Development of a freshman and transfer student athlete orientation program at Rowan University

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ABSTRACT

Michael D. Jefferson

Development of A Freshman And Transfer Student Athlete Orientation Program

May 1, 2001

Dr. James Coaxum

Higher Education Administration

Many college student athletes fail to attain degrees. Academically, students struggle to maintain the minimum academic requirements to remain enrolled in their college or university. The purpose of this thesis project was to determine the feasibility of developing a freshman and transfer student athlete orientation program at Rowan University. An action research design was used to collect qualitative data on student athletes regarding their attitudes and perceptions towards the development and possible implementation of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes. Student athletes and university administrators supported the development of an orientation program for student athletes at Rowan University.
MINI ABSTRACT

Many student athletes fail to attain degrees academically. Academically student athletes struggle to maintain the minimum academic requirements to remain enrolled in their college or university. The purpose of this research was to determine the feasibility of developing a freshman and transfer student athlete orientation program at Rowan University.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my parents, grandparents, and godparents, for their enormous and continuous support throughout this process. I am very blessed to have a family that acknowledges the strength and power of “the man above” and constantly reminds me that this could not have been accomplished without him. I would also like to recognize my extended family and friends for their tremendous support and encouragement.

I would like to thank the entire department of Educational Leadership, and am grateful to Dr. Larry Marcus and Dr Richard Smith for believing in me and granting me this wonderful opportunity. Last but not least, I would like to thank my comrade, mentor, and advisor, Dr. James Coaxum, for his assistance and dedication in overseeing my successful completion of this thesis change project and graduation.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most studied areas in higher education is student retention. Of the nearly 2.4 million students who entered a college or university in 1993, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree (Tinto, 1993). While many institutions establish programs to address student retention, the number of students who fail to obtain degrees continue to increase (Lenning, 1982). Retaining students in higher education is a financial issue as well as an academic issue. From a financial perspective, students who drop out during their first year represent the loss of three or four years of tuition for colleges and universities (Bean, 1990). This has produced a financial drain on colleges and universities. Each student that fails to reenroll in a college or university also represents a loss of revenue. Academically, student’s struggle to maintain the minimum academic requirements to remain enrolled in their college or university while colleges and universities attempt to retain as many students as possible to increase their retention rates.

Bean (1990) cites various reasons why students depart college before completing their degree. He states that students may not fit into an institution socially or academically, religiously or economically, or they may
simply leave because the school is not a good match for their needs. As the retention of students continue to decrease, institutions of higher education must begin to address this issue and somehow establish a remedy. Colleges and universities must especially begin to find solutions to the retention problems for those groups who experience high attrition rates. One such group is student athletes.

Over the past few years, concern over the retention of athletes in intercollegiate athletics, has caused great debate. As modern day television contracts and an annual multi-billion dollar sports market boosts the interest and relevance of intercollegiate athletics, colleges and universities have experienced difficulty trying to balance the importance of athletics in conjunction with academics. The belief that many students enter college for the sole reason of participating in collegiate athletics has stirred debate among athletic departments in colleges throughout the country. Intercollegiate athletics play an important role in the culture of an institution. Many institutions of higher education are recognized for the success of their athletic programs while difficulty of curriculum places a distant second. Shriberg and Brodinski (1984) argue that academics are relegated to a secondary position to athletics because institutions rely upon athletic revenue for significant contributions towards budgeting, planning, and
development. Institutions frequently compromise their academic integrity to accommodate winning programs (Shriberg & Brodinski, 1984).

As colleges struggle to maintain an equal balance between athletics and academics, student athletes experience even greater difficulty trying to equate the two. Many student athletes face difficulty trying to maintain their academics in conjunction with the amount of time and energy necessary to participate in a specified sport. Historically, college athletes have struggled to adapt to a collegiate academic curriculum and successfully handle the dual role of maintaining academic stability and participating in athletics (Purdy, 1983).

Many students find it difficult to reconcile the roles associated with their status as students and athletes (Coakley, 1986). Dual roles for college athletes consist of successfully competing in intercollegiate athletics and obtaining a degree. Thus, participation in college athletics may often be the sole reason for lack of degree obtainment for many student athletes. A sufficient number of student athletes have a difficult time adapting to a college curriculum and college environment. Many student athletes enter college ill prepared to adapt to the rigorous time scheduling that stems from participating in college athletics. In comparison to the typical student population, student athletes typically do not have time to relax, regroup, and
regenerate due to constant demands that are placed on them by the increasing pace of society (McGee, 1999).

In many parts of the country, college athletics is far more popular and influential than professional sports. Numerous fans, alumni, friends, and even parents, often pressure student athletes to perform at a level of perfection, and chastise student athletes when a level of perfection cannot be obtained or maintained. As time constraints placed on student athletes often hinder their ability to be successful in college, a crucial step to ensuring that they have a successful college experience is dependent upon the university’s ability to hire the right people – people who have the best interest of the student at heart (McGee, 1999).

Problem Statement

In 1996-1997, Rowan University student athletes graduated at a rate of 64 percent. However, this rate decreased dramatically in 1998-1999 as Rowan athletes graduated at a rate of only 46 percent. In the academic year 1998-1999, the Rowan University football and basketball teams each graduated student athletes at a rate of 0 percent. Within the span of two academic years, 1996-1997 to 1998-1999, the graduation rate for Rowan University athletes fell from average to below average.
The combined mean GPA of all Rowan University athletic teams (475 athletes) for the academic year of 1998-1999 was 2.68, while the comparable mean GPA for the Rowan University undergraduate student population was 2.96 (Athletic Academic Report, 1999). This research suggests that when comparing the success rate of athletes to the general student body, athletes at Rowan perform at a lower level than the Rowan University general student body.

Although national data collected on the graduation rates for student athletes is slightly higher than those of the general student body, there is still room for improvement among student athletes. Freshman student athletes entering college in 1992 (obtaining a degree within six years) graduated at a rate of 58 percent. National graduation rates for the general student body were reported at 56 percent (NCAA Fact Sheet, 1999). Although the statistics show a close correspondence in percentages, 57 percent (athletes) to 56 percent (general student body) in 1991, and 58 percent (athletes) to 56 percent (general student body) in 1990, student athletes may still be behind the general student body considering the numerous support systems utilized by student athletes, which are not utilized by the general student body. These support systems consist of personal tutors, mandatory study hall hours, and priority scheduling. Crowe (1998) cites that unlike the general
student body, student athletes are required to meet with tutors, professors and advisors on a daily basis. Taking this into account, student athletes should fare better than students of the general student body for the simple fact that they have more access too, and a greater opportunity to take further advantage of the support services mentioned above. Student athletes are often required to participate in mandatory study halls, and meet with personal tutors, while students within the general student body may choose not to take advantage of these support services.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the feasibility of developing an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes at Rowan University in an attempt to increase retention. The goal of this program is to make student athletes aware of the influences that may possibly assist them in obtaining a degree. As colleges throughout the country attempt to address student athlete retention by narrowing the gap between athletics and academics, it is important to examine the effects, if any, of orientating college athletes to issues that may enhance their academic development. The premise is that if student athletes understand the factors
that inhibit degree completion, as a result, student athletes will be able to avoid those inhibiting factors in an attempt to obtain a degree.

**Significance of The Study**

The academic integration of new students into an unfamiliar academic environment is very important. Storm (1984) states that this integration is a critical component of a new students academic life. The aim of this project is to assist freshmen and transfer athletes at Rowan University with their integration into a new academic environment. An orientation program for freshmen and transfer athletes will give athletes a "head start" on the difficulties of being a student and an athlete. What makes developing an orientation program for freshmen and transfer athletes at Rowan University such a unique concept, is the capacity of the program to perhaps assist with those factors that positively influence student retention including but not limited to; academic advising, tutoring, and counseling.

The factors that appear to influence a student’s decision to re-enroll, financial support, counseling, and advising, have a considerable overlap with those factors that influence the success of student athletes. Those factors that influence the success and retention of student athletes; time management, career choice, and academic success, may be determined by
how well a college provides financial support, counseling, and academic advising. Foremost, colleges and universities throughout the country vary in terms of academic expectations and goals set for their individual athletic programs. The differences in mission and in size have a profound effect on the structure of an institution and the expectations by various constituent groups (Purdy, 1983). First, it is important that professionals in the field of higher education identify those universities whom fail to provide student athletes with the necessary tools for attaining a degree. Universities have an enormous impact upon their student athletes. Their full support and cooperation is essential if the athletic program is to succeed (Smith & Herman, 1998) in general and the student athlete in particular.

Secondly, the orientation of student athletes must include traditional student orientation programs in addition to issues that pertain solely to the student athlete. In other words, it is important that student athletes experience the same orientation program of the general student body in conjunction with a program of their own. This study does not attempt to downgrade traditional orientation programs, it simply attempts to provide student athletes with the “extras” that are needed to become a successful student athlete on the field as well as off the field. Current orientation programs are responses to changes in the population of students in higher
education. Women, people of color, and non-traditional students have clearly changed the venue of orientation programs across the country. Orientation programs have evolved from their roots of individual faculty attention programs, to programs that attempt to focus on a multitude of important issues while meeting the needs of a diverse student population (Upcraft, 1993).

Approaching retention from an orientation standpoint will give us the ability to tackle problem areas in the initial stages of a student athletes' career. However, attempting to increase retention of student athletes is more than merely providing them with academic support through orientation. It is the ability to gain institution-wide support involving not only the athletic department, but also, senior administrators, faculty, and support staff. Implementing a freshmen and transfer orientation program at Rowan University will take the mutual supportiveness and understanding of university constituents.

The impetus for this project is spurred by the athletes' ability to recognize the importance of time management, the development of good study habits, and the ability to adapt to a new educational environment. Improving the retention rate of college athletes can be achieved through many strategies. Academic advising, tutorial programs, and career planning
and counseling are primary examples of the support services made available to student athletes. This project aims to examine the possible role of student athlete orientation programs as one strategy to boost the retention of these students.
Chapter Two

Review of The literature

Introduction

Since the first national study on retention was conducted in the 1930’s, retention has been one of the most common variables examined in higher education. Retention can be defined as the number of students in a college or university that disappeared from the student record system without having successfully completed the program in which they had originally enrolled (Lenning, 1982). One of the greatest influences in retention studies has been Vincent Tinto. Tinto’s model of student departure has been employed as a learning resource for more than two decades. Tinto’s (1993) theory suggests that students enter college with certain characteristics, intentions, and expectations. His or her decision to persist or depart is a function of the extent to which he or she has succeeded in becoming integrated into the institution socially and academically (Tinto, 1993). A student’s failure to obtain a degree is often assumed to be reflective of personal failure of the individual to measure up to the demands of his or her college or university. Tinto’s model (1993) of student departure focuses on the impact of external factors that stem from the institution. These external factors begin with the admissions process and include
financial aid, student services, and other administrative offices that deal
directly with students. Braxton (2000) considers the three campus
subsystems, academic, social, and organizational, to be the nucleus of the
support system for students.

There are various interpretations of what retention actually is. On the
surface level, retention deals with the aspect of student withdrawal, however,
a more in-depth description of the term tends to deal with the persistence of
a student and/or the period of time in which it took them to obtain a degree
from a university. There are three factors that contribute to student
withdrawal. Ozga and Sukhnandans (1988) model of undergraduate non-
completion lists unplanned external crisis, recognition of incompatible
choices, and unpreparedness as the three areas which contribute to student
withdrawal. An unplanned external crisis deals with a student’s inability to
predict an external crisis such as death in the family, sickness, or injury.
Recognition of incompatible choices is a student’s ability to realize that
furthering their education is simply not a good decision. Finally,
unpreparedness is a result of a student not being academically or socially
prepared for college. Research suggest that in order to increase student
retention, ALL of these attributes must be addressed in a collective manner.
Retention of Student Athletes

The question of why so many students are leaving colleges and universities without completing a degree can in part be answered by examining the types of students who enroll. Each year freshman and transfer student athletes enter colleges and universities at alarming rates. Many of these athletes enter college intellectually unchallenged and/or intellectually unprepared (Catanese, 1989). Statistics show that the retention of student athletes is traditionally lower than that of the general student body. Dennis (1998) further states that some schools have the same retention activities for all students – high-risk students, academically talented students, new freshman, and transfer students. Dennis (1998) suggests that there should be specific retention strategies for different categories of enrolled students, including: academically talented students, adult learners, transfer students, athletes, and minority students.

While student athletes often experience a difficult time in attaining a degree, minority athlete’s posses even greater difficulty in their attempt to attain degrees. However, no other ethnic group has had such difficulty in their efforts towards degree attainment than African Americans. Underwood (1980) reports that black student athlete’s graduation rate is 50 percent lower than white student athletes. Edwards (1982) estimates that of all black
athletes awarded athletic scholarships, 75 percent do not graduate. Although black athletes have traditionally performed lower academically than their white counterparts, the number of black athletes entering college on athletic scholarships continues to increase. Edwards (1984) states that in the dominating sports of football and basketball, black athletes receive athletic scholarships at an alarming rate of 2 to 1 over their white counterparts. It is often perceived that black athletes are continuously accepted into college possessing fewer academic credentials than white athletes. Since it was perceived that black athletes being accepted at lower academic standards resulted in a disproportionate amount of awarded scholarships, proposition "48" (1986) was passed to provide equal academic standards and expectations for all student athletes.

Proposition 48 requires all student athletes to possess a minimum high school grade point average, and achieve a minimum combined score on the SAT or ACT. Proposition 48 has not only closed the gap between the distribution of athletic scholarships amongst white and black athletes, it has also been credited as a successful retention tool. A study by the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) compared the differences in the 1985 and 1986 cohorts of student athletes before and after the implementation of proposition "48." The study showed that the 1985 cohort of student athletes
entered college with a grade point average of 2.85, and SAT average of 874, and a class rank in the top 34 percent. The 1986 cohort of student athletes entered college with a grade point average of 3.11, and SAT average of 957, and a class rank of 30.2 percent. Figure 1 below depicts the differences in the 1985 cohort and the 1986 cohort after the implementation of proposition “48.”

Table 1: Differences in Cohorts After Proposition “48”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1985 Cohort</th>
<th>1986 Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA= 2.84</td>
<td>GPA= 3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT= 874</td>
<td>SAT= 957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Rank= Top 34%</td>
<td>Class Rank= Top 30.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study supports the claim that proposition “48” may play an important role in the success and retention of student athletes.

While proposition 48 helps institutions monitor student athletes as they enter colleges and universities, universities (1992) are also required to provide data on their student athletes throughout the academic year. Mallette and Howard (1992) state that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires colleges and universities to state the academic eligibility of recruited student athletes, academic performance during
enrollment at the institution, degree programs and majors selected, graduation rates, and average time it takes a student athlete to graduate. These factors may be described as academic performance measures (APM). These APM's assist the NCAA in determining whether or not a college or university is providing quality academic support. Academic performance measures also provide a guideline to aid administrators in their attempt to retain student athletes. College administrators often use APM’s as a measuring tool to determine if the academic performance of their student athletes has fallen below university standards. While the NCAA uses APM’s to determine whether colleges are providing an adequate level of academic support, individual universities use APM’s to provide a personal assessment of their ability or inability to provide academic support. APM’s provide both the NCAA and colleges and universities with a guideline to determine how much academic support is warranted.

The Role of Academic Advising in Retention

Research findings suggest that academic advising is an important component of our ability to retain first year students. Hodgkinson (1985) strongly suggest that an increasing number of first-year college students will arrive on campus academically and psychologically ill prepared for the
challenges of college life. Hodgkinson (1985) further suggest that if these students are to have a reasonable chance of succeeding, they must not only have a campus environment conductive to meeting their special needs, but advisors with the sensitivity and training necessary to accommodate these needs.

Gordon (1995) describes the first-year student as being underprepared as a result of poor high school preparation or a low socioeconomic background. In response to the unpreparedness of many first-year students, approximately 70 percent of collegiate institutions incorporate some type of academic advising for first year students (Gruber, 1992). Gruber (1992) defines academic advising as regular academic meetings with an academic advisor, in which the academic advisor can monitor academic progress throughout the semester. This advisor also helps students with individual and personal issues that come up for them during the year. One of the initial challenges for freshman students entering college is the ability to adapt to an unfamiliar academic environment. Many first year students enter college with no academic direction or clear academic plan. Gordon (1995) suggests that approximately 25 to 50 percent of students entering college walk into the doors of their respective institutions with vague ideas concerning their professional futures. Academic advising is essential to the success of
student retention because it provides students with an academic reference. Academic reference may be defined as giving students the opportunity to refer to an individual who possess the experience and knowledge to guide them in the direction of academic success.

There are specific strategies that can be used to strengthen the effect of academic advising. Knowing and evaluating a students skills and abilities, assessing the factors that inhibit academic success, and referring students to appropriate resources are all strategies employed to enhance the effects of academic advising. As we analyze the effects of academic advising, it is important that we identify those students who possess an even greater need for its services. Students who engage in intercollegiate athletics often show an even greater need for academic advising than those students in the general student body. Student athletes cannot designate the same amount of hours per week to academics, as do non-student athletes. Practice, analyzing films, studying opponent tendencies, and travel time can occupy many hours per week. In an effort to maximize their time, student athletes must often practice better time management techniques than non-student athletes.

Time management is one of many topics that can be discussed and introduced during academic advising sessions. Time management is the
skill used to place in order one's daily activities so as to maximize one's time (Crowe, 1998). Stressing the importance of time management is an important characteristic of an academic advising program. As these goals play an important role in academic advising, academic advising plays an important role in orientation. Often, academic advising programs become part of an integrated network of programs aimed at student retention and are administratively tied to orientation programs (Frost, 1991). Four national surveys conducted by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), have collected data on the achievement of six goals for academic advising. These goals formed the basis for the development of NACADA standards for academic advising and the self-assessment guide for academic advising (Gordon & Habley, 2000).

1) Assisting students in self-understanding and self-acceptance (values clarification; understanding abilities, interest, and limitations)

2) Assisting students in considering their life goals by relating their interest, skills, abilities, and values to careers, the world of work, and the nature and purpose of higher education.

3) Assisting students in developing an educational plan consistent with their life goals and objectives.

4) Assisting students in developing decision-making skills.

5) Providing accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources, and programs.
6) Providing information about students to the institution academic departments, or some combination of both.

As administrators have taken advantage of the opportunity to incorporate academic advising into the orientation process, according to Strumph (1990), 91 percent of freshman received academic advising during orientation in 1982 compared to 99 percent in 1992, and 84 percent of transfer students in 1982 compared to 91 percent in 1992. It is important to link academic advising to the orientation process. Linking academic advising to the orientation process will help to stress the importance of academic advising.

The Role of Orientation in Student Retention

Orientation is a comprehensive program designed to facilitate the smooth transition of students into the academic atmosphere of the college or university (Smith and Brackin, 1993). Orientation programs are programs aid administrators in their attempt to introduce students to college. They provide an opportunity for freshman and transfer students to meet other students, learn policies and procedures, and become accustomed to university culture. Within the last decade, institutions have begun to view the orientation process as a viable retention tool (Noel, 1985). As the
demographics of college students change annually, so will the issues and concerns that face our students and institutions.

While numerous first year students take part in orientation, many do so lacking a firm understanding about the purpose of orientation. Swann (1989) states that university orientation is often the first introduction to college life and is sometimes confusing to students because their focus is more apt to be on limitations, rules, regulations, and those factors which relate to administration and authority such as behavioral expectations, rules, and regulations in residence life. Contrary to popular opinion, orientation is often employed as an opportunity for administrators to integrate first-year students into a university's culture and climate. Pascarella (1985) recommends that orientation be viewed as an opportunity for "anticipatory socialization." This is when a student has the opportunity to make new acquaintances and become accustomed to a college environment. Orientation should create new student expectations, which more closely approximate campus environment and norms. Orientation programs not only help students in the initial stages of the college experience, they also develop an ongoing process of academic awareness in teaching students when, where, and how to get help.
Given the importance of orientation programs to the general student body, student athletes also possess a need for an orientation program. While university orientation programs cope with issues that deal with the success and retention of students in general, a student athlete orientation program should be developed to deal with the issues that pertain solely to student athletes. Contemporary university orientation programs fail to address specific issues that pertain solely to the student athlete. In order to address the retention of student athletes, in concurrence with the retention of the general student body, it is important that colleges and universities develop an orientation program that tackles issues and concerns from a student athlete perspective.

**Conclusion**

There are many issues that play an important role in the retention of student athletes. Our ability to stress the importance of the specific issues that play a part in retention lies in our ability to increase student athlete awareness. Increasing student athlete awareness entails orientating student athletes to issues that will enhance their chances at degree attainment. As student athletes enter college, it is critical that colleges and universities take full advantage of the opportunity to point them in the right direction and
increase their chances of success. How can this be accomplished? First, colleges and universities must begin to closely examine the statistics and factors concerning student athletes and academics. After analyzing those factors, colleges and universities must begin to address the specific needs of student athletes aside from the regular student body. Research suggests that student athletes demand a substantial amount of academic attention. Specific issues that pertain to the retention of student athletes are in desperate need of increased attention and modification. As a solution to the retention crisis of student athletes remains obsolete, we must continue to gather research on all possibilities and possible solutions. One such possibility may be through orientation programs for these students.
Chapter Three

Methodological Design

The purpose of developing a freshman and transfer orientation program was to increase the awareness of student athletes about issues that would aid in their success at attaining a degree. This project then used an action research design to determine the need and feasibility for such a program at Rowan University. Action research combines both quantitative and qualitative research strategies and assists practitioners who want to implement change. Thus, an action research design was chosen for this project because it provided the researcher with the necessary techniques to study his own practices. Action Research is a form of applied research focused on solving local problems that practitioners face (Johnson and Christensen 2000). This form of research, usually applied by teachers, practitioners and administrators, involves finding a problem, researching the existing problem, and employing newfound knowledge to solve or improve the problem (Johnson and Christensen, 2000). The result of this study led to the development of a one-day orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes at Rowan University.
Organizational Description

Rowan University is a liberal arts institution located in southern New Jersey. The university consists of six colleges serving over nine thousand undergraduate and graduate students. As a NCAA Division III institution, Rowan University has been annually recognized as one of the most competitive Division III institutions in the country. Similar to most institutions in Division III, the athletic department at Rowan University stresses the importance of being a student first, and athlete second. The Rowan University athletic department consists of sixteen athletic programs, containing approximately 475 athletes (See table 2 below). The Rowan University athletic department consists of seven male programs, which total approximately 290 male athletes. There are nine female programs that consist of approximately 185 female athletes.
Table 2: Male and Female Athletic Programs at Rowan University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Teams</th>
<th># of Athletes</th>
<th>Female Teams</th>
<th># of Athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Field Hockey</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's Basketball</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's Track</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's Soccer</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Women's Basketball</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's Swimming</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Women's Track</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Country</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Cross Country</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total 297</td>
<td>Total 178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The athletic department at Rowan provides at best, modest support services for its athletes. Support services for student athletes at Rowan University presently consists of a mentoring program, a weekly study hall, and the daily support services made available to the regular student body. These daily support services include academic advising and career planning. Thus, at Rowan University there are only two support programs designed specifically for student athletes, which are a mentoring program and a weekly study hall.

**Action Research Design & Methodology**

While conducting action research, it is always important that the researcher develops a plan of action or design. In designing the action
research plan, one technique that was used to aid in the development of this specific research design was the use of cycles. The technique or strategy of using action research cycles allowed the researcher to organize and conduct his research in a series of steps. The purpose of using cycles in the design of this action research project was to allow the researcher to organize the project into clear succinct steps that would best assist the researcher in the goal of developing a freshman and transfer student athlete orientation program.

**Cycle One: Meeting with Rowan University Administrators**

When attempting to initiate change through action research, it is important to utilize your resources and gather information from all persons who have the authority and power to assist you in the establishment of change. The purpose of the first cycle was to introduce my idea to administrators at Rowan University in an effort to determine if the development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes was a feasible idea. In the process of meeting with university administrators, I followed the "chain of command," recognizing the importance of "management from the top down" (Bolman & Deal, 1996).

According to the structure of Rowan University, the athletic department falls under the direction of the Dean of Students. Starting my
research with the Dean of Students, I initiated a meeting time for us to
discuss some of the factors and issues that would play a part in the
development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes.

After gaining the support and approval for attempting to implement an
orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes, the Dean of
Students and I began to discuss alternative approaches for gaining the
support of the entire athletic department. Taking this important information
into consideration, I then proceeded to meet with individual coaches and one
student athlete academic advisor in an attempt to gain feedback on whether
or not the idea of developing an orientation program for freshman and
transfer athletes was a feasible one, and whether or not they would be
willing to provide their support.

**Cycle Two: Interviewing and Surveying Athletes**

Three athletic teams were interviewed and surveyed in this project.
The three athletic teams that participated were football, men’s basketball,
and women’s field hockey. Together, these three teams represented the most
academically unsuccessful athletic programs at Rowan University
(Educational Research Department, 1999). After determining which athletic
teams were struggling academically, student athletes were selected through
random sampling. Twelve student athletes were interviewed. Eight males were selected from both the Men's Basketball and Football teams, and four females were selected from the field hockey team. Each student athlete was surveyed at the beginning of each interview. Student athletes were surveyed on their prior educational history, and their personal thoughts about the student athlete academic support system at Rowan University (Appendix A).

Although action research uses both qualitative and quantitative techniques, qualitative interviews were used as the primary data technique in this cycle. Patten (1987) surmises that the two principle means of collecting qualitative data in the social sciences are interviews and participant observation in groups. Qualitative data was collected on each student athlete's perception of a student athlete orientation program. Each athletic team was interviewed separately, using focus groups. Stewart and Shamdasani (1988) identified multiple purposes for utilizing focus groups, one of which is diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program, service or product.

As the interviewer, I chose focus groups as a means for allowing student athletes to interact amongst themselves in conjunction with the researcher. The focus groups offered a stronger mechanism for placing control over this interaction in the hands of the participants rather than the
researcher (Kruger, 1998). Although qualitative research was used as the primary research tool in this change project, archived data was also collected in an effort to take advantage of data that had already been used for the purpose of public or private research. Archived data was used from the Rowan University department of Institutional Research regarding the academic status of Rowan athletes. With these academic facts, I was able to convince student athletes and university administrators that there was a need for a student athlete orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes at Rowan University.

Cycle Three: The Development of The Orientation Program

Based on the data collected, I developed a student athlete orientation program that responded to the suggestions of student athletes, coaches, and administrators at Rowan University. The development of this plan allowed me the opportunity to analyze their feedback and use that feedback to develop the orientation program. After the orientation program was developed, I presented the program to university administrators and student athletes for possible recommendations on how the program could then be modified.
Chapter Four

Presentation, Findings, Analysis

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze my findings to determine how best to design an orientation program that would meet the need of student athletes at Rowan. In order to achieve the task of developing an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes, it was necessary for me to gain the support of those persons who had the power and authority to implement this change. I first conducted research by gathering information on orientation programs, student athletes, and retention. I found that there were very few orientation programs designated or designed strictly for the college student athlete. I found a considerable amount of data concerning the retention of student athletes, yet, no information existed on the relationship between student athletic orientation programs and retention.

Gaining Administrative Support

After analyzing the research literature, I then introduced my idea to the Rowan University Dean of Students. The Dean of Students at Rowan University oversees the Athletic Director, who is in charge of the entire athletic department. The Dean of students was very receptive of the idea of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes. After
conferring with these two important individuals, I then set aside time to meet and gain the necessary support of the coaches for each athletic program. The coaches also felt as though the program was an excellent idea. I realized that gaining support of the coaches was a necessary tool in the development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes. If an orientation program were to be established, athletic coaches would possibly have to modify their schedules, force athletes to participate, and adapt to the changes in policy that would result in the possible implementation of the orientation program.

While the athletic coaches felt that the program was a good idea, they gave me the sense that they would not be willing to lose any practice time due to possible implementation of the program. The Rowan University football coach, K.C. Keeler, stated “this sounds like an interesting program, and I think it could help our student athletes a lot” (Personal Interview, 1/30/01). After commenting briefly, he quickly sent me to his assistant coaches and stated “if you need anything else from here on, please contact my assistant coaches” (Personal Interview, 1/30/01). After meeting with coach K.C. Keeler I proceeded to set up an appointment to have lunch with assistant coach John Bodine. Coach Bodine and I scheduled lunch, however due to a busy schedule he was forced to cancel. While my lunch date with
coach Bodine was cancelled, there were no other coaches available to be interviewed at the time. The Rowan University football team only has two full-time coaches. Since the research was conducted in the off-season, there were no other coaches available to be interviewed. University administrators and coaches felt that an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes was a good idea, and agreed that the program would probably aid in retention, yet they offered very few suggestions on ways to develop the program. Dean Stubbs, Rowan University Dean of Students, stated “This seems like an idea that would help us keep more student athletes in school” (Personal Interview, 1/18/01). Thus, I received the necessary approval to continue working towards the development of the orientation program.

Findings from Student Athletes

After meeting with administrators and coaches, I then proceeded to gather my data through focus groups and an open-ended survey from student athletes. There are various perceptions of what a strong academic support program entails. Similarly, various views also exist on what it takes to establish a quality student athlete orientation program. In the research conducted, student athlete opinions varied on whether or not they felt as though student athletes at Rowan University were academically
supported. Four females form the field hockey team, and one male student athlete from the men’s basketball team felt as though the Rowan University athletic department supported them academically. The other eight student athletes, all males, felt as though the university could have done more to assist them in their attempts to obtain degrees. Curtis Collins felt that prior to the start of the semester, each student athlete should be assigned to a personal academic tutor (Personal Interview, 2/13/01). Although student athlete opinions varied regarding whether or not they felt as though they were academically supported, student athletes agreed that time-management was the most important aspect in the retention of student athletes. William Johnson, of the men’s basketball team, stated that “Time management is the most important factor in retention, a student can have all the knowledge in the world, but without time, that student will not be successful” (Personal Interview, 3/8/01). As time-management continuously received a substantial amount of attention in each focus group, Andrae from the field hockey team stated, “If time-management skills were taught, it would make student athletes lives a lot easier” (Personal Interview, 2/21/01). Each student athlete interviewed felt that time-management was the most important retention tool for student athletes. Many student athletes felt strongly about time management, so strongly that many student athletes offered very few
suggestions on what other topics were of importance. As time management emerged as the most significant theme, I noticed that many students did not realize that there were other valuable resources besides time management. Academic advising, counseling, and quality study skills also play an important role in the academic success of student athletes.

Another area where students differed was whether or not they felt as though university administrators and coaches supported their academic cause. Students differed on whether or not they felt university administrators and coaches supported the idea that Division III student athletes place academics before athletics in an effort to obtain degrees. Jermaine Scurry, a football player, felt that “Coaches simply don’t care” (Personal Interview, 2/13/01). Scurry also stated that coaches encouraged students to enroll in classes that would keep them eligible. Curtis Collins, a transfer student athlete from Temple University felt that “the athletic department at Rowan University simply concentrated on football and cared little about academics” (Personal Interview, 2/13/01). Of all student athletes interviewed, Rowan University football players were the only student athletes who collectively felt as though their coaches were not doing a good job in assisting them academically.
While Curtis Collins and Jermaine Scurry felt that the Rowan University athletic department did not care to assist them in obtaining a degree. Other student athletes felt as though their coaches did have a positive attitude towards their ability to obtain a degree. Four females that were interviewed from the women’s field hockey team agreed that “their coaches are doing everything possible to assist them in attaining a degree” (Personal Interview, 2/21/01). Wayne Bucknor, of men’s basketball suggested that “one of his assistant coaches showed interest in his academic status, while his head coach showed very little” (Personal Interview, 3/2/01). Wayne Bucknor was the only men’s basketball player who felt that any of his coaches cared about his academic future. Terrance Williams and William Johnson stated that the coaches from the men’s basketball team cared very little about academics, and placed more of an influence on winning (Personal Interview, 3/2/01).

Curtis Custis, a transfer football player, expressed one of the most unique concerns throughout the entire research project. Custis cited that his coaches were trying to help him achieve academic success, but simply did not know how. “Coaches try to tutor, but it is not working,” (Personal Interview, 2/13/01). Curtis also stated that “coaches have very little time to
designate to tutoring, as a result of other job responsibilities” (Personal Interview, 2/13/01).

While interviewing student athletes on their academic status and the development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer athletes, I found that students cared a lot about the opinion and attitudes of their coaches. In my research, I came to the conclusion that students valued the actions of their coaches above all else. Taking this into consideration, it is important to have coaches participate in some aspect of the orientation program.

While opinions varied, each of the twelve students interviewed in this action research project and all of the university administrators interviewed felt that the development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer students was a good idea. Some students felt that a one-day orientation program was not enough to have an impact on a student’s academic career. Terrance Williams suggested “the orientation program be conducted in a two-day session” (Personal Interview, 3/2/01). Williams suggested that the orientation occur once before classes begin, and again after classes begin to reinforce what was previously discussed in the first orientation program (Personal Interview, 3/2/01). Marguerite Stubbs, Dean of Students, stated that “orientating student athletes shouldn’t stop, students should continue to
be orientated throughout the entire year” (Personal Interview, 1/18/01). The ability to orientate student's year around depends upon a university's ability to provide academic support throughout an entire year. A student athlete orientation program's goal is to serve as an introduction to the issues that may inhibit a student athlete from obtaining a degree.

The Development of the Orientation Program

After conferring with university administrators, coaches, and student athletes, I developed an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes at Rowan University. University administrators presented recommendations on the best possible dates and times to conduct the program, while student athletes presented recommendations on the topics that they felt should be discussed in the orientation program. University administrators also made financial suggestions concerning development of the program. Julie Peterson, the Director for The Center for Service Learning, suggested that university professors be used to conduct orientation program sessions, as a means of saving money and taking advantage of Rowan’s resources (Informal Conversation, 3/16/01). After conferring with university administrators, coaches, and student athletes concerning the implementation of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student
athletes, I analyzed the data and prepared the final recommendation for an
orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes. The format is
given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:45</td>
<td>Registration and Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:45-10:00</td>
<td>Program Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-11:15</td>
<td>First Session/ Time Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15-12:30</td>
<td>Second Session/Taking Advantage of Academic Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:15</td>
<td>Third and Final Session/Library &amp; Computer Lab Orientations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15-2:45</td>
<td>Program Conclusion and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students expressed concern over the value and importance of time-
management. Therefore, time management was incorporated as the first
session. The session on time management will show students how to
manage their time and how to balance academics, athletics, and personal
time. The second session will consist of an interactive lecture on ways to
take advantage of the university’s academic resources. Some students felt as
though the university did a decent job of providing them with quality
academic resources such as tutoring and academic advising. Others, felt as though the university did not do a decent job of providing them with academic resources, therefore, the second session will show student athletes how to take advantage of the academic support services that are provided. This session will teach student athletes how to set up an appointment with their academic advisors, how to officially drop/add and register for courses, and it will also teach student athletes when to recognize the need for tutorial assistance. The third and final session will include a library and computer lab orientation session that aims to orientate student athletes to the uses of the university library and student computer labs. At the conclusion of the program will ask students to fill out a survey on areas that the program, students will be asked to evaluate the program based on areas that need improvement and how they benefited from the program.
Chapter Five

Reflections, Recommendations, Conclusions

Reflections

The purpose of this project was to develop an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes at Rowan University. Increasing the retention of student athletes is a problem that has been troubling colleges and universities for decades. The difficulty in retaining students in higher education has been studied tremendously throughout the history of higher education (Beal, 1979), be that as it may, institutions of higher education still lack research concerning the retention of student athletes.

Institutions have established numerous support services to aid in the retention of college students; counseling, tutoring, and academic advising. Freshman orientation programs have provided an opportunity to increase the retention of students by orientating them to issues that play in role in a student’s failure to obtain a degree. While orientation programs may be effective at increasing retention for the general student body, the researcher in this action research project set out to determine if an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes would have equal success at Rowan University. While attempting to determine whether or not a student athlete orientation program would aid in the retention of student athletes, the
researcher in this action research project also set out to determine if the athletes, coaches, and administrators at Rowan University would support the idea of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes.

As I reflect on the research that was conducted in this action research project, I came to conclusion that a student athlete orientation program would be beneficial in aiding in the retention of student athletes. Research findings suggest that student athletes would benefit from an orientation program developed specifically for student athletes. Student athletes, coaches, and administrators agreed that the implementation of this program would aid in student athlete retention. They felt as though an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes would help increase student awareness. As students become aware of the issues that may inhibit degree obtainment, the retention of student athletes will increase as a result of increased academic awareness. The students interviewed expressed a desire to be academically supported. An orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes would show student athletes that the Rowan University athletic department was concerned about their academic careers, and in return, be encouraged to perform better academically. The focus group interviews in this project proved to be very helpful. Students took full advantage of the opportunity to voice their opinions on the
academic support of student athletes at Rowan University. While some student athletes possessed a stronger desire for the program than others, all twelve of the students interviewed felt as though a student athlete orientation program would aid in retention by either increasing the graduation rate, or increasing GPA's.

As students, coaches and administrators took advantage of the opportunity to critique the preliminary draft of the student athlete orientation program, various revisions were recommended. I took various recommendations into consideration and developed a student athlete orientation program. As I analyzed the research, recommendations, and feedback that was received throughout this action research project, I was enlightened on various issues and factors that enabled me to develop a personal perception on the best ways to implement an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes. Many of my personal recommendations coincided with those of the student athletes and university administrators. Students requested a program that dealt with the issue of time management. University administrators requested that the program show students how to take advantage of the services that were provided by the university. The data that was received in this action research project supported my personal suggestions on what a student athlete orientation
program should include, a series on time management and the use academic resources at Rowan University.

In years past, Rowan University student athletes have received a tremendous amount of criticism regarding their academic performance. Prior to the research conducted in this project, I questioned Rowan's athletes and their dedication to academics. As I surveyed and interviewed various student athletes, I realized that many student athletes cared tremendously about their academic performance and whether or not they obtained a degree. Initially, I was unaware of the passion that the students possessed concerning their academics. However, the students interviewed showed a considerable amount of concern, even though their grade point averages did not reflect this concern. I beg to question, why do the student athletes show more passion in the interviews and than they do in the classroom? Is it maybe because the athletic department does not require much of them academically? Student athletes have the ability to be much more successful academically, however, some of the athletes lack the support and encouragement of their individual coaches. While interviewing many of the coaches, I realized that coaches supported implementation of this program, yet wanted no part of the hard work that it would take to initiate the orientation program. I began to see a pattern developing in the attitudes of
the coaches. On one hand, the coaches expect their athletes to do well academically, yet on the other hand, they are not willing to dedicate the amount of time and hard work it would take to assist their athletes in achieving the aspired academic goal. What the coaches failed to realize was that student athletes often recognize the lack of enthusiasm that their individual coaches placed on academics. If athletic coaches fail to give academics a substantial amount of attention, then so will their athletes. This action research project has lead me to conclude that the student athletes in the study would have worked harder to achieve academic success if their coaches would have placed academics higher on their own priority list.

Support services in higher education play an important role in the retention of student athletes. Although many campuses do provide student athletes with tutoring centers, library services, academic advisors, and other various forms of support, many student athletes do not know how to take full advantage of these services. Curtis Custis stated that he did not know how to use the libraries electronic card catalogue system, (Personal Interview, 2/13/01) and as a result of his lack of knowledge, Curtis refused to use the database in an effort to help him find the information he was looking for. As universities make a conscientious effort to provide support services, many of these services are not used to their full advantage. Universities can provide
as much support as needed for its student athletes, however, if students are not orientated as to how to make use of those services, many services may easily go unused. As I conducted my research, this was one of the most frustrating aspects of this action research project. As a graduate student pursuing a M.A. in Higher Education Administration, I am very aware of the resources that colleges have provided for their student athletes. While conducting research in this action research project, it was frustrating to find that many student athletes had no idea of the resources that were provided, nor the familiarity to take advantage of those resources.

As colleges and universities are governmentally characterized as non-profit organizations, the more time that I dedicated to this action research project, I began to feel as though many colleges and universities are aiming to make a profit off their student athletes. Institutions of higher education are supposed to protect students from being exploited, subjugated, or used. Instead, many students in colleges and universities are being exploited for their talents, ideas, and hard work. This action research project made me aware of the large amount of student athletes that are being exploited in our colleges and universities. Since initiating this action research project, my perception of colleges and university athletic departments is that they are often interested in the type of skills that they can get out of the student,
instead of the type of skills or knowledge that they can instill into the student. When institutions and athletic departments place little concern into the retention of its student athletes, this shows that the institution has very little concern on whether or not their student athletes obtain degrees. If college and university athletic departments are not conscious of the retention rates of their student athletes, are they in essence manipulating those student athletes? Does this mean that they are more concerned with winning rather than educating?

**Recommendations**

This action research project caused me to rethink my ways in developing an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes. Initially, I was unaware of the strong feelings that student athletes possessed for the support of their individual athletic coaches. As I reconsider the some of the best ways in which to implement this action research project, I feel that the influence of athletic coaches in this student athlete orientation program is very important. It is essential for each athletic coach to participate in the orientation program. The presence of athletic coaches in the student athlete orientation process, will aid in the attempt to reinforce the athletic departments support for strong academic awareness.
My second recommendation concerning the development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes concerned what topic should be addressed during the third session of the orientation program? After in depth analysis, I felt that showing students how to practice good study habits is far more beneficial than simply telling them. Therefore, the third session of the program was changed into a library and computer lab orientation session, disregarding the previous session on when, where and how to get help. The goal of this portion of the program is to familiarize freshman and transfer student athletes to the uses and capabilities of the university library, computer labs, and various other research labs. Some students and administrators requested that the orientation program last longer than one day. However, due to time and financial constraints, the program has initially been developed in a single day format. The program does not reconvene throughout the year and once the athletic season and classes begin, students will not be able to assemble due to their busy schedules.
Conclusion

The development of an orientation program for freshman and transfer student athletes is an idea that has the potential to have a major impact on the retention of student athletes. It will give student athletes a head start academically, show them that our university does care about their academic future and make them aware of the influences that may keep them from obtaining a degree. Our ability to implement this program in institutions of higher education throughout the country depends upon the amount of time, effort, and money that institutions are willing to invest. Our ability to retain student athletes involves more than simply orientating them to the various issues that may impede degree attainment. Retaining student athletes includes many factors, including support, monitoring, and advising to name a few. Orientation is merely a means of familiarizing student athletes to a college environment, culture, and climate. The aspect of familiarizing student athletes to the college community should assist the student athlete in making his/her transition as easy a transition as possible. As student athletes continue to entertain and create millions of dollars in revenue each year, colleges and universities in return must strive to insure that athletes will be given the one quality that is more important than anything they can receive, an education.
References


Appendix A

Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol
Thesis/Change Project
(Implementation of an athlete orientation program)

A) Start of asking the group what are their overall feelings on the
cademic support that they receive here at Rowan University?

Attempt to get a general feel for any negative or positive attitudes.
Who has had trouble and who hasn’t?

B) Generate conversation on why some people may have had trouble
and why others may not have. Try and establish the different
academic characteristics between those who were academically
successful, and those who weren’t.

C) Attempt to get a generalization of how each person did
academically in high school and or at their previous school.
D) Now begin to introduce them to your orientation program, what it is about, and what your attempting to do (Retention). Ask the athletes what they think about the idea? Do they feel as though their coaches and teammates will support it?

E) Get into the academic history of each program; find out how often their coaches stress the importance of academics. Ask the athletes if deep down inside, do they feel as though their coaches really care about their academic future or academic eligibility?

F) Start to generate Ideas on when, where, and how are the best ways to implement this program. What topics should be given the most attention, how much time and money should be used.
G) Bring closure to the topic, find out if anyone has any other suggestions, and thank them for their cooperation.
Appendix B

Open-Ended Survey Instrument
Survey Concerning The Implementation A Freshman/Transfer Student Athlete Orientation Program

1) How have you fared in your academic transition from high school or your previous college to Rowan University? In your eyes, has your academic transition been a successful one? Could you have done better academically? Why or why not?

2) Do you feel as though the athletic program at Rowan University has done its share of making your transition a successful one? If not, how could they have done more to help?
3) Do you feel as though a special orientation program for freshman/transfer athletes would have made your transition a little easier? A program that focused more on issues that pertain to the student athletes, for example, Time Management, Advisement on scheduling, and more information on when, where, and how to get academic help? If so how?

4) If you wouldn’t have benefited from an orientation program for student athletes, do you know of anyone in the past or present that may have? If so, how would this type of program have made a difference for them?
5) Does the future, academic stature, and athletic eligibility of your teammates mean enough to you that you would encourage all freshman and transfers athletes to participate in an additional one day orientation program that catered to their needs? If not why?

6) Are there any other student athlete academic support concerns that you may feel as though are not being addressed? Are there any other ideas, comments, or suggestions that you may have on this issue or idea? THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!