

Is "Student-Athlete" an Oxymoron? Practical Steps for Teaching a Foreign Language to Collegiate Athletes

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"Athletics vs. academics" is a topic which is currently of great interest and concern. With the mission of making recommendations which will improve athletes' academic performance the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Knight Foundation are studying all aspects of collegiate athletics. *Time* magazine has reported, "Educators have long charged that the pressures...of college sports make a mockery of the scholar-athlete ideal." (54), and that the NCAA at its January convention took steps to move closer to that ideal. One new rule, to go into effect in 1992, reduces the basketball season from 28 to 25 games.

This is all good and necessary, but the effects will not reach universities for a long time. We need immediately to implement programs at the classroom level to help athletes cope better both with their sport and their classes. In no way am I implying that these young men and women are not as intelligent or as motivated as their non-athlete counterparts; actually, my experience has been just the opposite. Perhaps due to the mental discipline required by their sports, student athletes are extremely good at setting priorities and using their time to the best advantage. Since the university at which I teach, UNCC, does not accept athletes for admission if they do not meet the general admission standards, these young people are not at a disadvantage intellectually.

My main concern with athletes in my Spanish classes stems, for the most part, from the high number of absences they must incur during a semester as a consequence of their travel and playing schedules. Our classes meet five hours a week (3 of class and 2 of lab) and move at a rapid pace. Thus, athletes, during a two-day absence from the campus, miss twice as many foreign language class meetings as they do for other courses which usually meet only two or three times a week. This situation puts athletes at a distinct disadvantage in language classes.

This disadvantage is clearest for members of the men's basketball

team and the baseball team, because of their long seasons and the great distances they must travel for games. For example, the basketball team participates in tournaments in Alaska and California, and its season goes from November to February, if there is no post-season play. They fly to away games but are often absent for several days in a row owing to the distance and airline schedules. The baseball team plays 58 games in 53 days and travels to away games by van. (See Fig. 1).

The NCAA also moved at its January meeting to limit athletes to no more than ten missed days during the regular season. This proposed level of absences is still too high: no student, athlete or not, can succeed in a skills course in which he has missed two full weeks of instruction. Athletes C and D, basketball players we monitored in the spring, each had 10 absences in Spanish and missed 27 class periods in all¹ (See Fig. 2).

I first became aware of this problem three years ago in the spring semester. A basketball player—Athlete A—who was in one of my classes did not attend classes until the second week of the semester because of tournament play during the holiday break. His absences after that ranged from one to four every week. When he was able to attend class for more than two days a week, he seemed to understand the lessons and was able to fully participate in class because he learned information quickly. On the other hand, when his attendance was interrupted by travel, he seemed disoriented. I tried to help him some by making tapes for him to put in his Walkman, but, since study conditions are far from optimal while travelling, the tapes seemed to have no beneficial results. Knowing that athletes can avail themselves of free tutoring, I called the athletic counselor to suggest tutoring in Spanish for him. She was not very concerned and never found Athlete A a tutor. Since his absences were prolonged into March as a result of post-season play, this young man received an F for both his class and laboratory grades. It is very interesting, though, to note that he took the course in the summer and passed it. His success can be attributed to the fact that he was able to concentrate fully on this one class with no other demands on his time.

The next year the same situation was repeated with Athlete A taking second semester Spanish (1202) and Athlete B, also a basketball player, taking the first semester course (1201). They again missed the first week of class. Shortly after they returned there were tests in both class and lab. Both received F's for the classroom work. Athlete A also received an F in lab and Athlete B received a D. I decided again to contact the athletic counselor and insist that these young men be helped. There was a new person in this position, Patti McMillan, who was very interested and willing to work with me. We decided that a tutoring program was necessary to help these athletes catch up on what they had missed and to stay at the

level of their classmates in daily work. We both thought the travel schedule was to blame for their poor performance and kept track of absences and grades. Since we could do nothing to change the schedule though, we set out to address the problem as best we could. We arranged for both students to receive regular tutoring until the end of the semester. Student A earned a C in lab and Student B received a B. Both received D's in class—passing but not what we had hoped for. (See Fig. 3).

Mrs. McMillan and I met to formulate a plan for helping these young men and women deal better with their absences from foreign language classes. I explained to her how our classes were conducted, what our grading system was, and how the courses were structured. Although she was very concerned with the athletes and their courses, she was unaware of many things I told her, such as the importance of oral participation in classes which use the communicative method and the increased difficulty of the second semester course compared to the first level. We both had the same goals for the student-athletes at UNCC, so we agreed to try another strategy. From our last plan of tutoring *after* the athlete was in trouble, we decided that a tutoring program should be in place from the first day of each semester so that the athletes were never in a position of having to catch up. We instituted a program which we called "Hour-In For Hour-Out", which is simply that for every class or lab period an athlete misses, the same amount of time must be spent with the professor, lab instructor, or an approved tutor. This time must be completed as soon as they return from a trip so that when they return to class they have received the same amount of instruction as their classmates.

We agreed on several other points which I have elaborated in the following paragraphs. We put these steps to work in the fall of 1989. Mrs. McMillan tried to place a non-travelling athlete in each section or, at least, each subject, with travelling athletes. This person was responsible for xeroxing class notes, collecting handouts and assignments and placing these in the athletic office in folders which the travelling athletes picked up upon their return from a road trip. The athletes all lived near each other, so it was easy for them to meet with the non-travelling person if they had any questions or needed clarification. They were then able to do their assignments in preparation for their tutoring sessions.

With our present schedules a student often has a different professor for class and lab; therefore, I suggested that it was more advantageous for both the athletes and the professor to have the same person for both, if possible. We also found that athletes need to take early classes in order to be free in the afternoon for practice; early classes *do* cut down on their absences, since they usually leave campus in the afternoon. Working within the Foreign Language Schedule and time constraints, Mrs.

McMillan tried to place athletes with the same professor for both class and lab for continuity purposes. In addition, I suggested to Mrs. McMillan that athletes with a heavy travel schedule begin their foreign language courses during their season and complete them during their off-season or the summer. My rationale was that, especially in the French and Spanish curriculum, the first semester of instruction is much easier and goes at a slower pace. It is better for players to have this course during their busiest time, so that they will have more time to concentrate on the harder course when the demands of their sport are fewer. Since both baseball and basketball are spring semester sports, we were unable to make any valid conclusions about the benefits of these programs at the end of the fall semester.

These programs were put to the test during the spring semester of 1990. We followed and recorded the test results of four travelling athletes—three basketball players and a member of the baseball team. One basketball player was enrolled in French 1202 and the rest were studying Spanish 1201. The baseball player was in Spanish 1202. This variety could possibly give us a good base for comparison and would help us better meet the needs of student-athletes. As usual, the basketball players were absent the entire first week of the semester. In fact, they had not been on campus since the bookstore opened and, consequently, did not even have textbooks. Nevertheless, they did receive their assignments and class notes from a non-travelling team member, borrowed some books, and prepared for their tutoring session on Monday before class. They arrived at the tutoring session with all their homework complete, with their questions written down, and did participate fully in the session. Because of this "advance" work, they were able to attend class later in the day and be at the same level of preparation as their classmates.

We continued this program throughout the basketball season and instituted it with the baseball player as soon as his season started. Subsequently, we saw results in two areas. The first was in academic achievement, which was our main priority. (See Fig.4). From the chart it is clear that these two athletes, C and D, did not receive worse grades on tests taken after absences. In fact, Athletes C and D both received A's in class and lab for their final semester grades; the baseball player received an A in lab and a B in class. These results were beyond what we had expected. We observed that they benefitted in another area, which we had not expected. A significant portion of their grade is based upon participation. By being better prepared for their classes, these athletes could participate more fully in them. They actually became leaders of their groups! They felt like members of the classes rather than visitors. Thus they benefitted not only academically but also socially.

Further efforts to improve our procedures are still needed, though.

Our basketball player studying French did not have the success that the Spanish students had. He was not able to meet with his professor due to her schedule and we never could find a qualified tutor for him. Also, since no other athlete was taking second semester French he missed class handouts and notes. His final grade was a D in class and an F in lab. As a result we want to expand this program to include all languages we teach, and we hope to have approved tutors in all of them before the semester begins.

In the fall semester of 1990 we are tracking a soccer player taking Spanish 1202. He has come in for regular tutoring after his absences, which are sometimes two a week at this point in the season. While the team flies to most away matches, it has driven to some. This soccer player is maintaining a B average in class and an A in lab. We are not officially keeping track of the four basketball players currently in the same class because we do not feel that their sport affects them as much at this time of the year. Elements other than absenteeism, of course, influence an athlete's academic progress. It is affected by their practice hours, their physical training, and the physical as well as mental exhaustion they suffer. In addition to their weight-lifting and physical conditioning, the basketball team began running four days a week at 6:30 A.M. Their tiredness was clearly evident, and they did more poorly on the test that followed the beginning of this regimen. Now, however, they are accustomed to it, and their academic results have returned to their previous level. Because they do begin playing in November, we are making sure that they are staying up with their class work now so they will not fall behind.

In addition to these measures, Mrs. McMillan assesses the athletes on a regular basis. She ascertains if further problems exist, and she assists the students with time management and study habits. In cases where other problems are identified, she refers the students to the appropriate support service on campus.

At the end of this semester Mrs. McMillan will evaluate our results and adjust the strategies to fit the needs of our athletes. With their academic performance in mind, we would like to expand the program to other departments at the university, but the main impediment to this is the lack of qualified tutors. We are satisfied with the results we have been able to achieve in the Foreign Language Department. Our success was due to the cooperation of both departments—athletic and academic. Our goals were the same. For the short-term we wanted to help the athletes succeed on a daily basis; for the long-term, our goal was to help them successfully complete their college education. We are glad that, at least, in the Foreign Language Department at UNCC, the term "student-athlete" is *not* an oxymoron.

Fig. 1

1990 Baseball Schedule

FEBRUARY			APRIL		
Wed. 21	at Coastal Carolina	3:00	Tue. 3	at UNC Asheville	2:00
Fri. 23	at Pfeiffer	2:00	Wed. 4	N.C. STATE	6:00
Sat. 24	GEORGE MASON (DH)	1:00	Thu. 5	SOUTH CAROLINA-TV	7:00
Sun. 25	GEORGE MASON	1:00	Sat. 7	at Old Dominion (DH)*	5:00
Mon. 26	at Gardner Webb	2:00	Tue. 10	NORTH CAROLINA-TV	6:00
			Thu. 12	GARDNER WEBB	7:00
			Sat. 14	at Va.Commonwealth*(DH)	5:00
MARCH			Sun. 15	at Va.Commonwealth*	1:00
Fri. 2	DAVIDSON	3:00	Tue. 17	UNC ASHEVILLE	6:00
Sat. 3	at Davidson	1:00	Wed. 18	WAKE FOREST-TV	6:00
Sun. 4	at Davidson	1:00	Thu. 19	UNC WILMINGTON	6:00
Mon. 5	at North Carolina	3:00	Sat. 21	VA.COMMONWEALTH*(DH)	5:00
Tue. 6	ELON	3:00	Sun. 22	VA.COMMONWEALTH*	1:00
Thu. 8	at High Point	3:00	Tue. 24	N.C. A&T	3:00
Sat. 10	CAMPBELL	2:00	Wed. 25	HIGH POINT-TV	7:00
Sun. 11	CONNECTICUT	1:00	Fri. 27	at Davidson	2:00
Mon. 12	CONNECTICUT	3:00	Sat. 28	DAVIDSON	6:00
Wed. 14	PROVIDENCE	3:00	Sun. 29	DAVIDSON-TV	6:00
Thu. 15	at UNC Wilmington	3:00			
Sat. 17	at Jacksonville*(DH)	5:00	MAY		
Sun. 18	at Jacksonville*	1:00	Sat. 5	VIRGINIA TECH-TV	7:00
Tue. 20	LENOIR-RHYNE	6:00	Sun. 6	at Virginia Tech	3:00
Wed. 21	at South Carolina	7:30	Mon. 7	OLD DOMINION*(DH)	5:00
Thu. 22	at Catawba	6:00	Tue. 8	OLD DOMINION*	3:00
Fri. 23	PFEIFFER	6:00	Wed. 9	COASTAL CAROLINA-TV	6:00
Sat. 24	JACKSONVILLE*(DH)	5:00	16-19	at Sun Belt Tournament	
Sun. 25	JACKSONVILLE	1:00			
Tue. 27	CATAWBA	6:00			
Wed. 28	at N.C. State	3:00			
Fri. 30	At N.C. A&T	3:00			
Sat. 31	KING COLLEGE	7:00			

*Sun Belt Conference game
TV-Televised

Fig. 2

MEN'S BASKETBALL TRAVEL SCHEDULE

WEDNESDAY, JAN 25	-	(Travel to Peoria, Ill.)
	*	Leave campus at 12:00 (Noon)
THURSDAY, JAN 26	-	(Game at Bradley*U.)
	*	Away from campus all day
FRIDAY, JAN 27	-	(Travel to Birmingham, AL)
	*	Away from campus all day
WEDNESDAY, FEB 1	-	(Travel to Jacksonville, FL)
	*	Leave campus at 2:15 PM
THURSDAY, FEB 2	-	(Game at Jacksonville)
	*	Away from campus all day
FRIDAY, FEB 3	-	(Return to Charlotte)
	*	On campus by 11:00
MONDAY, FEB 6	-	(Return to Charlotte from Dallas, TX)
	*	On campus by 2:30 PM
TUESDAY, FEB 14	-	(Travel to Tampa, FL)
	*	Leave campus by 11:00 AM
WEDNESDAY, FEB 15	-	(Game at South Florida)
THURSDAY, FEB 16	-	(Return to Charlotte)
	*	On campus by 9:00 AM
MONDAY, FEB 20	-	(Travel to Bowling Green, KY)
	*	Leave campus at 4:00 PM
TUESDAY, FEB 21	-	(Game at Western Kentucky)
WEDNESDAY, FEB 22	-	(Return to Charlotte)
	*	On campus by 11:00 AM

Fig. 3

**ATHLETE 'B'
SPRING 1989**

BASKETBALL SEASON	DATE	GRADE	PERCENT
Test after 3-day trip to Illinois & Ala	1/25	F	47%
Test after 6-day trip to Florida & Texas	2/ 6	B	84%
Test after 3-day trip to Florida	2/20	D	68%
Test after 3-day trip to Kentucky	2/27	F	27%
	AVERAGE		56%
REMAINDER OF SEMESTER			
Lección 13	3/ 8	A	96%
Lección 14	3/27	A	90%
Lección 15	4/ 5	B	86%
Lección 16	4/17	B	82%
	AVERAGE		88%

Fig. 4

**ATHLETES 'C' and 'D'
SPRING 1990**

BASKETBALL SEASON	DATE	GRADE	PERCENT
3-day trip to Florida	1/24		
	Athlete 'C'	A	97%
	Athlete 'D'	A	96%
Home	2/ 7		
	Athlete 'C'	A	97%
	Athlete 'D'	A	100%
5-day trip to Calif.	2/16		
	Athlete 'C'	A	94%
	Athlete 'D'	A	92%
3-day trip to Virginia	2/28		
	Athlete 'C'	A	95%
	Athlete 'D'	A	91%
5-day trip to Alabama	3/ 7		
	Athlete 'C'	A	100%
	Athlete 'D'	A	90%
	AVERAGE	.	
	Athlete 'C'	96%	
	Athlete 'D'	93%	

● NOTES

¹ Our university has an attendance policy stating that any student who misses one fourth of the classes will fail the course; our department policy is even more strict. Both policies are in place because we know that students who attend class regularly will usually learn more. From studies and from our own personal experience as teachers, we know the importance of regular attendance in learning a foreign language.

● WORKS CITED

"Two Steps Forward: Academics over Athletics." *Time* 22 Jan. 1990: 54.

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment: A Computerized Supplement for the French Literature Survey

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As we move, or are moved by our administrators, to undertake assessment within our disciplines, departments, and courses, we teachers are beginning to ask exactly what is all this fuss about assessment? What do we have to do, and what is in it for us? Assured by well-meaning administrators that we *need* academic assessment to insure quality education and teaching, we nonetheless cannot help but view this current trend as one more task, one more "add-on," one more administrative requirement.

"While the term still means many things to many people, the symbolism of assessment increasingly has moved from instructional improvement to institutional accountability" (Ewell 23). This tendency, coupled with a belief that a "legislative trail is being laid that will make assessment a permanent part of higher education" (Marchese 4), have led to a growing feeling of dread among the faculty on the majority of college campuses.

For assessment to gain the acceptance of the teaching faculty, a distinction must be clearly drawn between a summative goal of academic assessment (i.e., assessment for external accountability) and a formative goal (i.e., assessment for the improvement of the College as a whole or of individual departments and courses). With the process of assessment being imposed primarily from outside the institution as a requirement for accreditation, however, "many seem directed toward reviving the once common notion of a comprehensive examination in either the major field or general education" (Ewell 26).

Rather than comprehensive examinations that would be given to our students at the end of their college studies, we should envision more creative strategies. Teachers can explore the possibilities and benefits of assessment and use what we discover to transform the assessment process into a pedagogical technique. According to Ewell, "...the primary thrust of most current state initiatives is to encourage institutions to undertake their own appropriate local assessment efforts" (25). He also points out that, while most accreditation agency and state guidelines lean toward quantifiable methods of assessment, they do not impose specific requirements on how to demonstrate institutional effectiveness (26). Let