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"Please (preferred deity) let our star player get the grade he/she needs on that Chemistry final."

With exam time around the corner, we all know there are coaches and administrators around the country saying some version of this little prayer.

And certainly, the concern that comes with feeling like the fate of your team's season is in the hands of the most at-risk student-athlete in the program can make it seem that meeting the NCAA's minimum academic standards is the sole objective of the academic support program.

But if your institution lacks resources in academic support, you may hear from your highest-performing students that they feel like victims of their own success – left to fend for themselves because they are not considered eligibility risks.

This is a challenging situation for an athletics program. When personnel and money are in short supply, the natural response is to

direct it all toward the biggest area of risk. But when we meet with prospective student-athletes and their parents on campus visits, we commit to support them academically whether they need that support simply to stay on track for graduation, or need it to meet loftier academic and professional goals.

In my time at Pepperdine, at the University of Nevada, and now at Central Connecticut State, I have worked with my academic staff to make sure that we have a well-rounded approach to academic support that works for all student-athletes. The development of programming to assist high-achieving student-athletes in reaching their goals – be it early graduation to get started on a graduate degree, admission to a medical or law school, or preparing to launch a career in a competitive field – has done much to send student-athletes off better prepared and more likely to have positive feelings about their experience as a college athlete.

Organizing an evening for athletics alumni in the legal profession to hold a panel discussion with student-athletes interested in law school was one

program that cost nothing and made a difference for our students. Our alumni came away impressed with some of our most ambitious student-athletes and eager to help; the student-athletes left with valuable insights, and with a few contacts in their field to help them get started. Later we held a program with alumni in the medical profession and had a similar response. When committing summer school funding, while we aim to spend as responsibly as possible, we also make sure that there is funding available for student-athletes looking to complete pre-requisite work for graduate school admission, and not only for those in immediate need of coursework for eligibility.

None of us who have spent sleepless nights worrying about academic eligibility will forget to commit resources for student-athletes to remain eligible and graduate. Make sure to also support high-achieving student-athletes, as that is a win-win. The students leave campus feeling rewarded and valued, get a head start in their chosen field, and are more likely to one day express gratitude as donors and supporters.

In the meantime, good luck with finals!

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