.

Campus partners from yet another ACM school took pains to emphasize that while the institution’s educational mission is “centered on academics,” it is recognized and in some quarters even celebrated that residential, co-curricular, and athletic experiences also play an important role in what students gain from their college experience.

Who are the “key players” in the quest for integration, and what challenges do they face as they consider the appropriate role intercollegiate sport might play in the academy?

College presidents have from time to time engaged in the conduct and oversight of Division III athletics, but this involvement is often the result of a NCAA-driven initiative or some perceived sports-related crisis or campus scandal. We may want to consider finding ways to keep presidents more informed and to encourage their active involvement in important decision making processes, while remaining sensitive to the multi-faceted demands on their time. Likewise, the senior administrator (Vice President for Student Affairs, Provost, Dean of the College) charged with broad oversight of athletics (often known as the “direct report”) must step forward in clarifying the role of intercollegiate sports on his/her campus. These individuals are typically charged with overseeing the

evaluation of athletic administrators and coaches and can send a powerful message by utilizing performance criteria that transcend won-loss records.

The faculty appropriately sees the academic program as primary. Some believe that while there may be a place in the academy for extracurricular activities, the all-consuming nature of competitive sports too often threatens the intellectual focus of the institution. Perhaps ironically, more than a few schools used the word "indifference" to describe how faculty viewed athletics. It was noted that a perceived ambivalence "might make things easier, but not necessarily healthy." The educational utility of well-conceived college sports programs must be clearly articulated if faculty are to support the time and resources needed, and opportunities for coaches and faculty to find common ground as teachers and mentors should be encouraged.

The Director of Athletics is often expected to be all things to all people and regularly deals with the inevitable competing needs of various campus constituencies. Because of the delicate nature of the position, the A.D. must have a close and open relationship with direct reports and must also enjoy appropriate support from the president.

Coaches, like athletic directors, are asked to serve more than one master. They are charged with upholding and living by institutional and conference ideals but feel increasingly compelled to win conference championships and to demonstrate achievement at the national level. While reasonably positive competitive success will always be a goal, the development and/or maintenance of a campus culture that promotes a clear balance between this aim and academic goals will be essential for clarifying the important value coaches add to the broader educational mission of the institution.

Students participating on sports teams have varied goals, from highly skilled athletes who seek to go as far as they can in their sport, to the more modestly gifted who have chosen to compete at the Division III level for a better opportunity to participate. The great majority of athletes are coming to college from a youth or secondary school model that values specialization and year-round training. Many want to continue to work to improve their skill and fitness levels, and see it as their right to do so, even if such activity excludes participation in other co- or extracurricular opportunities that may have particular educational value. On one ACM campus students reported feeling "stuck in the middle between expectations of their professors and those of their coaches" and called for "a better understanding" between the two groups in terms of both athletic and academic commitments.

As the above integration definition suggests, the goals and ideals of integration speak to the need for these six groups—presidents, faculty, athletic directors, students, coaches, and the senior administrator who oversees athletics—to communicate effectively and work cohesively toward a system that supports the pursuit of competitive athletic success in a context where institutional educational missions and values are primary.

ACM CHALLENGES

It may be particularly helpful to consider the various challenges, both specific and more general, identified by ACM partners during the institutional meetings to discuss campus integration of academic, athletic, and student life dimensions.

A Perceived Lack of Communication

Almost every school reported concerns about a perceived lack of communication among campus partners, often manifesting itself in misperceptions about the role of athletics, the conduct of the intercollegiate program, and contributions, or lack thereof, of members of the athletic department. For example, many schools argued that faculty have little or no recognition that coaching an athletic team is akin to teaching a class. In addition, some lamented that there was little campus recognition of the important role many coaches play in the education of the students on their teams. One ACM partner noted, "faculty have little sense of how coaches teach, and may not understand the broader learning goals of their teaching." Another ACM school argued that more frequent and "well-structured communication" between faculty and coaches would likely lead to greater awareness of the existing balance between academics and athletics on their campus. But this challenge is exacerbated by the waning of a long-standing "coach-faculty model" that has given way to a "separation of faculty and coaching roles." In addition, and in at least in some part due to increasing specialization, "coaches seem to interact and partner less with faculty (and for that matter with coaches of other sports) than in eras past." Some pointed to what they saw as an important distinction on campuses where coaches no longer (or never) enjoyed official faculty status, a condition said to "obviously and in many ways contribute to the lack of integration between academics and athletics."

A Perceived Athletic Subculture

Some reported the perception of a sort of athletic subculture on their campus. Indeed, one report noted "some students come to college solely for the purpose of continuing their athletic career for another four years." Another school noted, "some athletic teams like to live together in the residence hall, creating a tight and separate social group." And several schools argued that the oftentimes differential way in which athletes are oriented to college (particularly for fall sport participants) served to widen the divide with other factions of the campus. Likewise, some pointed to campus perceptions about athletes receiving various forms of "special treatment" furthering the belief that those who play on teams represent a distinct form of campus citizen. Finally, one school went so far as to make mention of a concern that athletes are afforded less and less time to interact with other students outside the classroom due to athletic time commitments. This condition may be aggravated on some campuses by "compliance based, required study tables" for athletes that may be inconsistent with the hope that students will take responsibility for their academic responsibilities. Indeed, one report noted, "some student athletes may rely on coaches too much" and that "coaches serving as academic advisors may contribute to this concern."

Scheduling Conflicts

Many made mention of problems caused by the inevitable overlap of athletic schedules and academic commitments, causing tension between the athletic department and the faculty. "There is an aggravation with the amount of class time some student-athletes miss, especially if he or she is a weak student." One school called for a "better understanding between professors and coaches about missed class/missed practice/missed competition." While athletic administrators often make extensive efforts to minimize the number of conflicts, these efforts--or the fact that athletic schedules must be conceived while considering a variety of factors (semester start dates, semester breaks, reading periods, examination schedules, etc.) that impact the final assignment of contest dates or times--are not always successfully conveyed to faculty. In some cases there is a sense that certain faculty lack reasons or incentives to consider a degree of flexibility in helping students balance their academic commitments and team responsibilities. The result is that ACM students report finding themselves regrettably "stuck in the middle." One school noted "athletes don't attend academic programs at night because of athletic practices" and coaches have difficulty attending faculty meetings because they conflict with practice times.

The Division III "Arms Race"

Some reports highlighted the troubling impact of a seemingly ever-increasing Division III athletic "arms race." This particularly manifests itself in the area of student recruitment in which coaches are essentially forced to spend a greater bulk of their time attracting new players and less time attending to the varied needs of current team members. One school lamented that "high performance standards for recruiting outstanding student athletes and winning games have become drivers for coaches in response to enrollment pressures and alumni expectations. At times, perceptions about expectations do not match reality." When Division III schools and conferences choose to make greater and greater commitments to the pursuit of championship-caliber play, ACM schools are faced with matching these efforts or the specter of competitive extinction. And this perceived arms race can manifest itself internally as well. According to one report, "some student-athletes become isolated from the rest of campus life because of obligations related to athletics;" this campus wondered whether or not "optional practices are really mandatory."

LESSONS LEARNED

It may be helpful to offer some general observations about what many see as universally important axioms when considering an integration initiative of this nature.

- Some campus partners enter into discussion about athletic-academic integration wrongly assuming that any and all "problems" are rooted in the athletic department and that the responsibility for moving the initiative forward lies at the feet of the athletic director. Indeed, one group

of ACM campus partners argued that while athletics can “be pursued in ways unrelated to the educational mission” of a college, coaches and athletic directors should not be placed in a position whereby they are expected to “justify” themselves and their programs to the faculty. In short, the quest for integration must be a two-way street with an assumption that all campus partners are intent on doing their part to increase and enhance educational experiences. Interestingly and perhaps ironically, some argue coaches and faculty are often more alike than not in terms of their single-minded pursuit of excellence.

- It can be important to identify and avoid seemingly popular solutions that are unlikely to yield a greater degree of integration. For example, it is unrealistic to assume that we can simply turn back the clock to some perceived golden age of college sport, a period that is largely based on myth rather than fact. Likewise, attempting to mandate change or demonstrate an overreliance on legislatively based prescription will not likely yield the kind of balance we all seek.
- While it is true that we will be discussing a variety of specific activities that might contribute to the development of a more integrated educational model, it is wise to avoid any sort of checkbox mentality, one in which people assume that quantity of programming automatically results in a more desirable athletic or academic culture. A combination of “best practice” initiatives with data-driven analysis might provide a better means to determine whether or not the kind of integration progress each school aspires to is being realized.
- Regular evaluation and measurement is critical to the effective operation of an athletic department. Athletes should be surveyed on a seasonal or annual basis on the relationship between their athletic participation and broader liberal arts education experience. Faculty and coaches should be asked about their perception of mutual cooperation and collaboration. Collected data and qualitative information should be analyzed and used to develop ongoing educational opportunities that would support the integration effort and address issues of institutional culture, diversity, and the role of athletics within the institution.
- The integration effort will come in a number of forms and must be ongoing, eventually being institutionalized within individual colleges and universities. There is no integration silver bullet, and while the development and sharing of best practices is encouraged, what works on one campus may not succeed on another. Ultimately, the success of this initiative will depend upon the leadership and direction provided by trustees, presidents, and senior administrators (including the athletic director) in charge of athletics on each ACM campus.

POTENTIAL INTEGRATION INITIATIVES

While participating ACM institutions offered a myriad of specific integration suggestions and potential best practices, as we approach the upcoming workshop it may be helpful to note and briefly consider some of the shared prescriptive opportunities in a broader context.

Orientation

For those who endorse the adage “you only get one opportunity to make a first impression,” the importance of an effective orientation program cannot be overstated, and almost all schools highlighted this goal. However, often campus partners view orientation too narrowly. In terms of integrating student-athletes, the process really starts with the messages they receive during the recruiting period. Likewise, coaches, faculty, and even senior administrators can be influenced by the messages they receive during the job interview period. And a strong argument could be made for viewing orientation as a period that extends beyond the very beginning of the school year, one that addresses the inclusion of all campus partners who will be counted on to play a role in campus-wide integration.

Curricular Opportunities

Feedback on the possibility of cooperative curricular efforts was mixed. On the one hand, there was enthusiasm for initiatives such as faculty and coaches sharing teaching techniques, faculty or coach-sponsored workshops, coaches speaking at academic department meetings and faculty speaking at athletic department meetings, taking advantage of curricular opportunities on team trips, the development of courses with sport-related themes, etc. However, some participants cautioned against developing curricular initiatives that might come across as forced or would be unduly problematic from a time commitment standpoint. It may be helpful to consider one or two ACM-wide possibilities and for each school to embrace a few opportunities that might best fit their particular campus needs.

Coach Hiring and Evaluation Practices

Hiring and evaluation processes offer important opportunities to tangibly support institutional mission statements. How might we emphasize to prospective and current coaches that we prioritize educational outcomes achieved jointly by academic and athletic programs above more narrowly defined athletic outcomes, while recognizing that the two do not have to be mutually exclusive? Of course, competitive success is and should be valued by both programs. But an overemphasis on the pursuit of victory in the liberal arts setting, not unlike an overemphasis on research to the detriment of teaching, advising, or committee work, can at times do more harm than good. How does your school define competitive success? Which campus partners are included on search committees, and what roles do they play? What messages do candidates receive from the way a search is conducted? Likewise, are coaches evaluated in a

manner that is at least somewhat consistent with the way in which faculty are appraised in terms of their contributions to institutional educational missions?

A Place for Assessment

Like other parts of the academy, athletic departments are not infrequently the target of unsubstantiated rumor and stereotype. Campus discussion about athletes and their alleged incoming academic credentials, propensity to cluster into certain majors and classes, questionable behavior in social settings, etc. are often grounded in preconceived notions rather than fact. More formal assessment initiatives also present the opportunity to quantify and offer qualitative insights into the kinds of experiences students participating on intercollegiate teams are having. What kinds of measurement would provide data that can not only separate fact from fiction, but might also be shared with coaches and athletic administrators as they consider the best ways in which to maximize the educational value of athletic offerings?

Communication Opportunities

Increasingly and due in no small part to a higher education's move toward greater specialization, coaches and faculty often tend to operate in separate and distinct silos. This trend has, in some cases, been exacerbated by the demise of a model whereby coaches were able to earn faculty status and classroom teaching was a part of their job. How might we encourage meaningful interaction and collaboration among faculty and coaches in pursuit of the college's overall learning goals? What kind of messages do we send to the campus community when we talk about athletics and about their relation to academics? Are these messages all about competitive success, or do we endeavor to publicly recognize integration and balance?

Identify and Take Advantage of Existing Strengths

Are many coaches and faculty already formally or informally supporting the principles of integration? Past experience suggests that on many campuses faculty are divided into three camps in terms of how intercollegiate sport is perceived: (a) a small group that is highly supportive of the intercollegiate program; (b) another modest number of faculty who are decidedly anti-athletic; and (c) the great majority who are either ambivalent or neutral about the role of athletics. While it is natural for coaches and athletic administrators to spend a great deal of time with faculty supporters or responding to particularly active detractors, the more open "middlings" are often not exposed to much of what is educationally valuable about college sport or the myriad of integration opportunities that might exist on campus. How might we constructively interact with this critical mass of faculty? Likewise, on most campuses the majority of coaches support the college's broader educational mission, but an inordinate amount of time is spent dealing with coaches who view intercollegiate sport in relatively narrow terms. How might we empower and encourage those coaches with a more balanced perspective?

One could make a strong argument that athletics should be viewed no differently than curricular and co-curricular activities on a liberal arts campus. That is, every effort should be made to maximize the educational utility of the intercollegiate program, and various campus constituencies should be encouraged to play an active role in this endeavor. This ACM-FaCE conference will provide an opportunity to reflect on your accomplishments in this area and to plan new initiatives that strengthen individual colleges, the consortium, and the liberal arts sector.