

**ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND PERFORMANCE  
FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES TASK FORCE**

**Final Report**

**Submitted to**

**President Robert H. Bruininks  
Senior Vice President and Provost E. Thomas Sullivan**

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**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**



# ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND PERFORMANCE FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES TASK FORCE

## *Committee Membership*

**Mary Jo Kane, Co-chair**

Professor and Director, School of Kinesiology  
Vice-chair, University Senate

**Perry H. Leo, Co-chair**

Professor, Aerospace Engineering & Mechanics  
Chair, FAOCIA

**C. Josh Borowicz**

Senior Academic Advisor  
CCE/Student Services and Advising

**Heidi Meyer**

Assistant Director of Admissions  
General Recruitment, Office of Admissions

**Linda J. Brady**

Professor, Food Science and Nutrition  
Faculty Representative, Intercollegiate Athletics

**Mark Nelson**

Director  
McNamara Academic Center

**J. T. Bruett**

Associate Director  
Athletics Compliance Office

**James J. Rowan**

Assistant Director  
Office of Admissions

**L. Victor Collins**

Director  
Martin L. King Program

**Regina Sullivan**

Associate Director  
Intercollegiate Athletics

**Lynn K. Holleran** (*Ex Officio*)

Associate to the Vice President & Chief of Staff  
Office of the President

**Patrick N. Troup**

Director  
Multicultural/Academic Affairs

**Frank Kara**

Director  
Athletics Compliance Office

**Cathrine A. Wambach**

Associate Professor  
Post-secondary Teaching and Learning

**Leo E. Lewis**

Associate Athletic Director  
Intercollegiate Athletics



# **ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND PERFORMANCE FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES TASK FORCE**

## **Final Report**

### **Introduction**

This report highlights key findings and recommendations of the Task Force on Academic Support and Performance for Student-Athletes. Our primary charge was to review and address significant issues surrounding student-athlete academic outcomes. These issues ranged from strengthening undergraduate retention and graduation rates, to improving coordination and delivery of academic support services, to enhancing the overall educational experiences of student-athletes at the U of M. Toward that end, we focused on four essential tasks:

- Collect and analyze longitudinal data from 1999-2006 to establish profiles of student-athletes on their admission to the University and throughout their stay, and to use these data to establish benchmark measures of student-athletes' academic performance
- Assess current practices concerning academic support and performance internal to the University and identify best practices at similar academic institutions
- Identify and consult with internal and external constituencies with the goal of improving academic performance
- Develop specific recommendations regarding support programs, identify admission pathways and highlight specific performance strategies that will foster student-athlete academic success rates

### **Transforming the U through Strategic Positioning: The Role of Student-Athletes**

In 2005, President Robert Bruininks announced that the University of Minnesota would launch an historic initiative—Strategic Positioning—to make us one of the top three public research universities in the world. A key element of strategic positioning is to strengthen the quality of students' educational experiences through major academic initiatives such as the Four-Year Graduation Plan. As part of this plan, Provost Tom Sullivan recently announced new aspirational targets with the goal of significantly improving undergraduate retention and graduation rates.

Because the President and Provost have made the academic success of all students one of their highest priorities, they proactively initiated a Task Force that would directly address the academic performance of one critical group of students—student-athletes. In addition, the Task Force was created to reflect and strengthen:

- Recent changes in NCAA requirements for student-athlete outcomes at Division IA institutions; and
- The work of the Department of Athletics' Graduation Rate Task Force.

### **Guiding Principles**

We framed our work around many of the guiding principles tied to Strategic Positioning. Implementing these principles will create significant opportunities for a wide array of stakeholders within the University community, including student-athletes. These guiding principles allowed members of the Task Force to play our part in:

- Exploring new solutions and best practices to address critical problems;
- Supporting faculty and staff who are dedicated to helping students achieve success;

- Improving efficiencies and administrative services; and
- Creating a culture that provides “access to success” so that students become lifelong learners and leaders.

In addition to these guiding principles, our work supports the vision offered by the Director of Athletics, Joel Maturi, when he declared: “[The University of Minnesota] is committed to attaining unprecedented levels of excellence in academics as well as athletics [while] becoming the model Division IA athletics program in the country.”

### **Collect, Establish and Analyze Longitudinal Baseline Data**

Data collection and analysis were undertaken by John Kellogg and Ron Huesman (Institutional Research and Reporting), and Tracy Fischer (Office of the Registrar). Data were collected beginning with those student-athletes enrolled in 1999, as this was the first year comprehensive data from PeopleSoft were available. There were two phases of data collection and analysis:

- Phase I: Establishing Demographic and Academic Performance Profiles of Student-Athletes through the use of *Descriptive Data*
- Phase II: Identifying Key Factors that Contribute to the Academic Success Rates of Student-Athletes employing an *Innovative Statistical Model*

In addition to Phases I and II, the Task Force took a comprehensive approach by collecting information from NCAA databases and recent analyses of academic performance trends of General College students. As part of this process we met with Eric Ferris (consultant to Intercollegiate Athletics). Dr. Ferris has analyzed academic performance trends and outcomes in intercollegiate sports for a number of years.

### **Phase I: Establishing Descriptive Profiles of Student-Athletes**

Because a significant part of our charge was to establish baseline information, a primary goal of Phase I was to gather and analyze longitudinal data. By doing so, we have provided the University a compelling set of data that can be used to develop critical models, strategies and benchmarks for future success. In addition, gathering baseline data on longitudinal trends allows the University to *comprehensively examine student-athletes’ admissions pathways, academic progress and graduation rates*.

In Phase I, there were two key areas or categories of data collection and analysis:

- Variables related to the profile of student-athletes admitted to the University, including:
  - High school class rank
  - Standardized test scores
  - Special admit status
  - State/country of origin
  - Admitting college
  - Eligibility for Pell grants
  - First generation college student
- Variables related to establishing student-athletes’ academic performance once enrolled at the University, including:
  - U of M cumulative GPA (each term)
  - U of M term GPA
  - College and department affiliation (each term)
  - Academic major (each term)

- Whether student-athlete satisfied academic eligibility requirements (each term)
- Number of overall credits (each term)
- Number of degree credits towards major (each term)
- Number of credits short of graduating
- Number of Ws, Fs and Ds
- Remaining eligibility (each term)
- Student-athlete graduated or did not graduate (4, 5, 6 year periods)

All data were analyzed through a two-tier process. First, we examined overall trends for each of the two categories cited above and second, we separated the data by:

- Year in school
- Sport
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Graduation status (graduated or not) after 4, 5 and 6 years
- At-risk status (defined as entering high-school student either below the 50th percentile in their class or an ACT score less than 20 or an SAT score less than 940)

### **Phase I Results: Key Findings**

[Note that when findings refer to graduation rates/trends, they are based on a subgroup of 564 student-athletes who entered the U of M between Fall, 1999 and Spring, 2002 and thus had at least 4 years to graduate].

#### ***Demographic Profile of Incoming Student-Athletes*** (see Appendix A for more detail):

- ◆ From 1999-2005, approximately 1,400 student-athletes were enrolled at the University of Minnesota. Of this number:
  - 48.2 % were female
  - 51.8% were male
  - 15.5% were students of color
  - 77.1% were white
  - 5.8% were international
- ◆ The percentage of students of color was higher among male student-athletes (18.8%) than among female student-athletes (9.1%)
- ◆ Approximately 60% of female student-athletes were tendered, while approximately 70% of male student-athletes were tendered
- ◆ Just over 50% of student-athletes came from Minnesota, about 20% came from states with some form of reciprocity (primarily Wisconsin), while the remaining 30% came from other states or countries
- ◆ 91.7% of student-athletes enrolled directly from high school, while 8.3% transferred from other institutions (2- and 4-year colleges and universities)
- ◆ Approximately 50% of all student-athletes enrolled in CLA, 30% in GC and 20% in other colleges (IT, CSOM and COAFES)
  - Among female student-athletes, 58% enrolled in CLA and 18% in GC
  - Among male student-athletes, 36% enrolled in CLA and 43% in GC
  - 70% of student-athletes of color enrolled in GC

***Academic Performance Profile of Student-Athletes*** (see Appendix B for more detail):

The following trends reflect the academic performance of student-athletes entering directly from high school. Of these student-athletes:

- 27% graduated in the top 10% of their class; 55% in the top 25%; 84% in the top 50% and 16% graduated in the bottom 50% of their high-school class
- Female student-athletes were more likely to come from the top 25% of their class (70%); this trend did not occur for male student-athletes (only 40%)
- Among student-athletes of color, approximately 30% were in the top 25% of their high-school class while 36.5% were in the bottom 50%
- On the ACT exam, 4.5% of student-athletes scored between 31–36; 32.7% scored between 25–30; 50% scored between 19–24 and 12.9% scored below 19
- Female student-athletes performed slightly better than males on the ACT
- 50% of student-athletes of color scored below 19
- 63.5% of student-athletes graduated. This breaks down as: six year graduation rate of 73.9%; five year graduation rate of 71%; and four year graduation rate of 47.4%

***Demographic Profile of At-risk Student-Athletes*** (see Appendix C for more detail):

- 29.9% of all student-athletes were classified as at-risk, defined as the lower 50th percent in high school rank or below 20 on their ACT (below 940 on the SAT)
- 17.6% of female student-athletes were classified at risk, with basketball having the largest number of at-risk student-athletes and swimming the fewest
- 38.6% of male student-athletes were classified at risk, with football having the largest number of at-risk student-athletes and swimming the fewest
- Approximately 67% of student-athletes of color were classified at risk
- 81.5% of all at-risk student-athletes enrolled in GC; 14.4% enroll in CLA; 2% enrolled in COAFES

***Academic Performance Profile of At-risk Student-Athletes*** (See Appendix D for more detail):

- Approximately 28% of student-athletes were considered at-risk by the operational definition cited above
- Approximately 60% of at-risk student-athletes in the 1999, 2000 and 2001 cohorts had not graduated
- The average GPA for student-athletes classified as at-risk was 2.48 and 3.09 for those not classified as at-risk
- The average GPA was 2.8 for at-risk students who graduated and 2.25 for those who didn't graduate
- The overall number of Ws, Fs and Ds was higher for at-risk student-athletes compared to not-at-risk student-athletes
- The average number of Fs was 2.80 for at-risk student-athletes who didn't graduate and 1.08 for those who did graduate
- 41.7% of at-risk student-athletes graduated. This breaks down as: six year graduation rate of 52.7%; five year graduation rate of 54.4%; and four year graduation rate of 20.6%

Based on these findings, it seems safe to assume that those student-athletes who will most likely not graduate can be identified long before they leave the University. A critical question therefore becomes: ***When, where and how do we intervene with at-risk student-athletes?*** This question in

particular guided much of our work as we formalized our conclusions and made specific recommendations to enhance the overall academic success of student-athletes.

### **Phase II: Identifying Key Factors that Contribute to Academic Success through an Innovative Statistical Model**

In Phase II, we moved beyond descriptive profiles of student-athletes and examined key factors—as well as the relative weight of each of these factors—that may contribute to the academic performance of student-athletes. Toward that end, an *innovative regression/predictor model that isolated key variables significantly correlated with academic success* was developed by John Kellogg and Ron Huesman specifically for our Task Force. Their unique approach employs “survival analysis” as a way to identify key factors that impact a student-athlete's ability to persist and graduate over time.

The goal of this model in particular, and Kellogg’s and Huesman’s research in general, was to develop a practical application to help the University enhance student-athlete success by identifying at-risk students. Their study was presented in October at the *National Symposium on Student Retention* in Albuquerque, NM. An extension of their work incorporating non-athlete student cohorts was presented in November at the *Association of Institutional Research of the Upper Midwest* in Bloomington, MN.

The input variables for the regression/predictor model were:

- Ethnic origin (students of color vs. not students of color)
- Gender
- Sport Type (revenue vs. non-revenue)
- Tender status (tendered vs. not tendered)
- ACT/SAT score (SAT scores were converted to an equivalent ACT score)
- Entrance college (GC vs. not GC and CLA vs. not CLA)
- Number of Fs first semester
- Number of Ds first semester
- Number of Ws first semester
- Number of Cs first semester
- Ratio of units attempted to units completed first semester
- At-risk status as defined by class rank (below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile) or ACT scores (less than 20) or SAT scores (less than 940)

These particular variables were selected as representative of a student-athlete’s entering profile (e.g., sport type, gender). First-semester performance measures were targeted because internal studies conducted by General College showed a strong and positive correlation between first-semester performance (with respect to overall GPA) and graduation rates.

### **Phase II Results: Key Findings**

Results indicated that only five of the input variables correlated with academic success. In decreasing order of significance they were:

- Ratio of units attempted to units completed, first semester
- Ethnic origin (students of color vs. not students of color)
- Number of Cs first semester

- Entrance college (GC vs. not GC)
- Number of Ws first semester

While these variables did not reveal the entire story of critical factors related to academic success—28% of the variance was explained in the model, though this percentage is considered significant in relevant academic fields of study—*the regression model we employed correctly predicted 70% of the unsuccessful student-athletes and 80% of the successful student-athletes from the full cohort*. In addition, on the advice of Rich Howard, Director of Institutional Reporting and Research, the data were re-run using a discriminant function analysis (cluster analysis) rather than a logistic regression analysis; results from this follow-up analysis were essentially identical.

Findings from the logistic regression model revealed two important subgroups of student-athletes based on measures of academic performance. “Success” was defined as either having already graduated or being still enrolled at the U and on track to graduate. The two subgroups were:

- **Under-achievers:** Student-athletes who were predicted to succeed but did not do so
- **Over-achievers:** Student-athletes who were predicted not to succeed but did so

Once these two groups of student-athletes were identified, we examined their individual transcripts in detail. We were particularly interested in understanding the profiles of those student-athletes who succeeded despite the odds (i.e., “over-achievers”), as well those student-athletes who appeared to have the tools to succeed academically but failed to do so (i.e., “under-achievers”). Their profiles are highlighted in the table on page 7.

	<b>Over-achievers (N=32)</b>	<b>Under-achievers (N=103)</b>	
<b>Gender</b>			
<i>Female</i>	19%	44%	
<i>Male</i>	81%	56%	
<b>Race</b>			
<i>American Indian</i>	0%	1%	
<i>Asian</i>	0%	2%	
<i>African American</i>	28%	12%	
<i>Hispanic</i>	3%	2%	
<i>International</i>	16%	10%	
<i>Unknown</i>	6%	2%	
<i>White</i>	47%	72%	
<b>Sport, Men's</b>			
<i>Baseball</i>	3%	5%	
<i>Basketball</i>	0%	2%	
<i>Football</i>	34%	15%	
<i>Golf</i>	6%	3%	
<i>Gymnastics</i>	3%	4%	
<i>Hockey</i>	0%	9%	
<i>Swimming</i>	13%	5%	
<i>Tennis</i>	3%	2%	
<i>Track/CC</i>	13%	7%	
<i>Wrestling</i>	6%	5%	
<b>Sport, Women's</b>			
<i>Basketball</i>	3%	3%	
<i>Golf</i>	0%	3%	
<i>Hockey</i>	0%	4%	
<i>Rowing</i>	6%	5%	
<i>Soccer</i>	0%	6%	
<i>Softball</i>	0%	3%	
<i>Swimming</i>	0%	5%	
<i>Tennis</i>	0%	1%	
<i>Track/CC</i>	6%	13%	
<i>Volleyball</i>	3%	3%	
<b>Entry College</b>			
<i>CLA</i>	28%	49%	
<i>GC</i>	60%	34%	
<b>Exit College</b>	<i>(Graduated)</i>	<i>(Withdrew)</i>	
<i>CCE</i>	19%	ICP	6%
<i>CLA</i>	34%	most in Comm	50%
<i>CEHD</i>	28%	BME, SPST, KIN	9%
<i>GC</i>	n/a		15%
<i>IT</i>	3%		7%
			30% undec, 15% Comm BME, SPST, KIN undec, pre-CLA, -CSOM most lower-division

## **Challenges Related to Data Collection and Analysis: Here, There, and Everywhere**

Though we have every confidence that the data (and findings) highlighted throughout this report are robust and reliable, we faced a number of significant hurdles when attempting to collect data related to the primary issues under consideration. For example, one of the first things we discovered was that *critical data related to the academic performance of student-athletes were stored in disparate places across the University* ranging from the Athletic Department, to the Compliance Office, to General College. In addition, different units often relied on completely different data sets.

Not surprisingly, this situation often resulted in missing data, duplication of effort, and data that were not always up to date. As a result, tracking and monitoring the progress of student-athletes became much more complicated, time-consuming and cumbersome. This could be particularly problematic for those most in need of more intensive oversight—at-risk student-athletes.

It should be emphasized that those individuals responsible for collecting, analyzing, and tracking data related to the academic profiles and performance of student-athletes are keenly aware of these problems and support the recommendations made in this report. Please note that these recommendations are made at both an immediate tactical level and at a longer-term research and development level.

## **Recommendations for Achieving Academic Success for Student-Athletes**

***Recommendation 1: Formalize, standardize and streamline data collection of student-athletes' academic performance by creating a centralized database that can be used by Athletics, Compliance, Admissions, the McNamara Academic Center, and other relevant units across the University.***

As mentioned briefly above, we have a current system that is in need of significant overhaul. Critical data related to student-athletes are in disparate places across the University and need to be stored in one central location. For example, individual paper files are kept in the Compliance Office while other information is housed in the McNamara Student Advising Center or the Athletic Department and filed electronically. The practical effect of this non-centralized, non-standardized system is that a great deal of effort is required to accurately track the progress of student-athletes toward a degree, not to mention their eligibility and APR status. In addition, athletic advisers in the MAC and at the department level routinely report difficulty in communicating consistent information to the student-athlete. A more streamlined, standardized, and centralized system for data collection and analysis will allow for ongoing and consistent tracking of student-athletes' academic progress. In sum, such a system will create more efficient and effective ways to update, monitor, and access both routine and key information.

As part of our research, we gathered information on current best practices at other peer institutions. We discovered that the University of California at Berkeley has one of the best database systems in the country for profiling, tracking, analyzing, and reporting information related to student-athletes. The "Berkeley Model" uses a program called *FileMaker Pro* that includes personal information, information relevant to particular sports, current academic status, travel schedule, eligibility information, transcripts, class schedules, as well as athletic advisor comments and e-mails, and college advisor comments and e-mails. The database is also used to collect information on prospective student-athletes during the recruiting phase. Our Task Force recommends implementing this or a similar system.

Related to the creation of a centralized, standardized database, we recommend hiring a “data czar” to implement and oversee the system. Though we are reluctant to make recommendations related to personnel matters, it became clear in the course of our conversations that unless some individual is tasked with data collection procedures and oversight as their primary responsibility, the current system will continue to be done on a piecemeal basis and many profiling, tracking, and reporting needs will simply “fall through the cracks.”

***Recommendation 2: Examine the potential for an intensive and comprehensive Summer Bridge program to help student-athletes—especially those who are academically fragile—successfully transition into the academic and social rigors of life on a college campus.***

Our analysis indicates that first-semester performance is *the* most critical predictor of long-term academic success for student-athletes. Similar results have been discovered in studies conducted by General College where first-semester GPA was found to be the only variable that strongly correlated with academic performance. In addition, anecdotal evidence gleaned from conversations with student-athletes indicates that the increase in workload and intensity from high school to college is vastly underestimated as a barrier to success.

Beyond anecdotal evidence, we examined the literature on the efficacy of summer bridge programs in general, and related to student-athletes in particular. We discovered that for at least two decades, research has described the outcomes of various summer bridge programs for students who are believed to benefit from additional support as they transition into college life. Many of these programs have been aimed at students of color. For example, the University of Minnesota, Morris, Gateway Program is a four-week summer initiative for African American and American Indian students. The students who participated in this program graduated at the same rate as white students (Risku, 2002). In addition, Zhang and RiCharde (1999) found that participants in a summer program earned higher first-year GPAs and were more likely to return to school compared to a similar group of non-participants. In reviewing the outcomes of UC Berkeley’s affirmative action program, Carroll, Tyson, and Lumas (2000) suggest that participation in the summer bridge program was an important contributor to student success. Despite the general consensus that bridge programs are effective, caution should be used when interpreting results evaluating their impact because participants often continue to receive support services beyond summer programs which may also contribute to academic success.

Athletes have been included in summer bridge programs when their characteristics match those of other students receiving support. Scholars such as Carodine, Almond, and Gratto (2001), recommend that athletes participate in orientation programs with other students to reduce their isolation and reinforce their identities as students. In a recent study, Hollis (2001-2002) queried 91 heads of athlete academic support departments at Division I institutions. She examined specific types of services and staff in the unit and the amount of space, budget, and administrative support for the unit. These variables were then used to predict graduation rates for student-athletes. Having a summer bridge program for new students was associated with higher graduation rates suggesting that this approach can be considered “best practice.” [Citations are available in Appendix E.]

Based upon these and other findings, we believe that summer bridge programs must be thoroughly examined as a way to help at-risk student-athletes in particular as they transition into the University community. Academically fragile students are often “at risk” not because they lack the cognitive ability necessary to complete a degree, but because they are under-prepared, lack verbal and quantitative skills, and the social and cultural experiences needed to succeed

within the higher education community. Frequently, at-risk student-athletes have incurred a study deficit over their high-school years, one that prevents them from hitting the ground running. A summer bridge program could help “jump start” their academic careers. In addition, a summer bridge program could be the initial phase of a broader tracking system for first-year students who are considered at risk. Such a tracking system should include a means by which advisors and tutors get more timely feedback on in-class performance, and should focus on 1000 level courses with a particular emphasis on math and science courses, writing, and other classes considered “gateway courses.”

While there are only limited data demonstrating the effectiveness of summer bridge programs, we found that a number of Division I schools—we looked at the University of Iowa and the University of Washington in particular—have such programs for at-risk freshman, both student-athletes and non-student-athletes alike. However, we also found that one reason there are so little actual data—not to mention research studies—related to these types of programs for student-athletes is that the NCAA only began allowing such initiatives in 2001 and confined these practices to men’s and women’s basketball; summer bridge programs were extended to all sports beginning in the summer of 2005.

At the U of M, we have some data suggesting that simply bringing entering at-risk student-athletes to campus the summer before their freshman year does not automatically help their long-term academic success. This appears to be the result of the limited number of appropriate summer courses currently available, the time commitments these students give to athletics, and the lack of a formal program. In sum, we urge the University to make sure that any summer bridge initiative that is undertaken involves a serious, comprehensive, and systems-wide approach. Done correctly, such an initiative could become the first step in creating, implementing, and monitoring early intervention and individualized programs for those student-athletes most at-risk. Exposure to a comprehensive summer bridge program may also enhance and integrate the academic expectations and motivations of student-athletes and foster a commitment to accountability in specific, measurable terms.

The data provided below come from the University’s recent efforts to offer some kind of transition initiative for student-athletes the summer before they enter the U. Note that these efforts do not involve any formal, systematic program. Nevertheless, we gathered relevant data to see what, if any, trends were developing as a way to lay the foundation for future summer bridge programs.

- Student-athletes were enrolled in an "informal" summer program beginning in 2001 through summer, 2006
- A total of 44 student-athletes enrolled in the summer. Of this total, 26 (61%) were at-risk
- The majority of student athletes came from men's and women's basketball and football
- Pathways of entrance clustered in the following four colleges: CEHD 35% (n=15); CLA 30% (n=13); GC 19% (n=8); CCE 14% (n= 6); CHE 2% (n=1)
- Number of credits attempted across all summers ranged from 2 to 10, with an average of 6.3 credits attempted
- Number of credits earned across all summers ranged from 2 to 10, with an average of 5.7 credits earned
- GPAs across all summers ranged from 1.44 to 4.0 with an average of 2.84

- First-semester GPAs across all summers ranged from 0.97 to 3.5 with an average of 2.52 [Note: First-semester GPAs are pending for those 18 student-athletes who took courses in summer, 2006, and are enrolled this fall.]

***Recommendation 3: Increase access to academic programs that are relevant to student-athletes as a way to increase their interest and motivation, leading to better academic outcomes.***

We support the notion that once student-athletes are admitted, the University has an obligation to provide academic majors and programs in which they have an interest. Research has shown that the general institutional culture and conditions that influence the overall graduation rate at any academic institution account for 80% of the graduation rate of its athletes. A key component of “culture and conditions” is making available those areas of study that will significantly increase a student’s desire to learn. In short, students are more likely to succeed if they are engaged in academic fields of study they find interesting and motivating and if they see a relevant link to their future careers.

Many of our ideas on “relevance” stem not only from anecdotal evidence provided by members of the task force who have “expert knowledge” as academic advisors or athletic administrators, but from individual transcript analyses, especially of those student-athletes who were predicted not to succeed but did so. Transcript analysis revealed that overachieving student-athletes generally clustered into six academic majors:

- ICP
- Business and Marketing Education
- Kinesiology
- Sports Studies
- Family Social Studies
- Communication Studies

A common thread throughout these majors is that they allow a student-athlete to integrate his or her experience and interest in the world of sports with their academic areas of interest. In addition, these majors have accessible GPA requirements—an overall GPA of 2.0 to both enter and graduate—and are often more flexible in terms of other entrance requirements and class schedules.

One major barrier to success for underperforming students has to do with the point above regarding GPA requirements. Conversations with McNamara advising staff indicate that many student-athletes, particularly those at-risk, want to major in academic areas such as Sport Management/Studies. Because acceptance into some relevant majors require GPAs higher than 2.0, many student-athletes go into Business Marketing Education (BME) in CEHD or Communication Studies in CLA. They choose these majors, in part, because they are interested in business (BME) or mass communication (CS), ***but what they are primarily interested in is the business of sport (e.g., sport marketing and promotion) or communicating about sport (e.g., sports journalism).*** We therefore urge central administration—after appropriate consultation with relevant Deans, Department Chairs and faculty—to expand access to traditional majors and to explore the development of intra and inter college majors/emphasis areas that would significantly increase student-athletes’ motivation to succeed academically. For example, related to this latter point, a student-athlete might combine a major in BME (Department of Work and Human Resource Education) with an emphasis area in Sport Studies (School of Kinesiology).

Such an approach is consistent with one of the major goals of Strategic Positioning—interdisciplinary, collaborative initiatives.

***Recommendation 4: Intensify efforts to track, engage, and provide opportunities to former student-athletes who have left the U without graduating, but who have accumulated enough credit hours so that graduation is well within reach.***

During the course of our investigation we learned about a group of student-athletes who achieved academic success, but remain largely invisible throughout mainstream media and in our public consciousness. We speak of student-athletes who had left the University without graduating, only to return (in some cases, after many years), and earn their undergraduate degrees. This is something that both the student-athletes themselves and the University can take great pride in. We urge central administration to build on efforts already in place to significantly increase the graduation rates of these student-athletes because in spite of recent successes (key findings for those who have returned and obtained their degrees are provided on page 13), much work remains.

From 1999 through summer, 2006, approximately 27% (385/1,450) of all student-athletes enrolled at the U of M left without obtaining their degrees. Some of these individuals went into professional sports or transferred to other institutions. We focused our efforts on those student-athletes who had accumulated enough credit hours to have the possibility of graduation within reach. “Enough credit hours” was defined as 100+ academic credit hours; 48 former student-athletes fit that criterion. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we refer below to student-athletes who left the U without obtaining their degrees but accumulated a significant number of credit hours as “leavers” (key findings for student-athletes in this category are provided on page 14).

Currently, the University makes use of the *Student-Athlete Opportunity Fund* to encourage and assist former student-athletes to return to the U and obtain their degrees. This fund was established by the NCAA to provide direct financial benefits to student-athletes and their families. Funds are distributed by individual conferences with the intent of providing maximum flexibility in their use. The Opportunity Fund can be used to assist student-athletes in meeting financial needs that arise in conjunction with participation in intercollegiate athletics or enrollment in an academic curriculum. Examples where funds have been dispersed include degree completion programs and financial support for summer school programs.

At the University of Minnesota, the Student-athlete Opportunity Fund has been a cornerstone of the *Gopher Graduation Initiative* overseen by key personnel in the Athletic Department. Key goals of this initiative include:

- Being pro-active in tracking and updating relevant information related to leavers. This goal will be more easily achieved with the implementation of Recommendation 1;
- Identifying those individuals—teachers, coaches, staff, community members—who have established close relationships with a leaver and empowering them to encourage leavers to return to the U; and
- Working with coaches, staff, alumni groups and the NCAA (e.g., use of their annual graduation reports) to identify and target leavers who dropped out of the U before the advent of PeopleSoft in 1999.

We applaud the efforts and early successes of the Gopher Graduation Initiative, but feel this important project would be strengthened if central administration, in consultation with the Athletic Department, appoints an individual whose primary responsibility would be to expand

and oversee this and other efforts aimed at improving the graduate rates of former student-athletes. This individual's responsibilities would include, but not be limited to:

- Creating a pool of mentors to help negotiate the process of readmission;
- Providing and coordinating appropriate levels of assistance related to academic support and advising;
- Identifying barriers to re-entry as well as support mechanisms that will ensure academic success;
- Conducting interviews with student-athletes who dropped out but subsequently returned to the U and graduated; and
- Developing one-on-one peer relationships between academically successful student-athletes and leavers.

Regarding the suggestion related to conducting interviews, information gleaned from these encounters can help to develop and implement specific pathways and strategies for getting other student-athletes to return and graduate.

Regarding the suggestion to develop one-on-one peer relationships, a review of research conducted by Pascarella, Patrick and Terrenzini (2005) suggests that peers can have important effects on students' academic experience. Watt and Moore (2001) found that although many athletes spend a great deal of time with other athletes, their strong identification with an athletic peer group can be beneficial, including an increase in tolerance, respect for differences, and support for the problems they share such as balancing schedules.

We believe that with key leadership and appropriate levels of assistance, an initiative created specifically for these particular student-athletes can become a model for *all* students who face academic challenges at the University.

### **Findings Related to Student-Athletes who Returned to the U and Graduated**

Though the information provided below is incomplete due to some missing data, we have highlighted key trends related to those student-athletes who returned and earned their degrees.

- A total of 24 student-athletes have returned and graduated over the last three years
- 75% male; 25% female
- For male athletes, 50% were in football or basketball, with hockey, wrestling, and track & field represented; for female athletes, 33% were in basketball with soccer, swimming, hockey, and track & field represented
- One student-athlete dropped out in 1983; others did so as recently as 2005. The average duration between drop out and return was 3 years-2 months, with a range of 21 years-6 months to 9 months
- The range of time it took from "return to graduate" was 2 years-9 months to 4 months, with an average of 1 year-8 months
- Colleges from which student-athletes graduated: CLA (33%); CCE (25%); EHD (25%); IT (8%); and AGFES (4%)
- Majors earned: ICP (25%); Kinesiology/Sport Studies (21%); Mechanical/ Electrical Engineering (8%); History, American Studies, Child Psychology, Psychology, Communications Studies, Philosophy, and Natural Resources (<1%)
- Overall GPAs ranged from 2.08 to 3.83 with an average GPA of 2.54

### **Findings Related to Student-Athletes who Left the U and Have Not Returned to Graduate**

The information below highlights trends related to “leavers”—student-athletes who left the U without graduating, did not transfer to another school, and accumulated at least 100 credit hours.

- A total of 48 student-athletes fall into this category—75% male; 25% female
- For male athletes, 36% participated in football, 17% in hockey, 11% in basketball and swimming, with baseball, golf, gymnastics, and track & field represented
- For female athletes, 58% participated in soccer and rowing, with softball, swimming, tennis and track & field represented
- Overall, 46% of “leavers” were at risk student-athletes, 56% of whom were male, 17% of whom were female
- 60% of “leavers” entered through GC, followed by 27% through CLA; 6% through EHD; 4% through IT; <1% through COAFES
- 38% of “leavers” were last enrolled in EHD, followed by 31% in CLA; 19% in CCE; and <1% in IT, GC, CHE, and CALA
- 69% of “leavers” were white, followed by 25% who were African American; with less than 1% Hispanic and international student-athletes
- Total number of credit hours earned by “leavers” ranged from 100 to 149, with the average number of total credit hours equaling 121.81
- Cumulative GPAs of “leavers” ranged from 1.49 to 3.54, with the average cumulative GPA equaling 2.53

***Recommendation 5: Strengthen current efforts to more fully integrate intercollegiate athletics with the broader University community by eliminating unnecessary barriers and creating structures and opportunities that promote a culture of integration.***

Recent efforts to integrate the culture of intercollegiate athletics with the University community at large are consistent with Regents’ policy as well as the policies of faculty governance. For example, one of the guiding principles of the Regents Policy on Intercollegiate Athletics is that, “the University shall promote a culture that integrates Intercollegiate Athletics into the campus mainstream.” Explicit acknowledgement of the desire to more fully integrate athletics is also reflected in the policies of the Advisory Committee on Athletics (ACA), a committee that provides oversight and consultation between faculty and the Department of Athletics:

“[The ACA] strongly supports the integration of athletic administrators and coaches into the University governance structure ... Efforts also must be made to insure that student-athletes are treated as integral members of the University community, eligible to participate in all its activities and to take full advantage of the opportunities and services that the University can provide to facilitate their development and graduation.”

The ACA provides many examples of positive and appropriate interactions between faculty and coaches designed to more fully integrate athletics. Some examples include:

- Encouraging coaches and other staff in the Athletics Department to apply for membership on University-wide committees;
- Inviting coaches to departmental or collegiate sponsored forums or meetings where issues that are relevant to student-athletes are discussed;

- Providing opportunities for recruits to meet with faculty from colleges/departments where student-athletes hope to enroll;
- Broadening the Guest Coach program; and
- Encouraging student-athletes to invite faculty members to the annual student-athlete Scholars Banquet.

Because of the many academic scandals that have occurred in Division I college sports, “firewalls” have often (and appropriately) been erected between the academic side of the institution and athletic departments. The University of Minnesota is no exception. Though we recognize and support the need for strong oversight, it is also important to recognize that positive and significant interactions between coaches and faculty can (and should) exist. Indeed, such interactions can be critical to more completely integrating athletics into the University community as a whole.

Within the last few years there have been renewed efforts by the ACA and other units across the University to sponsor events that will foster interactions between academics and athletics. Preliminary results from these efforts suggest that people in athletics are eager to increase their involvement with the University community. These efforts help ensure that the discussions and ideas generated by the task force are continued, and that there is faculty “follow up” on all our recommendations.

In order to maximize the efforts initiated by the ACA and faculty governance committees, we suggest that central administration in general, and the Office of the Provost in particular, takes a pro-active approach to encourage cooperation among faculty, coaches and academic and athletic staff. We believe that ongoing grassroots efforts by the faculty to foster such interaction will be substantially enhanced if faculty and athletic personnel see direct involvement at the highest levels of the University. Such involvement could include:

- Creating opportunities for academic and athletic personnel to discuss matters of mutual interest such as student-athlete graduation rates;
- Inviting coaches and athletic administrators to participate in events (e.g., orientation week) where new faculty and staff learn about the entire University community. It is vital to establish the culture of the U as soon as new people arrive on campus; and
- Actively publicizing and promoting the many academic accomplishments of our student-athletes such as profiling student-athletes who make the Dean’s list, graduate with honors or receive all-Big 10 academic honors.

### **Pathways and Strategies for Future Success**

Intercollegiate athletics can play a critical role in the University’s efforts to become one of the top three public research universities in the world. The Board of Regents explicitly acknowledges the various and important ways that college sports connect the U to broad and deep constituencies: “Intercollegiate athletics fosters positive identification and goodwill for the state and its University among graduates, citizens of the state, and individuals across the country. This good will, public support, and identification help the University serve its varied missions in all its activities.”

The Athletic Department also recognizes its importance—and obligation—in advancing the success and impact of the University. A key component of the Department’s mission is to serve as a “window to the U.” This window should reveal not only the athletic successes of our student-athletes, but their academic accomplishments as well. A strong and overt commitment to

the academic performance of student-athletes will underscore the University's overall commitment to undergraduate education and building a talented, promising and highly qualified student body from diverse backgrounds.

We believe the University is well positioned to implement our recommendations immediately. As mentioned in the introduction, the President and Provost have placed the academic success of our students at the center of Strategic Positioning. As part of this effort, the Provost recently announced a number of academic initiatives that will enhance ongoing efforts to improve student experiences and outcomes, including overall graduation rates. Such efforts are showing signs of progress: In 2005, the 4-year undergraduate graduation rate was 36.7%, the 5-year rate was 56%, and the 6-year rate was 61.2%. These trends are up substantially from 2000 when the 4-year graduation rate was 26.1%, the 5-year rate was 45%, and the 6-year rate was 50.1%.

The academic performance of student-athletes reflects these trends: In 2005, the 6-year graduation rate was 64% while the 5-year rate was 60%. It should be emphasized that although much work remains, student-athletes (overall) continue to graduate at a higher rate than their non-athletic counterparts.

When referring to Strategic Positioning, the President and Provost often remind us that the status quo is unacceptable and that "to stay the same is to fall behind." Improving graduation rates for all students is an essential benchmark of this historic initiative. Targeting the academic performance of student-athletes is one important way for the University to achieve this important and worthy goal.

In conclusion, the changes our Task Force is recommending—from upgrades in the infrastructure of data collection and analysis, to critical investments in such ongoing efforts as the Gopher Graduation Initiative—are all focused on improving student-athletes' academic experiences and outcomes, including, most importantly, obtaining their college degrees. Successful implementation of our five recommendations will help ensure that the "view through the window" illuminates both the athletic and academic achievements of our student-athletes, as well as the efforts of our dedicated faculty, staff and coaches in nurturing those achievements.