



ATHLETICS AND ACADEMICS:

**the total
legiate
experience**

by Michael S. Miller, '82 - Vice President of Enrollment Management and Campus Life

“When I returned to Rockford College in 1999 as the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, I was excited about the opportunity to work with the intercollegiate athletics program at my alma mater. I was also apprehensive. As a former student-athlete, I know the tremendous impact sports can have on one’s life.”

As an experienced college administrator and educator, I also understand a lot about the challenges and issues that intercollegiate teams and student-athletes face.

A long-standing issue on many college campuses has been the relationship between intercollegiate athletics and the academic mission of higher education. While many of us in the academy hold different views about what this relationship should be, there are growing concerns at many colleges and universities about disconnects between academic values and athletic pursuits. While it is generally believed that college sports are an important part of campus life, it is also believed athletics can detract from core values espoused by most educational institutions (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

In my first few years back at the college, I saw this disconnect clearly as we instituted football as an intercollegiate sport. This happened nearly two decades after a group of instrumental faculty members and administrators, including the dean of students at that time,

Dr. Joel Tibbetts, were advocating the addition of football to the college's offerings. Football, it was believed, would add to the quality of student life at Rockford College. It would add to student enrollment, especially in the residence halls, and help balance the male/female ratio within the student body.

The program has just completed its fifth year, and by most accounts it has been successful. (We are currently conducting a thorough review of all our athletic programs.) It has added to student enrollment and helped balance the male/female ratio. It has made Rockford College an exciting place to be on Saturday afternoons in the fall, and it has driven improvements in recreational facilities, playing fields, and campus life.

Regardless of how one may feel about football, or football at Rockford College for that matter, there is no doubting the importance of all the intercollegiate athletic teams at the college. Presently, more than 200 male and female student-athletes compete in 17 intercollegiate sports on behalf of Rockford College. Student-athletes account for approximately 30 percent of the full-time undergraduate student population and almost 60 percent of the students who live on campus. On average, approximately 35 percent of our incoming freshmen tell us they plan to play varsity sports, which is a significantly higher percentage than incoming freshmen at similar private colleges.

To administer and support our athletic programs, there are head coaches, assistant coaches, trainers, sports information staff, parent organizations, cheerleaders, and countless volunteers. There is a faculty member who serves as one of our official representatives to Division III of the

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and an infrastructure to comply with reporting regulations and demands placed on our governance structure by that organization.

The budget for the department of athletics and recreation (including expenses associated with the management and maintenance of facilities, fields, and venues) accounts for approximately 10 percent of the college's overall budget. To comply with Title IX, we regularly survey students to determine their interest in sports-related programs and attempt to allocate funds equitably between male and female teams.

This year, the largest student organization on campus was the Regent RAGE (Rockford Activities Getting

A long-standing issue on many college campuses has been the relationship between intercollegiate athletics and the academic mission of higher education. While many of us in the academy hold different views about what this relationship should be, there are growing concerns at many colleges and universities about disconnects between academic values and athletic pursuits.

Excited), which not only supports our athletic teams, but was, on occasion, seen in Maddox Theatre rooting for their fellow students. Today's version of yesterday's "yell leaders" look like those students we see in front of television cameras at major college sporting events. Our students dress in purple paint, bathrobes, masks, and whatever else strikes them in the moment. Our events receive local and regional attention by media outlets, and beginning with the fall 2005 season, Rockford football games will be broadcast throughout northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin on WTJK (1380 AM), an ESPN radio affiliate.

In the last several years, athletic events at the college have been festive, exciting, tense, and at times, nothing short of spectacular. Seaver Gym saw as many as 1,000 fans at a basketball game during the 2003 season. Events have been won, or lost, on last-second shots and dramatic home runs. We have even seen points scored by Julie Harshbarger, from Roscoe, Ill., the first female to play on the football team. During the 2004 baseball season, Steve Ketter, from Eden, Wis., led the nation in home runs and was named a Baseball America/ESPN NCAA III preseason All-American catcher for spring 2005. In recent years, the volleyball team and both the men's and women's basketball teams have advanced to the NCAA tournament and the festivities around football games would make Bill Veeck (legendary baseball owner and promotion maverick credited with putting player names on uniforms and planting the ivy at Wrigley Field in 1937) proud.

Many of us know firsthand the effect intercollegiate athletics has on the college's image and its relations with other colleges around the country. Besides competing

regularly within the Northern Illinois and Iowa Conference (NIIC), our football team competes against schools throughout the upper Midwest. Our softball and baseball teams continue their long-standing tradition of spring trips, annually representing the college in Florida and several other southern states. Most recently, we have been working closely with presidents and administrators from other regional colleges and universities to create a new athletic conference which will further enhance and project our image as a liberal arts college throughout Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri, including major urban areas such as Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Louis.



Members of the 2004 football team give racquetball courts at the YMCA a good scrub during the fall Plunge.

In many respects, our athletic programs and student-athletes are our most visible, active, and successful ambassadors to the world beyond our campus. Through play and sportsmanship, our teams, coaches, fans, and students show the world how studying at Rockford College produces educated citizens who are poised and ready to make a positive difference in the world as scholars and leaders in whatever they choose to do.

While there is no question that our intercollegiate teams and our student-athletes have a major impact on Rockford College, what do we really know about the collegiate athletic experience for student-athletes and more importantly, what should we expect that experience to be?

Outcomes and success

Participation in organized sports is commonly believed to promote the development of character, enhance leadership abilities, and teach teamwork skills. Dating back to at least the mid-1800s, these notions were advanced by educators and administrators who

believed organized sport programs promoted social and moral attitudes that produced good citizens (Sage, 1998). Participation in intercollegiate athletics has been commonly associated with character development, but is there evidence to support such an assertion?

In his 1993 comprehensive study of the values, behaviors, and attitudes of college students, Alexander Astin – a leading scholar in the field of higher education and founding director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, an ongoing national study of some 9 million students, 250,000 faculty and staff, and 1,500 higher education institutions – found participation in intercollegiate sports led to better emotional and physical health, growth in interpersonal skills, and high campus life satisfaction rates. He also found participation in intercollegiate athletics to be negatively associated with performance on some standardized tests (GRE verbal, LSAT, and NTE General Knowledge) and decreased the likelihood that students would vote in government elections.

Other researchers have reported on various aspects of the intercollegiate athletic experience. On the positive side, participation is associated with enhanced interpersonal skills (Ryan, 1989), increased self-esteem (Taylor, 1995), and opportunities for leadership within social groups (Cantor and Prentice, 1996).

Evidence also exists to support assertions that participation in intercollegiate athletics can hinder a student's ability to develop mature relationships with peers (Sowa & Gressard, 1983) and to develop holistically while in college (Cantor and Prentice, 1996). Intercollegiate athletics has been found to teach antisocial behavior and delay a student-athlete's career and educational plans (Rees, Howell, & Miracle, 1990).

Because of the intense physical demands and time constraints placed on student-athletes, they tend to socialize with teammates more often than with other

students. Student-athletes do not participate in co-curricular events, on or off campus, to the same extent as their peers. They are generally less active in art, music, theater, clubs, and organizations than other students (Stone and Strange, 1989). Student-athletes are also believed to be less academically able by other students, faculty, and the public in general (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991).

In one study, Cornelius (1995) suggested participation in intercollegiate athletics was less about participating and more about how strongly students identify themselves as "student-athletes." Those students who more strongly identify with the athlete role were more likely to have stronger life management skills (e.g., time management, relationship management, and obligations to self and

others) and competencies required to manage academic demands than were other students.

William Bowen, a former president of Princeton University and coauthor of two controversial books on intercollegiate athletics, examined student-related trends in intercollegiate

athletics during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Bowen and his colleagues argue that despite any positive aspects of intercollegiate athletics, a divide between athletes and other students exists at all types of institutions on many of the indicators that define academic quality, student life, and alumni commitments to their alma maters.

At Rockford College, we see some of the trends reported in the literature about higher education and athletics. Our student-athletes tend to major in the social sciences, live in the same residence halls, and spend most of their time together outside the classroom (which has generally been the case since the late 1970s, and possibly earlier).

Empirical evidence shows us that incoming Rockford College students, compared with first-year students at other private colleges and universities, are significantly

Our student-athletes tend to major in the social sciences, live in the same residence halls, and spend most of their time together outside the classroom (which has generally been the case since the late 1970s, and possibly earlier).

more likely to be impacted by their participation in organized athletics, either because they were recruited with the anticipation of playing varsity sports or because they were influenced by coaches and athletic recruiters.

Increasingly over the last decade, incoming students also tell us that “financial assistance” has become the most important factor influencing whether they attend Rockford College (the academic reputation of the college has steadily become less important to them).

The influence of the athletic department on students’ decisions to attend has remained relatively constant, except for fall 2002, the second year of the football program, when there was a significant increase in the importance of athletics to students who chose to attend Rockford College.

We also know from an analysis of students’ academic performance during the fall 2004 semester that student-athletes fared no better or worse than other

students on various measures of academic performance and standing. For those students who were academically classified as high risk, there were no differences in mean grade point averages between those who were student-athletes and those who were not.

Our student-athletes tell us about the remarkable camaraderie they develop with teammates, the loyalty, respect, and admiration they have for coaches, and the lessons they believe influence who they are now and who they will be as adults. Many of us who participated in college sports will recall the influences coaches and teammates had on us. In fact, I regularly see the positive influences of Rockford College athletics on numerous alumni – something I am certain today’s student-athletes will experience as they go on to pursue the opportunities afforded to them by their liberal arts education.

Disconnected communities

Recently, several college presidents and athletic administrators, working through The Andrew Mellon Foundation, formed the College Sports Project (CSP). This initiative was created to address concerns about increased specialization in NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics and a widening “academic-athletic divide” that is separating student-athletes from their classmates and distancing athletic personnel from faculty and student affairs staff.

The mission of NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics is that athletes are students first, and that well-administered intercollegiate athletic programs enhance the total undergraduate experience for all students and provide life-long lessons for student-athletes. At the core of the College Sports Project are two objectives that guide the relationship between intercollegiate athletics and educational values:



Coach Julian Jacques with the women’s volleyball team.

- First, student-athletes “should be ‘representative’ of all other students in terms of academic outcomes, choice of majors, and opportunities for engagement in campus activities.”
- Second, “athletic administrators and coaches must embrace their roles as educators and resist the temptation to view their contributions as separate and autonomous from their institution’s primary mission. Similarly, faculty members, academic administrators, and student life professionals should recognize the educational values of intercollegiate athletics, and respect the contributions that coaches bring to the academic enterprise.”

This past January, under the leadership of President Pribbenow, Rockford College joined the CSP and committed itself to the project's core objectives. We further committed to a vision-planning process for intercollegiate athletics at Rockford College. Led by Professor Bill Lewis, a group made up of student-athletes, faculty members, trustees, and athletic staff is seeking to align intercollegiate athletics with the educational mission of the college, identify value-driven outcomes expected for all student-athletes, and promote practices that engage student-athletes in the entirety of the collegiate experience.

Uniting the best of each world

I have described the importance of intercollegiate athletics to Rockford College, and I have documented some of the outcomes associated with the intercollegiate athletic experience. I have also stated the college's commitment to pursuing a mission-driven experience for students. So what can we do to create a mission-driven, educational experience that connects the academic, athletic, and student worlds? From my personal and professional experiences, I find several ideas to be quite compelling:

Recognize that the best of each world can be combined to produce a meaningful and encompassing educational experience at Rockford College. Students tell us they have many different reasons for

attending college. They have numerous goals, ambitions, interests, distractions, and expectations. They bring to us attitudes, values, and behaviors, and trust that we will help guide them to different and better places.

If one of our mission-driven educational objectives is to help them be better citizens, we need to challenge them to make connections between their worlds and communities beyond their immediate experiences. This requires us to find ways to connect with students where they are, not where we think they should be. It also suggests we find ways to connect and integrate the various worlds on our campus into a broader educational experience. In other words, by finding ways to connect the best of the academic, student, and athletic worlds, we will find new and exciting ways to reach students while we model ideals such as tolerance, inclusion, reason, and respect, each a critical competence for effective citizenship.

Promote the practice of being scholar athletes. Rick Telander, a long-time writer for the *Chicago Sun Times* and *Sports Illustrated*, once described how his college football coach would alternatively yell, "Don't act, think" and "Don't think, act." Well, why not think *and* act? Why not find ways for

student-athletes to study their sports while they play them? Why not have students use what they learn in the classroom to analyze and understand the dynamics of



*1894 - This apparatus was one of the first built for the recreational use of neighborhood children at the Hull-House Playground. It would be followed within a year by swings, hammocks, sandboxes, and rope-ladders.



*1895 - The construction of a playground shelter where children and instructors could congregate was important, and a new kind of play activity was introduced as children were taught group games.

* Photos from the University of Illinois at Chicago Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections Department.

sports, including motivation, volition, conflict resolution, problem solving, politics, and human relations? Why not structure some aspects of the athletic experience to intentionally develop critical thinking skills? Why not find ways to integrate the academic and athletic experiences to find new ways to engage students in the learning process?

An example of the practice of developing scholar athletes is the college's Experiential Learning Program (ELP). This program involves graduate students (graduate assistants) who serve as assistant coaches (in some cases upper division students participate as interns). Each student dedicates on average 28 hours per week to coaching and other athletic pursuits in exchange for modest compensation and a tuition stipend. Students enter learning contracts with coaches, who also serve as mentors. The learning contracts are structured in ways that encourage students to take theories, ideas, models, and constructs from the classroom and intentionally apply them to the work they do as assistant coaches.

Become scholars of the student experience. Most people involved in athletics do not just coach. They teach, evaluate, and engage students in ideas relevant to their lives. But if we are to create educational conditions that transcend the traditional boundaries on our campus, we will need to know how our athletic practices influence student learning as well as whether those practices should differ when they are applied to different types of students. We will need to know how student learning can be enhanced by connecting the various experiences students have on our campus and how organized athletic activities expand/complement outcomes sought through the curriculum.

This suggests that we need to study how we teach, how students learn, and how we can implement improvements in both, not only for athletes, but for all students involved in various aspects of the collegiate experience – theater, music, art, student government, and residence life. By promoting student learning through all aspects of their educational experiences, we are enhancing their abilities to think critically, solve problems, and exercise good judgment – practical skills necessary to see beyond one's immediate experiences.

Place integrity at the center of our efforts, on and off the field. All students, coaches, faculty, and administrators need to be active in promoting and living out the ideals that make a Rockford College education distinctive. The Honor Code, a long-held and important tradition at the college, “proposes to all students the importance of

finding significance in life in spiritual, creative, and intellectual terms and the necessity of developing a set of ethical values to guide personal conduct.”

In the athletic world, this involves discipline, character development, leadership, personal responsibility, teamwork, and integrity. It does not involve winning at all costs, nor does it involve

segregating collegiate life for students. Instead, it involves the construction of an educational experience that incorporates the best of what each world has to offer and helping students see the connections between what they learn and what they do in all contexts – from the classroom to the residence halls to the athletic fields.

What's next?

How do we proceed to realize the vision outlined here? First, we need to shift our perspective from “athletes are

“The opportunity which the athletic field provides for discussion of actual events and for comradeship founded upon the establishment of just relationships is the basis for a new citizenship and in the end will overthrow the corrupt politician.”

– Jane Addams, "Recreation as a Public Function in Urban Communities,"
American Journal of Sociology 17, no. 5 (March 1912): 615-19.

different” to “all students matter, regardless of who they are and why they are at Rockford College.” We should expect that students attend college to learn, even if it does not always seem like it. We should pay attention to the things our students do, such as whether they are serving in leadership positions on campus, voting, volunteering, actively pursuing religious and/or spiritual development, becoming tolerant of others who are different than they, developing meaningful perspectives of life, developing a deeper understanding of one’s self (emotionally, spiritually, physically, and socially), and learning to appreciate diversity.

Second, our coaches need to be more visible across campus. Likewise, all of us need to find ways to be involved in the entire educational experience for students, not just the portion of the experience with which we are most comfortable. The most consistent finding reported in the research on students in higher education is the influence of faculty and other mentors on students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).



Baseball Pitcher Keith Miller is part of the Vocal Collective and sings the National Anthem before college sporting events.

With so many of our undergraduates directly involved in intercollegiate sports, it is imperative for all of us pay attention to the athletic experience of students.

Third, we need to clearly understand what we promise and what we expect from the intercollegiate athletic experience and from our student athletes. We need to

demand that our student-athletes, and our students, carry forward the distinction of being a Rockford College student at all times with passion and pride.

Great communities are ones where everyone matters and where everyone is connected by a common aspiration to achieve something special. We have something special in our vision to be Jane Addams’

college in the 21st century. We have great students, great coaches, and great possibilities.

We just need to think, act, and give a damn. **D**





References

The Andrew Mellon Foundation (November 29, 2004).
College Sports Project. New York, NY.

Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college?*
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bowen, W. G. & Levin, S.A. (2003).
Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values.
Rutgers, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cornelius, A. (1995). The relationship between athletic identity,
peer and faculty socialization, and college student development.
Journal of College Student Development, 36, 560-573.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education.*
Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.

Engstrom, C. M., Hallock, H., Riemer, S. M., & Rawls, J. (2000).
Perspectives of democracy: A lens for analyzing students'
experiences in a pilot community standards program.
Journal of College Student Development, 41(3), 265-278.

Guarasci, R. (2001). Developing the democratic arts.
About Campus, 5(6), 9-15.

Hogan, R., Curphy, G. J., & Hogan, J. (1994).
What we know about leadership: Effectiveness and personality.
American Psychologist, 46, 493-504.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1981).
How college affects students. Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rees, C. E., Howell, F. M., & Miracle, A. W. (1990).
Do high school sports build character? A quasi-experiment on
a national sample. *Social Science Journal*, 27, 303-315.

Richards, S. & Aries, E. (1999). The division III student-athlete:
Academic performance, campus involvement, and growth.
Journal of College Student Development, 40, 211-218.

Sowa, C. J., & Gressard, C. F., (1983).
Athletic participation: Its relationship to student development.
Journal of College Student Development, 22, 236-239.

Suggs, W. (September 19, 2003). The big time costs of small-time
sports. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Telender, R. (1989). *The hundred yard lie: The corruption of
college football and what we can do to stop it.*
New York: Simon and Schuster.

Wolniak, G. C., Pierson, C. T., & Pascarella, E. T. (2001).
Effects of intercollegiate athletic participation on male
orientations toward learning. *Journal of College Student
Development*, 42, 604-624.