

**Report of the Academic Subcommittee of the
Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics
Appointed to Review the University of Mississippi's
Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support**

In response to the NCAA Committee on Athletics Certification recommendations, the University of Mississippi's Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics appointed the Academic Subcommittee to undertake a review of the Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support (OSAAS). The subcommittee was appointed at the November 16th, 2007 meeting of the Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics. The following University of Mississippi faculty are members of the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee and were asked to serve on the academic subcommittee conducting the review:

Dr. Jason E. Ritchie
Chair, Academic Subcommittee of the Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics
Associate Professor of Chemistry & Biochemistry
(Faculty Senate Representative)

Dr. Gary Gaston
Professor of Biology

Dr. Laurel Lambert
Assistant Professor of Family & Consumer Sciences
(Faculty Senate Representative)

Dr. Robert Plants
Assistant Professor and Assistant Dean for Advising, School of Education
(Faculty Senate Representative)

Dr. Ethyl Young-Minor
Associate Professor of English & African-American Studies

Dr. Ronald Rychlak (ex-officio member)
Chair, Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics, and
Faculty Athletics Representative
Associate Dean, and Professor of Law

In the course of this review, the subcommittee met with Lynnette Johnson (Senior Associate Athletic Director and Senior Woman Administrator) and Karen Schiferl (Associate Athletic Director for Academic Support) on January 15th, 2008. The committee also met with a focus group of 16 Student-Athletes on the evening of January 28th, 2008. Finally, the committee met with several staff members from OSAAS including the Associate and Assistant directors, three academic counselors, and one learning specialist on February 13th, 2008. In addition, the Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics has been receiving regular reports from both Lynnette Johnson and Karen Schiferl on the progress and challenges in the Office of Student-Athlete Academic

Support. The committee also received a tour and introduction to the newly opened FedEx Student-Athlete Academic Support Center.

In the committee's first meeting with Johnson and Schiferl, we discussed the facilities available in the new FedEx Center, and the improvements in Academic Support since the last review of the University's Academic Support Services in the fall of 1999. In the opinion of this subcommittee, the University of Mississippi truly has the model for academic support facilities in the newly opened FedEx center. The physical space and information technology available to the Student-Athletes are truly cutting edge. The 22,500-square-foot FedEx Student-Athlete Academic Support Center features two large computer labs with over 100 computers, a 150-seat high-tech auditorium (which is available as a campus-wide classroom), 20 large and small group and individual tutoring rooms, conference rooms, a large study area, a multi-media classroom and offices for the academic support staff.

In addition, the Department of Athletics has **added staff members** including an Associate Director, an Assistant Director, a Senior Academic Counselor, and four Learning Specialists positions since the 1999 review. These added personnel significantly increase the capacity of the OSAAS to advise and support the Student-Athletes. The addition of the Learning Specialists to the OSAAS staff allows for a concentrated effort to assist Learning Disabled, and "at-risk" Student-Athletes in adjusting to the college environment. The Learning Specialists can focus on teaching the LD and "at-risk" Student-Athletes study skills, time management, and strategies for academic success. This allows the Academic Counselors to spend more one-on-one time consulting with individual Student-Athletes.

The academic support center takes several steps to **ensure that Student-Athletes transition** smoothly to the University of Mississippi, and that "at-risk" Student-Athletes receive the extra help that they need to be successful at Ole Miss. For example, all first-time Student-Athletes, and Student-Athletes who are at-risk of losing eligibility (based on their cumulative GPA) are required to attend a structured study table. The number of hours per week that a student is required to attend study table is determined by their academic counselor and is based on their own individual "at-risk" status. The study table provides a structured setting in which the Student-Athletes can work to improve their academic standing. In addition, the OSAAS employs four Learning Specialists who are available to work with Student-Athletes who need extra help in the mechanics of studying and time management. Furthermore, the OSAAS vigorously enforces a class attendance policy to ensure that Student-Athletes are attending classes.

The **academic progress** of Student-Athletes is actively monitored by their academic counselors through regular meetings and academic progress reports. These progress reports are electronically solicited from instructors twice per semester, and ask the professor to logon to the GradesFirst webpage and input current grades and attendance for the Student-Athletes in their classes. The academic counselors then use these progress reports to assist the Student-Athletes in making progress towards graduation and remaining eligible for athletic competition.

All Student-Athletes are eligible to participate in the OSAAS **tutorial program**. Tutorial sessions are typically scheduled through the Student-Athlete's academic counselor, and may be requested by either the Student-Athlete or the academic counselor. Tutorial sessions are frequently one-on-one with the tutor, and are generally not larger than two or three Student-Athletes per tutor. Qualified tutors who are selected are given an introduction to OSAAS which includes training on "dos and don'ts". In addition, the tutors are monitored and receive feedback from the OSAAS staff on an ongoing basis (each OSAAS staff member is required to observe 3 tutoring sessions per week). Academic counselors receive a written report from the tutor after each tutoring session, and a student's progress is communicated to the coaching staff. In addition, OSAAS has partnered with the English and Mathematics departments to employ graduate students to hold office hours in the FedEx center, and can assist students on a regular schedule.

When asked about the challenges facing the OSAAS, Schiferl and her staff both replied that they are spending a good deal of time and effort on issues related to the structure of the University. The committee was happy to see that the OSAAS's challenges seem to be external to Athletics, and that everyone felt that the facilities and staff available for academic support within the Department of Athletics were excellent. The OSAAS staff identified several specific challenges including: (1) **Academic Advising**, (2) **Priority Registration**, (3) **Transcript Evaluation** for transfer students, (4) the lack of an automatic **Degree Audit** system, and (5) the lack of a consistent **Attendance Policy** for the whole University of Mississippi. It is interesting to note that three of these challenges (Advising, Transcripts, and Degree Audit) affect the entire student body, and that streamlining these processes would benefit everyone at the University of Mississippi.

The first four of these challenges are generally related to the recent academic reform at the NCAA and the introduction of the Academic Progress Rate requiring that Student-Athletes make progress in their degree. In order to remain athletically eligible, Student-Athletes must meet progress benchmarks (e.g. a Student-Athlete must complete 40% of their degree by their 5th semester). Thus, it is critical, for eligibility purposes, that OSAAS be able to determine in "real-time" a Student-Athlete's academic progress towards their degree. The lack of an online **degree audit** system coupled with major delays in processing transfer equivalencies from **transcripts** can potentially leave the OSAAS in a state of not knowing whether a Student-Athlete is eligible for competition. The Associate Director of OSAAS reported that the University of Georgia has, and has had for some time, an online degree audit system that is instantaneous and can be used to run hypothetical situations. This committee recognizes the progress that has been made in adopting an online degree audit system, and recommends that this system be made available as soon as possible, benefiting all students at the University of Mississippi. Furthermore, we recommend that the transcript evaluation process be streamlined and possibly moved to the University-level.

Another problem arises as students naturally progress in their degree program into more specialized classes, of which there are fewer and fewer sections. Here, it is critical that Student-Athletes be able to enroll in the section of a course which best fits their practice

and travel schedules. In addition, the OSAAS staff report that the addition of waitlisted classes during enrollment has made their job somewhat harder in some situations. Their problems arise because student-athletes may not practice (or compete) unless they are enrolled in 12 hours, and waitlisted classes do not count towards this 12 hour requirement. Moreover, a student may not be waitlisted in the section that they want to be in and simultaneously be enrolled in another section of the same class. Here, student athletes would benefit from an earlier priority registration in order to avoid these situations. The majority of this committee believe that Student-Athletes are in need of earlier **priority registration**.

It is also critical that Student-Athletes receive correct **academic advising** from their faculty academic advisors, especially options for alternative classes that will allow the Student-Athlete to continue making progress towards their degree should they not be able to enroll in their first choice of classes. Here, we recommend that the Chancellor seek out ways to increase the effectiveness of the Academic Advising. Again, this is an area where the entire student body stands to benefit from reform.

Finally, the OSAAS often has difficulty with the lack of a consistent **Attendance Policy** at the University of Mississippi, especially as it applies to Student-Athletes and excused absences, primarily for travel. While most instructors appear to be willing to work with Student-Athletes in order to make-up missed work, the OSAAS frequently encounter individual faculty and department policies that do not allow Student-Athletes to make -up work missed while on excused absences. This can lead to a lowering of grades, and can be a threat to a Student-Athlete's eligibility. The adoption of a consistent Attendance Policy across the entire university will allow greater flexibility for Student-Athletes to make-up work missed while traveling on behalf of the university.

In terms of addressing the concerns and recommendations from the **previous review** of the OSAAS, this committee has determined that all of the recommendations regarding infrastructure and information technology have been far exceeded with the opening of the new FedEx Academic Support Center. In addition, the recommendations dealing with adding additional staff members have also been exceeded. The OSAAS is doing a good job communicating with Student-Athletes' professors, both about expected absences, and in monitoring academic progress.

Interview with Student-Athletes

The subcommittee met with a focus group of Student-Athletes on the evening of January 28th, 2008. The subcommittee interviewed two groups of Student-Athletes, which were diverse in terms of race, gender, and academic ability. One group of Student-Athletes was composed of academically high-performing Student-Athletes, while the second group was composed of Student-Athletes who were academically "at-risk". The subcommittee thought it was important to interview both groups of Student-Athletes as they would likely interact with OSAAS in different ways, using different services. For example, the "at-risk" Student-Athletes were much more likely to have worked with the Learning Specialists and been asked to attend the Structured Study Table. The Student-Athletes

were asked to discuss a series of questions designed by the subcommittee to better understand how the Student-Athletes feel about how well the academic side of their college experiences were being taken care of. In addition, several of the questions were designed to probe how the recommendations of the 1999 review of the OSAAS were implemented, and how well the OSAAS is addressing the points listed in the “Student-Athlete Services Guidelines” document. These questions are appended to this report.

The committee chair lead the discussion by asking Student-Athletes how effective the OSAAS was at communicating their academic progress to their **coaches**. All of the Student-Athletes thought that their coaches were very well aware of their academic progress, and especially monitored their class attendance. The Student-Athletes all said that they would face very undesirable consequences from their coaches for unexcused class absences. The Student-Athletes generally thought that their coaches were very interested and supportive of their academic progress, such that the coaches were willing to reschedule practices and travel schedules in order to accommodate Student-Athletes' academic schedules.

The Student-Athletes were asked about their experiences with **tutoring**. Both groups of students expressed the concern that it can be difficult to get tutors for upper-level classes. The Student-Athletes all thought that the tutoring provided was beneficial. When asked about the frequency and availability of tutoring, the Student-Athletes were generally happy with the availability of tutoring, with some students being able to meet with tutors every day. The Student-Athletes did mention that it can sometimes be difficult to schedule a tutoring appointment early in the semester. The Student-Athletes were happy with the quality of the tutoring, saying that the tutors were generally very knowledgeable and well prepared for tutoring sessions.

The Student-Athletes were asked about their **academic advising** experiences with both their Faculty Advisors and their Athletics Academic Counselors. Both groups of students seemed to appreciate their interaction with their faculty advisors, and thought that they were generally getting good advice. In addition, several Student-Athletes mentioned that they appreciate the professional career advice they received from their faculty or college advisors. When asked about difficulty in registering for required classes, none of the Student-Athletes had lost eligibility or had their eligibility threatened by an inability to register for a specific class. The Student-Athletes did mention that their practice schedules did occasionally have to be accommodated because they were not able to get into a specific section of a class.

Student-Athletes were asked about their **travel schedules**, and specifically how they accommodated their class work while traveling. The Student-Athletes were pleased with the availability of laptop computers, which they can check out while traveling, to keep up with their course work (the students appeared to frequently take advantage of this service). Several Student-Athletes also informed us that they have participated in study table while on the road (both in hotels and on the bus), and had been tutored by fellow Student-Athletes. In addition, the students were satisfied with the system for notifying their professors when they were going to miss class due to a competition. Most Student-

Athletes noted that they were able to arrange with their professors to make-up missed work. Some Student-Athletes, however, noted that certain academic departments were not willing to allow them to make -up work, which lead in at least one class to a Student-Athlete having to drop a class. All of the Student-Athletes were satisfied with both the timeliness and reliability of the OSAAS in notifying their professors when they would be traveling.

Several of the Student-Athletes interviewed had worked with the staff **learning specialists** at the OSAAS. All of these students were appreciative of the specialized help they received from the learning specialists, and thought that the strategies and skills they learned were valuable. The students mentioned that the learning specialists have helped them in areas such as planning for assignments, outlining skills, and generally acting as a “super” tutor.

We also asked the Student-Athletes about their relationship with their OSAAS **academic counselors**. All the Student-Athletes said that they have a close relationship with their counselors, and were able to discuss a variety of problems with them including social integration, and adjusting to university life. In terms of availability, most of the Student-Athletes thought that they could see their counselor as often as they wanted (drop-in access). Some of the Student-Athletes have had problems, or knew other athletes that have had problems, scheduling time to see a certain advisor (this could have been due to unrealistic expectations by individual Student-Athletes). Some Student-Athletes appeared to have required meetings with their counselors, while others did not. We suspect that this has to do with an individual student’s “at-risk” status. We asked the students how they picked their major area of study, because the committee was concerned with the possibility that the OSAAS might be steering students into the “easiest” majors. However, none of the Student-Athletes’ responses caused concern in the committee. For the most part, the Student-Athletes interviewed were primarily motivated by personal interests and family input. Several did tell us that their coach required them to enter the university as undecided majors in order to maximize their academic flexibility. This is appropriate and we do not have a problem with this practice. In addition, the Student-Athletes are generally happy with the education they are receiving at Ole Miss, and did not express the opinion that they are “missing out” on anything because of being involved in athletics. In fact, several of the students, when asked if there was a particular person at Ole Miss that had especially helped them, replied that OSAAS staff members had been great mentors. Specifically, students singled out Bobby Nix, Drew Clinton, and Karen Schiferl as having been especially helpful in obtaining their educational goals.

One area of concern that was identified in this review is how well the Student-Athletes **understand their own eligibility**. The Student-Athletes all agreed that they frequently discussed their athletic eligibility with their academic counselor. However, the committee got the impression that the Student-Athletes do not keep track of their own eligibility, but rely on the OSAAS staff to keep them on track. In fact, several of the Student-Athletes thought that they were being “pushed towards graduation” by the academic counselors. Despite having taken the form of a complaint, this committee is supportive of pushing Student-Athletes to obtain their degree. In another potential trouble spot, several of the

football players expressed the concern that the primary academic focus of the football staff was on maintaining eligibility rather than completing a degree. The committee would recommend that the new head football coach and coaching staff emphasize completing a degree as the main academic goal for their players.

We asked the Student-Athletes about how well they were informed about academic requirements, criteria, and support while they were being **recruited** to the University of Mississippi. Most of the students remember meeting with OSAAS staff during their official visits, and several of them remember their parents being impressed with the availability of academic support. In addition, at least one student recalled meeting with a faculty member during their visit.

Importantly, the students were asked whether they thought the OSAAS was operated in an **ethical** manner. None of the students reported ever having been offered improper assistance by either a tutor or staff member in the OSAAS. I also offered each of the Student-Athletes interviewed my contact information so that they could contact me in private with any of their concerns, and I received no communications from any of them. More troubling though, was the response by a couple of Student-Athletes when asked how they would respond to an offer of improper assistance. Several of the students in the “at-risk” group expressed that they would be willing to accept what would clearly constitute improper assistance if it was offered to them. This committee recommends that the OSAAS and compliance staff continue to educate the Student-Athletes about proper and improper academic assistance, and channels for reporting offers of improper assistance. When this committee met with the OSAAS staff, we asked about the process for monitoring tutors for compliance with ethical guidelines, and were satisfied with the steps being taken by OSAAS to ensure that the tutors behave ethically.

Lastly, the Student-Athletes were asked if they had ever been made aware of **academic awards** by the OSAAS staff. One student responded that Karen Schiferl had specifically advised them about awards that they were eligible for, while another student responded that they had received a similar nomination from Derek Horne (Associate AD for External Affairs), while a third student mentioned that their coach had prepared a list of scholarships and awards that were posted on a team bulletin board.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The committee is satisfied that the Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support is providing high-quality academic support to the Student-Athletes at the University of Mississippi. We are completely satisfied with the physical and information technology infrastructure provided by OSAAS. In addition, Karen Schiferl has assembled a competent, qualified, and effective staff of academic counselors, learning specialists, and tutors.

This committee makes the following recommendations that:

- (1) A review of the Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support be conducted at least every three years, and that the next review conclude no later than the spring semester of 2011 (and then again in the spring of 2014, 2017, and 2020). The Director of Athletics shall be responsible for ensuring that the Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics conducts this review in a timely manner. This review should continue to be planned and executed by University of Mississippi faculty members outside the Department of Athletics.
- (2) Results of this review be communicated to the University Chancellor and Provost and be presented to the Faculty Senate.
- (3) The Faculty Senate Representatives on the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee initiate contact with the Faculty Senate in order to develop a recommendation, and build faculty consensus, for a consistent and university-wide Attendance Policy.
- (4) Student-Athletes at the University of Mississippi be provided earlier priority registration.
- (5) An online degree audit system be made available as soon as possible, as this will benefit all students at the University of Mississippi.
- (6) The Chancellor introduce a campus-wide initiative to increase the effectiveness of the Academic Advising.
- (7) The transcript evaluation process be streamlined and possibly moved to the University-level.
- (8) The new head football coach and coaching staff emphasize completing a degree as the main academic goal for their players.
- (9) The OSAAS and compliance staff continue to educate the Student-Athletes about proper and improper academic assistance, and channels for reporting offers of improper assistance.
- (10) OSAAS continue to enhance their relationship with faculty by providing each student athlete with a potential travel schedule that can be given to faculty members on the first day of class in order to find potential conflicts at the earliest possible date.

Questions asked of Student-Athletes during Focus Group

- 1A) Are your coaches aware of your academic progress? How do they keep track of your academic progress?
- 1B) Are tutors available to assist you in your specific academic/course work areas? Is it difficult to schedule time with an academic tutor? Does tutoring help you?
- 2A) Who advises you on which courses to register for in your degree program (e.g. degree requirements, prerequisites)? Are you satisfied with the quality of academic advising you receive towards your academic degree?
- 2B) Have you had any difficulties in registering for the courses you need for your degree?
- 2C) Has the registration process ever caused you problems with your eligibility status?
- 2D) Have you ever discussed career possibilities with your academic counselor or faculty advisor? Has anyone at Ole Miss ever helped you prepare for job interviews (e.g. mock interviews, resume preparation)?
- 3A) Do you have the support you need to complete assignments, take exams, while traveling to competition?
- 3B) How are your professors notified that you will be absent from class due to competition? Do you have any concerns regarding this process?
- 3C) Do your professors provide you support/assistance when you miss class because of competition?
- 4A) What have you learned from your interaction with learning specialists?
- 4B) Describe your relationship with your academic counselor.
- 5A) Why did you decide to pick your particular major?
- 5B) Are you pleased with the education you are receiving at Ole Miss?
- 5C) Is there someone in particular at Ole Miss who has helped you attain your education goals?
- 6A) Are you aware of your personal eligibility status? Do you know what you need to do in order to maintain your athletic eligibility?
- 6B) When you were recruited, did you meet with academic advisors? During your official visit to Ole Miss, what did you learn about what is required of you academically?
- 6C) Tell me about your freshman or transfer orientation?
- 7A) Does the Office of Student-Athlete Academic Support operate in an ethical manner?
- 7B) Have any of your tutors, learning specialists, or academic counselors ever offered to type your papers, or complete class work on your behalf?
- 8A) If you receive textbooks with your scholarship, how are those distributed to you?
- 8B) Have you ever been nominated or made aware of an academic award by your academic advisor?