

July 2012

Academics-Athletics Forums: An Initiative to Improve Communication and Understanding across the University

Joseph L. Fink III

University of Kentucky College of Pharmacy, jfink@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp>



Part of the [Other Education Commons](#)

The author gratefully acknowledges the highly capable assistance of Carl Nathe, UK Office of Public Relations and Marketing, in promoting these events to those outside the institution. Further, the valued assistance of Mr. John Butler, Assistant Athletics Director for Compliance, Ms. Heather McAtee, Assistant Athletics Director for Academics and Eligibility, and Ms. Katie Hardie, Director of Compliance, with the initiative described here and many other responsibilities is gratefully acknowledged.

Recommended Citation

Fink, Joseph L. III (2012) "Academics-Athletics Forums: An Initiative to Improve Communication and Understanding across the University," *Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp/vol1/iss2/5>

This Practitioner Briefs is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Academics-Athletics Forums: An Initiative to Improve Communication and Understanding across the University

Cover Page Footnote

The author gratefully acknowledges the highly capable assistance of Carl Nathe, UK Office of Public Relations and Marketing, in promoting these events to those outside the institution. Further, the valued assistance of Mr. John Butler, Assistant Athletics Director for Compliance, Ms. Heather McAtee, Assistant Athletics Director for Academics and Eligibility, and Ms. Katie Hardie, Director of Compliance, with the initiative described here and many other responsibilities is gratefully acknowledged.

Academics-Athletics Forums: An Initiative to Improve Communication and Understanding across the University

*Joseph L. Fink III**

Communication across an institution of higher education continues to appear to be a challenge. Administration to faculty, college or department to other academic units or to critical offices with roles supportive of the academic mission—all these relationships present challenges in communication to enhance understanding across a complex organization. In few relationships is this as challenging as enhancing communication between the academic side of the institution and the intercollegiate athletics program.

One position at each NCAA member institution responsible for bridging that gap is the Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR) (NCAA, 2009). The role of the FAR is described this way at the University of Kentucky (UK):

The individual in this position serves as a senior advisor outside the athletics program to the President on matters related to intercollegiate athletics and is recognized as the representative of the institution and the faculty in the relationship between the NCAA and the local campus. (Fink, n.d.)

The responsibilities assigned to the FAR at UK are also described in this way:

Responsibilities of this position include ensuring that student-athletes meet all NCAA, SEC, and institutional requirements for eligibility to practice, financial aid, and intercollegiate competition. This includes both initial academic eligibility

* Joseph L. Fink III, B.S.Pharm., J.D., is Professor of Pharmacy Law and Policy at the University of Kentucky (UK) College of Pharmacy, Lexington. He also serves as the Faculty Athletics Representative for UK to the Southeastern Conference and the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He is a member of the Awards, Benefits, Expenses and Financial Aid Cabinet of the NCAA. Finally, he is a member of the Executive Committee of the Southeastern Conference and serves as Secretary of the Conference.

for freshman and transfer student-athletes as well as continuing academic eligibility for those continuing enrollment at the institution. (Nathe, 2009)

It is noteworthy that one of the expectations of the NCAA for the FAR is to provide “oversight and advice in administration of an institutional athletics program and is in place to promote academic integrity in intercollegiate athletics, *to facilitate the integration of athletics and academic components of the collegiate community*, and to promote institutional control of athletics on campus” (Faculty Athletics Representative Association, 2008).

Conception and Implementation of the Idea

At the University of Kentucky the FAR chairs the Academic Integrity Committee composed of representatives from the Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, Office of Enrollment Management/Admissions, Office of Student Financial Aid, Athletics Compliance Group, and the Center for Academic and Tutorial Services (the academic support unit for student-athletes). This group meets twice per semester to facilitate and enhance communication across the various units regarding issues related to the academic progress and well-being of student-athletes.

During one of the group’s meetings the idea arose of having periodic informal gatherings to which faculty and staff would be invited to meet with coaches and other officials from Athletics to learn more about the operation of intercollegiate athletics programs at the University. The informality of a seminar-type format was selected because faculty are very familiar and comfortable with the seminar format, using it for both upper division undergraduate courses, graduate courses, and courses for students of

the professions. The notion gained momentum when the possibility was raised during one-on-one meetings conducted during the summer with the head coach in each sport.

The title of “Academics-Athletics Forum” was selected to emphasize the linkage between the two, but with academics in the lead role. Flyers announcing the series were headed with the subtitle “Striving to Achieve Goals,” with graphics of a rolled up diploma in one upper corner and a trophy in the other corner to emphasize the point that student-athletes are pursuing both goals. This design also reflected that both areas of activity—academics and athletics—are significant parts of the total institution. The announcement flyer was put into a PDF format for electronic distribution.

One to two weeks before the first Forum the University administration adopted a policy that greatly hindered the initiative. Until that time, notices of approved events on campus could be distributed via an email blast distribution to all faculty and staff. Responding to a concern about an overabundance of such messages, the administration decided to discontinue distribution of information in that fashion. Unfortunately, the Forums occurred during a time between that decision and implementation of a replacement approach now in use, distribution of notices via an electronic daily newsletter known as “UKNow.”

That hurdle was exacerbated by the approach adopted by the *Kentucky Kernel*, the independent campus newspaper. While they would send a reporter to cover the sessions and include a description afterward, they were unwilling to publicize the sessions in advance. That also contributed to the lower than expected turnouts for the sessions.

To address these communication and promotion challenges, an approach was adopted that involved electronic distribution of the Forum flyers to selected campus

leaders and others who might be likely to attend. [See Figure 1.] That distribution was accompanied by a request that the flyer be shared liberally with others.

President of the University
Board of Directors Members, UK Athletics Association
Professors in Educational Policy Studies & Evaluation Department
Professors in Kinesiology and Health Promotion Department
Department Chair, UK Athletics Training degree program
Southeastern Conference liaison to Faculty Athletics Representatives
Faculty Athletics Representatives at SEC institutions
Compliance Group within UK Athletics
Director of Athletics
Director of Media Relations, UK Athletics
Former Faculty Athletics Representatives at UK
Members of the Academic Integrity Committee
Head Coaches and Assistant Coaches
Staff in the Center for Academic and Tutorial Services
Head Athletic Trainer, UT Athletics
Head Physician, UK Athletics
Faculty Advisor, UK Cheerleading Squad
Dean of Students Office Staff
Executive Council of the University Faculty Senate
Representative of the UK Student Athletic Council
Coordinator of the UK Advisors Network
Faculty Athletic Representative at Transylvania University, the other NCAA member institution in Lexington

Figure 1. Individuals Receiving Flyers Announcing the Forums

The plan for each session was to open with a brief review of the role of the FAR followed by introduction of any officials from Athletics in attendance other than the panelists—administrators, coaches, academic support center staff members. The panelists were then introduced using an interview format, including questions like “Where did you grow up? How did you get into coaching?” and so forth. [See Figure 2.] This served to set an informal tone for the session as well as putting the panelists at ease. The audience was asked to identify how many were faculty, staff, students and off-campus visitors. Representatives of the local media were in attendance as well.

1. Where did you grow up? Go to school? What was your academic major?
2. How did your career path unfold?
3. What are two common misconceptions you've heard about athletics & student-athletes?
4. What is your schedule during the year? Students' schedules?
5. Who determines the schedule for your games, matches or competitions & what factors are weighed? How do you factor class schedules into travel time, etc.? What time is practice & why?
6. What are your primary geographic recruiting areas?
7. Do your student-athletes cluster in certain majors?
8. What factors attract student-athletes to UK in your opinion?
9. What is an "equivalency sport?"
10. On the recruiting trail what are the general perceptions of UK both academically and athletically?
11. Have student athletes changed since you have been coaching, say with the arrival of the Millennial Generation?
12. Do student-athletes have mandatory study hours in CATS?
13. What has been the impact of the Internet on recruiting?
14. Are prospective student-athletes every linked up with faculty in their proposed major while on a visit to campus? What can faculty do to help recruit student-athletes?
15. What are the single biggest academic challenges for your student athletes? (e.g., scheduling, attending class, study time)
16. What is the most effective thing done to recruit student-athletes to UK? What can really "turn the head" of a student-athlete considering UK?
17. What in your view is the relative role of the coach/assistant coach and academic advisor in CATS in working out academically-related issues with faculty?
18. What is your expectation of your student-athletes about alerting faculty to competition-related absences?

Figure 2. Potential Questions to Be Addressed to Presenters

Sessions were scheduled for a late afternoon time slot to minimize schedule conflicts with classes. The site for the sessions was selected based on central location and ready accessibility; the White Hall Classroom Building is a well-known venue on campus and the gatherings were held in a room with a seating capacity in excess of 200.

The First Academics-Athletics Forum

The first Forum was held on September 9, 2010. A panel of three head coaches—Gary Henderson, (UK Baseball); Rachel Lawson, (UK Softball); and Craig Skinner (UK

Volleyball)—was selected based on their interactions with the FAR during the summer one-on-one sessions. There were 62 individuals in attendance not including the panelists and moderator.

Brief evaluation forms were distributed to attendees upon entry. Completed evaluation forms were submitted by 21 attendees: one faculty member, nineteen staff employees, and one student. The fact that only one-third of those attending submitted evaluation forms means that the evaluation information must be viewed in light of that low response rate.

Using a five point Likert scale of Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4 and Strongly Agree = 5, those attending were asked to rate the session on two items, yielding the indicated mean rating:

This program was interesting.	Mean = 4.45	N = 20
This program was valuable.	Mean = 4.30	N = 20

When asked “Did you learn something new at this session?”, 17 responded “Yes” while two indicated “No.” Two participants did not provide a response to this question.

The follow on question then asked “If yes, what was the most interesting thing you learned?” and which yielded these responses:

- Younger students being interested in recruitment.
- Coaches’ attitudes about the importance of academics.
- Coaches’ personal and academic backgrounds.
- The varying perspectives of the coaches. Great to have multiple.
- The mentoring aspects of coaching.

The emphasis then shifted to significance of what was learned by asking “If yes, what was the most significant thing you learned?” Those responses were:

- How geographic considerations enter into recruiting decisions.
- There is a significant demand for tutors.
- How high the GPA’s are for all student-athletes (3.04) and for the sports represented on the panel.

The last question was “What topics or issues would you suggest for future Academics-Athletics Forums?” Suggestions included:

- Have someone knowledgeable about finances discuss the relationship between UK Athletics (.com) and the University (.edu).
- A session on the inner workings of the UK Center for Academic and Tutorial Services (CATS).
- Rules and procedures applicable to student-athletes missing class for competition.
- Forums with additional head coaches to provide insights about other teams.
- A forum featuring student-athletes to discuss similarities of student-athletes and non-student-athletes.
- Professors’ perspectives on student-athletes and what they do or do not do in class.
- Student-athletes and the issue of maintaining amateur status.

- Is it realistic for a student-athlete to consider other interests while enrolled in a professional degree program with the attendant time demands?
- Insights regarding the standards used for admission and continuing eligibility.

Questions addressed to the panelists by those who attended included:

- Discuss how low academic progress of student-athletes could potentially impact an athletic program, i.e., what are the potential penalties or sanctions?
- Given that recruiting increasingly focuses on student-athletes at younger ages, does that create a risk of missing out on “late bloomers, i.e., students who don’t blossom as athletes until their junior or senior years?”
- When it is said that a student-athlete is receiving a 50% percent scholarship does that calculation include tuition plus room and board? Does the in-state versus out-of-state tuition rate make a difference?
- Do all scholarship student-athletes live on campus? Are the amounts of athletic scholarships public record?
- Proper nutrition could potentially be a challenge with the schedules student-athletes maintain. Is there a possibility of having “training tables” for student-athletes in Olympic sports?
- Do the panelists think there is parity in access to resources, e.g., mandatory tutoring, proactive academic advisors who follow up with instructors, etc., for both student-athletes and non-student-athletes?

- What changes would the panelists make in the way athletic grants are awarded?
- How would the panelists change the NCAA academic progress requirements for student-athletes?

All in all, the first Forum was regarded as a good start with many good issues and topics discussed. The panelists were engaging and forthright, confirming their selection.

The Second Academics-Athletics Forum

The second Forum was held on October 12, 2010, and featured John Calipari, Head Coach of the UK Men's Basketball Program. Attendance was 68 individuals excluding speaker and moderator.

For this session evaluation forms were submitted by 22 attendees. Attendees submitting forms included seven UK staff employees, ten students, and five prospective UK students or their parents. Again the following information must be viewed in light of that low response rate.

The ratings for this session, using the same five point Likert-type scale of Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4 and Strongly Agree = 5, were:

This program was interesting.	Mean = 4.50	N = 22
This program was valuable.	Mean = 4.36	N = 22

When asked "Did you learn something new at this session?", 21 responded "Yes" while one indicated "No."

Those who responded "Yes" indicated the following as the most interesting thing learned?

- The coach's philosophy about having passion for your job.
- The things the players go through.
- The coach does not have a computer!
- Some of the NCAA rules and policies about academic matters.
- The coach's upbringing.

The list of most significant things learned by those who responded included:

- How the coach feels about coaching at this university and his passion for coaching.
- The graduation rate for his players at former schools.
- The spotlight focused on UK athletics and athletes.
- Passion for what you do is important.
- The coach's relationship with the players.

Questions addressed to Coach Calipari by those attending were:

- His views on selected NCAA policies.
- Recruiting and the NCAA – rules and policies.
- Comment regarding how student-athletes are subject to progress-toward-degree requirements that do not apply to non-student-athletes.
- What changes in mentoring and mentoring relationships with student-athletes have occurred over the years?
- What can faculty do to better understand and relate to Athletics?

At this Forum the coach was very engaging, particularly with three UK students who sat in the front row. It was also noteworthy that another academic-athletics linkage occurred during this session. Three two-person student teams from a broadcast journalism

course attended this session, taping interviews before and after the session as well as during the body of the seminar. They then edited this material and submitted it as a course assignment, an unanticipated link to the academic enterprise.

The Third Academics-Athletics Forum

The third Forum, held on November 16, 2010, focused on academic support services for student-athletes. Panelists from the Center for Academic and Tutorial Services (CATS) included the Associate Athletics Director for Student Services, Director of Academic Services, Director of Advising Services, an Academic Counselor, and the Life Skills Coordinator. Attendance at this session dwindled to 22 and evaluation forms were submitted by only seven attendees.

The mean ratings of this session by the seven people who submitted evaluation forms were:

This program was interesting.	Mean = 4.28	N = 7
This program was valuable.	Mean = 4.43	N = 7

When asked “Did you learn something new at this session?”, six responded “Yes” while one indicated “No.”

The list of most interesting things learned included:

- UK had the first such athletic-academic center.
- Scheduling challenges with regard to classes matching up with students’ needs.
- The part the Department of English plays in facilitating tutoring.
- The commitment and effectiveness of the job done by CATS staff.

The most significant thing learned was identified by respondents as:

- Scheduling challenges with regard to classes matching up with students' needs.
- Challenges in dealing with contemporary students and their attitudes and priorities.
- Student accountability is a challenge.
- CATS staff members discuss strategies for doing well, not curricular matters, leaving the latter to academic advisors in the colleges, departments and programs.

Outcomes

The format appeared to work well and was warmly received by those who attended. The topics covered were of interest and the sessions were lively, with give-and-take between audience and presenters.

The challenges with announcing the sessions to faculty, staff, and students in light of the administration's shift in communication policies were very substantial and, despite efforts to overcome them, greatly undermined the initiative. Plans for continuing the series into the Spring were suspended due to light turnouts.

One very positive outcome from this initiative was that the Director of Athletics, Mitch Barnhart, volunteered to host informal lunchtime roundtable discussions and briefings with campus deans to continue the conversation about the academics-athletics connections. Communication about this was facilitated by the FAR and this invitation was well received by the deans.

Finally, following the third Forum a suggestion was made that the sessions be digitally recorded to be accessible through the University website. Unfortunately, that

great idea was advanced after the series had concluded. However, that suggestion was incorporated when the FAR at Auburn University, Dr. Mary Boudreaux, replicated the series described herein at that Southeastern Conference institution. (see: <http://www.auburntigers.com/cia/>). Adoption of this initiative by the FAR at another Southeastern Conference institution lend credibility to the conclusion that the idea was worthwhile.

Conclusions

Improving communication and understanding is always a laudable goal. It can also be a challenging undertaking with unforeseen hurdles materializing to impede success. Such a development occurred with the institution's shift in policy regarding campus-wide email blasts of messages about events of interest.

The message that was the goal of these sessions was an important one and continues to be deserving of attention. Enhancing cooperation and understanding across the institution can only work to position the institution to better serve student-athletes. The method of effecting that communication is one that will require some additional work.

This undertaking is informative because it provides insights about the topics and issues at the interface of academics and athletics that are on the minds of faculty and staff. The purpose in sharing the story of this initiative is to encourage others to consider adopting similar programming at their institutions. Hopefully that goal has been met.

References

- Faculty Athletics Representative Association. (2008). What college presidents need to know about Faculty Athletics Representatives. Retrieved from <http://www.farawebsite.org/files/President%20BrochureFARA.pdf>.
- Fink III, J.L. (n.d.). What is the UK Faculty Athletics Representative to the SEC and NCAA? Fact sheet for student athletes, University of Kentucky.
- Nathe, C. (2009, June 25). Fink is UK's New Faculty Athletics Rep to the SEC and NCAA. University of Kentucky News. Retrieved from http://news.uky.edu/news/display_article.php?artid=4827&mode=print
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2009). NCAA Constitution. *2009-2010 NCAA Division I Manual*.