



*Article*

## **Library Outreach to University Athletic Departments and Student-Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

Research has shown that student-athletes often enter higher education less prepared than their peers. The student-athletes then face the difficult task of catching up to their more prepared peers, while being asked to spend in excess of 20 hours per week training and competing. In order to assist student-athletes in becoming academically successful, the Axinn Library at Hofstra University partnered with the University's Department of Inter-Collegiate Athletics and the Center for Academic Advisement to provide library services to athletes. Building on the subject specialist liaison model of librarianship, Axinn Library began providing reference desk hours, by-appointment research assistance, and an information literacy course.

Academic libraries in the United States have been using the subject specialist liaison model of librarianship for many years. Typically, librarian liaisons support academic departments that are classified by discipline, e.g., English, economics, communications. However, non-academic departments such as university athletic departments have largely been excluded when assigning liaisons in libraries. A literature search for articles discussing library outreach to athletic departments yields limited results, with articles by O'English and McCord (2006), and M. Forys, J. Forys, Ford, and Dodd (2000) being amongst the few that present similar initiatives. Academic librarians often find it challenging to connect with traditional academic departments, so it is not surprising that non-academic units, such as an athletic department, have been overlooked. Perhaps this can be attributed to the perception of athletics at the college level. Comeaux (2011) examined the perception of student-athletes by faculty members and stated "Faculty members perceive both male and female student-athletes negatively in situations dealing with intellectual abilities, special services such as an expanded tutorial program, and out-of-class achievement" (p. 82). This perception creates an artificial schism between athletics and academics, and between coaches and faculty.

The mission statement is the heart of any college athletic department. At Hofstra University, the Department of Intercollegiate Sports' mission statement<sup>1</sup> is explicit about the importance of athletics: "The primary objective of the athletic program is to provide student-athletes with the opportunity to excel in the academic environment and in athletic competition." This simple statement is perhaps the crux of the issue. Parity between athletics and academics cannot be achieved with a hyphen, not student-athlete, not student-first-athlete-second, but just student. As will be discussed in this article, these underserved students need every tool that higher education and the academic library can furnish them in order to excel academically.

### **The Need for Library Outreach to Student–Athletes**

According to a study conducted by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "Many schools routinely used a special admission process to admit athletes who do not meet the normal entrance requirements" (Knobler, 2008, p. A1). William Bowen, the former President of Princeton University and of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, conducted extensive research into the academic preparedness of student-athletes. The result of this research is presented in *The Shape of the River* (Bowen, Bok, & Loury, 2000), *The Game of Life* (Shulman & Bowen, 2002), and *Reclaiming the Game* (Bowen & Levin, 2003). In *Reclaiming the Game*, Bowen and Levin (2003) state:

In the 1951 entering cohort at the Ivys and the co-ed liberal arts colleges, athletes, including High Profile athletes were academically indistinguishable from their classmates. By the time of the 1976 cohort, the male athletes were falling behind; by 1989 the gap had widened for men and for the first time female athletes were doing less well than their peers (p. 127).

This disparity in academic preparedness is not meant as a criticism of athletes in higher education or of the admissions process. Rather, it should be viewed as an indicator of

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.gohofstra.com/sports/2014/8/21/GEN\\_0821144839.aspx](http://www.gohofstra.com/sports/2014/8/21/GEN_0821144839.aspx)

the student-athletes' overall preparedness for achieving academic success. In essence, talented athletes with lower scores are recruited for their skills on the playing field with the hope that they will be able to catch up to their peers. Unfortunately, not only do student-athletes have to overcome a deficit of academic preparedness, they are required to do so with less time for academic work than the general student population.

It tends to be forgotten that student athletes have greater workloads than the average student. Schulman and Bowen (2002) found that student-athletes might spend two to four hours a day, six days per week training. "Concurrently, intercollegiate programs demand more and more...Swimmers are often in the pool up to four hours per day Monday through Friday, and year round training, in one form or another is common in most sports..." (Schulman & Bowen, 2002, p. 271). In the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) *Division I Manual* (2014), the bylaws regulate the amount of time student-athletes can devote to training, in-season and off-season:

#### 2.14 The Principles of Governing Playing and Practice

The time required of student-athletes for participating in intercollegiate athletics shall be regulated to minimize interference with opportunities for acquiring a quality education in a manner consistent with that afforded the general student body.

#### 2.15 The Principles of Governing postseason competition and contests sponsored by Noncollegiate Organizations

The conditions under which postseason competition occurs shall be controlled to assure that the benefits inherent in such competition flow fairly to all participants, to prevent unjustified intrusion on the time student-athletes devote to academic programs, and protect student-athletes from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises. (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014, p. 5).

The time limits are 20 hours per week in season and eight hours per week in the off-season. This is not the full picture. The literature on the "20 Hour Rule," as it is more commonly referred, suggests that the limit is easily circumvented, abused, and ignored. Weekly training totals can exceed 30 hours (Bowen, Bok, & Loury, 2000; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2007; Ayers, Pazmino-Cevallos, & DBOSE, 2012). The reality is that students have a limited amount of time to devote to academics. Colleges and universities owe student-athletes more than just the opportunity to excel in their sports. They must actively promote and support academic excellence.

There are two significant ways academic libraries can support academic excellence. The first and foremost is providing direct access to a librarian. If student-athletes have little time for academics, then they likely have little time to find their way to the library for research assistance. So librarians should find their way to the student-athletes. In the literature, "embedding" takes the form of librarians staffing non-library locations as reference service access points. Hugh Rundle (2014) writes on this topic in *Planning Our Future Libraries: Blueprints for 2025*.

Embedded librarians are sent to the point of need to bring services to patrons, which frees them from coming to the library...Just by being there the librarian is able to make connections, find relevant research results, and help make sense of data. (p. 57)

Bringing library services to the student-athletes is a first step to providing assistance. The next step is the creation of an information literacy course designed for student-athletes.

### **Hofstra University's Initiative**

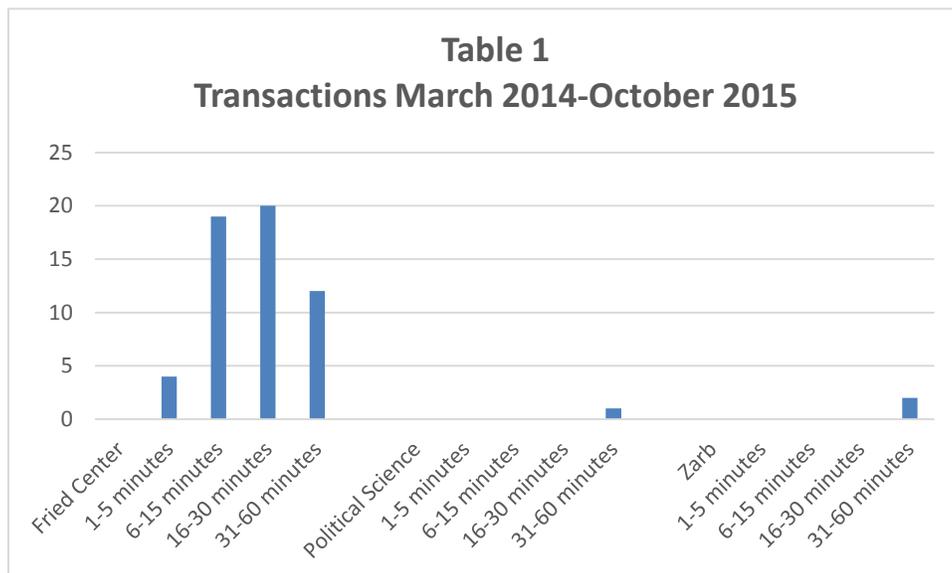
In the spring of 2013, the Hofstra University Athletic Policy Committee, of which the author is a member, convened to receive a report from Rachel Peel-MacAndrew, Associate Dean of Advising, regarding the academic needs of student-athletes. During this meeting, the author asked if any attempt had been made to reach out to the Axinn Library for academic support. No attempt had been made. This initiated months of conversations between Peel-MacAndrew and the author, resulting in a proposal to leverage Hofstra University's recently constructed study hall facility, The Fried Center for Student-Athlete Development, into a true academic support area. This involved designating the author as the library liaison to the Athletic Department and embedding him inside the Fried Center to perform reference services four hours per week from October to December and February to May. The Fried Center houses 12 computers, a laser printer, a projector, a small classroom/conference room, and provides access to the campus Wi-Fi. In addition to the technology, Peel-MacAndrew and Michelle Spartorella, Assistant Dean of Academic Advising at Hofstra, maintain offices within the Fried Center. These academic advisors are responsible for continuously monitoring the grades of the student-athletes. Having these technologies in place and ready access to academic advisors makes the Fried Center an ideal location for expansion of library services. Since the addition of a reference librarian, Peel-MacAndrew has also added tutors from Hofstra University's Writing Center, the Math Department, and the Science Department.

The first phase of this initiative was to introduce the author as the library liaison to the athletic department. To this end, a basic library skill workshop was conducted in the Fried Center on 5 March 2014 for 45 freshman student-athletes. This introductory session corresponded with the opening of the reference access point within the Fried Center on Friday mornings from 11am to 1pm and Wednesday evenings from 5pm to 7pm. A formal introduction to the coaches of Hofstra's 17 teams and the Athletic Department administrators took place on May 13<sup>th</sup> during the Department of Intercollegiate Sports Spring meeting.

The second phase of this project was to begin offering a one-credit information literacy course to incoming student-athletes. A single independent study version of the proposed course was piloted in Summer Session II of 2014. A nine-week distance education course was offered for the first time in the spring of 2015 with 16 student-athletes. The objectives of the lectures and assignments were geared towards building an understanding of how to collect, evaluate and use information.

## Outcome

The original intent of this initiative was to replicate the traditional reference desk experience inside the Fried Center, meaning that any student-athlete was welcome to walk up and ask for assistance. This has rarely been the case. As the only librarian embedded in the Fried Center, I have found that the student-athletes are much more comfortable with scheduling a research appointment rather than just randomly showing up. I have answered a total of 55 questions over 132 hours at the Fried Center, with only two of these being walk-up reference questions. As the vast majority of my questions have been research appointments, the length of time spent on answering these questions far exceeds that of the typical reference interview. According to internal statistics, 80% of all reference transactions take one to five minutes to answer as opposed to the 8% at the Fried Center. The Axinn Library Reference Desk also has a much more diverse and numerous user population. Because the reference desk use varies greatly between the Axinn Library and the Fried Center, I decided to compare the Fried Center research appointments to my research appointments with the Political Science Department and the Zarb School of Business (see Table 1). The number of scheduled appointments from the Fried Center far exceeds that of the Political Science Department and that of the Zarb School of Business over the same time period.



With the benefit of hindsight, there are a number of things that the author changed for future work with the Athletic Department, foremost being the introductory orientations. The orientation setting in a large room in the Fried Center with a large audience failed to leave a strong enough impression of who the librarian is and what service is being provided. To address this, in October of 2015, the format was switched to a seminar session held inside the library. The number of students was limited to about 15, and the

session included a general library discussion, coverage of basic research strategies, and setting up user accounts for interlibrary loan, EBSCO, Adobe Digital Editions, and the Library's app. These four user accounts were chosen for their usefulness to the research process. These seminars were conducted throughout October and had a positive effect on research appointment requests. As of November 12, 2015, seven research appointments have been conducted, compared to November 2014, which had only six for the entire month.

The credit-bearing information literacy course currently being offered is taught online. This has its advantages and disadvantages. Being online allows student-athletes to self-pace, which is the course's biggest advantage. The biggest disadvantage is trying to teach first semester freshman how to navigate the distance education platform without seeing them in person. Keeping the student-athletes on task was challenging in comparison to the students taking the business information literacy course the author teaches. This is likely due to the difference between undeclared freshman student athletes and graduating Zarb School of Business seniors. Eventually, we would like to track the success of the program by analyzing the four-year graduation rate and GPAs of the student-athletes who have taken the course versus those who have not. As of now, however, the academic advisors are reporting informal positive feedback about the course from the student-athletes.

The Fried Center, with all of its strengths, was designed as a traditional study hall and not an academic support center. The current design lacks the space and technology to support the growth of the support services. Since February 2014, additional tutoring services have been added. These additions have created a more crowded environment and have limited the author's ability to conduct proper reference interviews. Currently Hofstra University is exploring ways to reconfigure and expand the space.

In consultation with Peel-MacAndrew, I initially staffed the Fried Center with a mix of day and evening hours, Wednesdays 5pm-7pm and Fridays 11am-1pm. It became clear very quickly that Friday was not a popular day for studying. On most Fridays, I was staffing an empty room. Therefore, in the fall of 2014, the Fried Center was staffed on Wednesdays and Thursdays, 5pm-7pm. In addition to these hours, I am readily available for additional appointment times to accommodate the student-athlete's hectic schedules. For instance, the women's basketball team members, with practices until 7pm every night, cannot normally get to the Fried Center during the listed hours. Therefore, appointments are available as late as 8pm. When dealing with student-athletes and their demanding schedules it is important to be as flexible as possible.

Using the subject specialist model allows Axinn Library to better support student athletes. Sports play a dominant role in the student-athletes' daily schedule, and the amount of time remaining for research and schoolwork can be limited. Athletes may not have the time to wander the book stacks, physically or virtually. In fact, they may never reach the library at all. Being present within the Fried Center gives the embedded librarian a chance to act as guide and mentor.

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