

SUPPORTING STUDENT-ATHLETES

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Introduction

I did not know what to expect when I started working at the Football Academics Center (hereafter referred to as the “Center”) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) as a part-time tutor in 2009 even though I was not new to the academic center world, having worked at the Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC)¹ for six years beforehand. As an undergraduate and graduate student at UT Austin, I had heard stereotypes surrounding student-athletes (e.g., student-athletes are not interested in academics, student-athletes do not work hard at academics) and rumors of the advantages they receive, including that tutors or mentors are “fix-it” people who make academic miracles happen. What I learned upon starting work at the Center is that the reality is quite different and that such stereotypes, as is the case with all stereotypes, about student-athletes do not patently apply. This piece aims to situate the Football Academics Center within the writing center community by describing the Center, the unique population we serve, and the strategies we use to support student-athlete writing.

About the Football Academics Center

The Center serves a very specific population—UT student-athletes. The students with whom we work are part of the larger team comprised of the 51,000 students at UT. They may be bigger in some cases than the average college student, but they are still young adults in their late teens and early twenties, attempting to navigate college life at a large and complex university.

Our Center is part of a community of centers at UT Austin that support students’ academic endeavors. Some of these centers are open to all university students: the Sanger Learning and Career Center² as

well as the UWC. The Peter T. Flawn Academic Center “offer[s] flexible study spaces, multimedia services, and upgraded computer labs . . . designed to support the academic and research goals of the entire campus community.”³ Other centers work with specific populations within UT. For example, the LBJ School of Public Affairs offers a writing center for the graduate students enrolled in its school.⁴

Writing centers serve as refuges for students to develop their writing in accepting, supportive, and confidential spaces. So too is the Center a refuge for UT’s student athletes—they come to the Center to get away from the public’s attention and focus on their studies. The Center focuses on the academic (and to some extent the personal) side, the less visible side of our student-athletes, and so it is not very visible at UT. It is removed from and not accessible to the rest of campus, emphasizing that at least one part of the student-athletes’ lives is not available for perusal.

Student-Athlete Demands

The students with whom we work have athletic demands (i.e., football) and goals (e.g., contributing to a winning football team) that often compete with their academic ones. Our students are busy, very busy, often starting and ending their days when it is dark outside. They divide their days among various tasks—weightlifting and training sessions, classes, practices, games, travel, and academic work—and they do their best to deal with that busy-ness.

To be sure, having various demands is true of all students. Students balance work, family, extracurricular activities, and social obligations, making it difficult for them to focus on academics all the time. The demands on our guys’ time are distinct in the sense that they result in students’ faces appearing on the front page of multiple newspapers and in a variety of media outlets and in students playing in front of

hopeful fans every week. Their time in the spotlight may be greater now that UT has a 24-hour television network, called the Longhorn Network, affiliated with ESPN that is devoted to covering University events, including intercollegiate athletics.

Ensuring Academic Integrity

I developed a firm belief in non-directive and non-evaluative writing center pedagogies, in the importance of providing students with strategies for navigating the writing process and improving their own writing, during my time at the UWC. I brought these beliefs with me to the Center. But even beyond my personal commitment to writing center principles, the Center must adhere not only to University policies on plagiarism, collusion, and scholastic responsibility⁵ but must also comply with NCAA rules⁶ that prohibit student-athletes from receiving extra benefits (for example in the form of too much assistance from a writing tutor) that other students do not receive.

If student-athletes are unable to maintain certain grades and grade point averages, they may lose athletic scholarships that allow them to afford higher education, or they may not be able to play. The pressure to achieve a certain academic standing may tempt student-athletes, just as it may tempt students in the larger university population, to commit academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism or collusion, especially given their time constraints. University and NCAA policies remind students of their commitment to high academic standards, no matter what stressors or pressures they may experience, and emphasize student accountability and responsibility.

Such policies exist in part to respond to the high-stakes situations in which student-athletes find themselves. They bump up against the triage model of writing centers and strictly specify that our Center is not and cannot be a writing hospital. Academic centers are able to exist on campuses because they uphold high ethical standards and follow rigorous conduct when working with students.

Strategies for Working with Student-Athletes

In working with students on writing, we often informally refer to the students at the Center as “guys,” as they are all male, and we see the same group of students on a daily or weekly basis. Unlike at other academic centers, the population with whom we work is a constant during the year, not changing until a new group of student-athletes begins their first years at UT. However, like our fellow writing center practitioners, to assist these students in tackling their academic obligations, our tutors and mentors have an arsenal of strategies, ones that we in the writing center world typically use but have tailored to working with student-athletes. I describe some key strategies below:

We create agendas for each session

At many academic or writing centers, when a student comes in for assistance, he wants to work on a particular assignment or cover the material for one class. He will meet only with the tutor or consultant and then be on his way. When the guys come into the Center, they have various assignments for several classes, and they may need to divide their time among different tutors and mentors. This time pressure is felt not only by students but by the tutors and mentors at the Center who recognize that they have a limited period with the guys and may need to work with others tutors or mentors on apportioning that time. Prioritizing, discussing what is feasible during a session, and creating action plans are critical when tutors and mentors work with a student.

We are emotionally sensitive

Our tutors and mentors must motivate and get students on task to do productive work, often after the guys have engaged in football-related activities. Emotions on the field can carry over and impact work and vice versa. We take the time to check in with our guys, acknowledge the stresses and feelings that they may be carrying, and help put them in a positive headspace for their studies. Since we see the guys at the Center on a regular basis, our tutors and mentors are able to develop rapport and relationships of trusts with students that facilitate such conversations. Although we want students to become comfortable with tutors and mentors, our staff helps to prevent a

student from becoming dependent on any one person by advising students working on writing to meet with different writing tutors to mitigate risks of dependency.

We modify our approach to respond to different learning styles

Many of the guys with whom we work do best with active approaches to learning, so we use hands-on strategies and multi-modal strategies with them; making learning as active as possible can assist students with switching gears from practice, where they are so physically involved, to academics.

Writing is a process

It can be frustrating for our guys to work on writing because it is time-consuming, and time is a scarce resource. Tutors and mentors advise the guys to start their work early and stick to agendas, to not procrastinate or allow work to pile up. They also, when appropriate for the class and assignment, encourage the guys when possible to write on topics about which they feel passionate. For some students, this means writing about sports-related topics or controversies. However, not all of our student-athletes connect with such an approach, and we instead engage with their unique interests—service work in the community, creative writing, music, or leadership issues. The key, as in any writing center, is to meet each student where he is and tailor our approach to his distinct personality and needs.

We hold students responsible

When a student is also an athlete, a very real consequence of his not doing well academically could mean that he cannot play his sport. Regardless, tutors and mentors must actively resist acting as those “fix-it” folk and delineate boundaries for students. It may be hard, especially since the guys have much to do in a limited amount of time, but our goal is to improve the student (the writer), not a particular assignment (the writing).

Conclusion

Unlike many other academic centers, our goal at the Center is not to attract a larger clientele or to

address writing in the larger community; we exist to respond to the needs of a particular population and encounter unique challenges in doing so. But, like other academic centers, we share concerns that other writing and academic centers face. We work, through staff training and clear communication to students about our roles, to ensure that the services we provide are student-centered, high-quality, and ethically responsible. We may not be the most public of our fellow UT centers, but we serve an important role at the University and are diligently contributing to the goals of the writing center community at large.

Notes

1. *The Undergraduate Writing Center*. Department of Rhetoric and Writing – The University of Texas at Austin, n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
2. *The Sanger Learning and Career Center*. Division of Student Affairs – The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
3. *Peter T. Flawn Academic Center*. Information Technology Services – The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
4. *LBJ School of Public Affairs Graduate Writing Center*. Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs – The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
5. *Student Judicial Services*. The Office of the Dean of Students – The University of Texas at Austin, 2010. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
6. *Athletics Compliance Services*. Athletics Department – The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.

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- Athletics Compliance Services*. Athletics Department – The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.
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