Montana State University

Athletics Review Report

February 16, 2007

INTRODUCTION

A voluntary athletics review evaluation was conducted at Montana State University by a review team made up of Kevin Lennon, vice president for membership services, Greg Sankey, associate commissioner for compliance at the Southeastern Conference, and Leeland Zeller, associate director of membership services (review team) at the invitation of President Geoffrey Gamble. The review consisted of a visit to the Montana State campus December 4-5, 2006. Jaynee Nadolski, assistant commissioner for compliance of the Big Sky Conference, also participated in the review and contributed significantly to the process.

During the visit, key institutional personnel both inside and outside the athletics department were interviewed, including: president, university legal counsel, vice president for student affairs, director of athletics, faculty athletics representative, admissions and enrollment services staff members, director of student activities, associate director of athletics for student and compliance services/senior woman administrator, academic coordinator, head football coach, head men’s and women’s basketball coaches, head cross country/track and field coach and a former student-athlete. In addition, selected documents and records were reviewed before and during the visit. Following the review of the selected documents and discussions with key individuals, both inside and outside the athletics department, the review team met with President Gamble to discuss both strengths and areas of enhancement.

This report is intended to provide an overview of the status of the universities policies and procedures related to recruiting and integrating student-athletes into the athletics department, and in turn, the student-athletes and the athletics department into the university and the community. The report recognizes many of the university’s current strengths and identifies key areas which offer opportunities for enhancement.

It is important to note that this athletics review is intended to assist Montana State in examining and improving its athletics program. It should not be viewed as a comprehensive “audit” or “seal of approval” relative to the institution’s overall efforts. Even the soundest university and athletics programs cannot eliminate completely the possibility of unforeseen problems. This external review can, however, contribute to the institution’s abilities to recognize and address potential areas for enhancement and to take appropriate actions to rectify potential deficiencies.
STRENGTHS

1. The operations of the athletics department are well integrated into the administrative operations of the university (e.g., financial oversight, admissions).

2. The university’s leadership has initiated efforts to proactively seek and implement enhancements to the Montana State athletics program. Examples of these efforts include:
   a. Athletics department identification of academically “at-risk” student-athletes for the purpose of providing additional academic monitoring and support.
   b. Consideration of a “Student-Athlete Leadership Training” program intended to foster development of leaders from all intercollegiate athletics programs.
   c. The athletics director has initiated numerous programs intended to increase communication with coaches and student-athletes, quantify the positive stories occurring within the athletics program and involve former student-athletes in discussions with current Montana State student-athletes.
   d. Increasing support for posteligibility degree completion programs for student-athletes.

3. The status, reputation and academic rigor of Montana State.

4. The Bozeman community and surrounding area provide the university’s athletics program with the opportunity to develop supportive relationships that positively impact the entire university community.

5. Montana State has a long established affiliation with the Big Sky Conference, which successfully meets the academic, competitive and geographic needs of the university.

6. The university’s senior leadership (president, vice president and athletics director) share and articulate a common view of athletics, which results in a positive working relationship among these key stakeholders.

7. The Montana State intercollegiate athletics program has experienced numerous successes, which include the following:
   a. All-America recognition earned by three members of the Montana State track and field team;
b. Numerous Academic All-America and Academic All-Big Sky awards achieved by individuals in many sports;

c. The Women's Basketball Coaches Association's recognition of the women's basketball team's academic success, which is especially notable given this achievement occurred following coaching transition in the program;

d. The men's tennis team's competitive and academic successes within the Big Sky Conference; and

e. The competitive success of the Montana State football team.

8. Most coaches and administrators share the values articulated by the university and athletics department leadership.

9. Implementation of the Academics, Life Skills, Leadership (ALL) Program, which has impacted coaches and student-athletes through the establishment of expectations for academic performance and community service, challenges coaches and student-athletes through a competitive format and prominently displays the community impact of this program at the entrance of Worthington Arena.

10. The women's basketball coach Tricia Binford and the men's basketball coach Brad Huse have communicated their expectations to student-athletes that they demonstrate leadership, succeed academically, contribute to the community and excel competitively. In their relatively short tenures at Montana State, both coaches are able to provide tangible examples of how these expectations have translated into successful performances. While coaching transition often results in competitive challenges, these individuals represent positive additions to the Montana State athletics staff, the university and the Bozeman community.

AREAS FOR ENHANCEMENT

1. The athletics department should re-examine its strategies for achieving success within the NCAA Division I Academic Performance Program (APP), including:

a. Continued focus on meeting the needs of student-athletes identified as "academically at-risk."

b. Provide ongoing education related to the APP, contemporaneous and historic penalties, the NCAA Division I Academic Progress Rate (APR) and the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) to coaches, student-athletes and administrators.
c. Additional efforts should be implemented for the purpose of ensuring proper management of issues related to the APP. This includes review of policies related to provision of posteligibility athletics scholarships, monitoring academic performance of student-athletes who have exhausted eligibility and the use of athletics scholarships that are available in late summer or during the academic year:

d. The review of the academic credentials of prospective student-athletes should be enhanced for the purpose of increasing the likelihood that prospective student-athletes will enjoy academic success at Montana State and contribute positively to achieving academic goals of the university and the NCAA.

2. Although the leadership provided by university and athletics department administrators (i.e., president, vice president, faculty athletics representative, athletics director) also are listed as a strength the university possesses, there is a need for key leaders to seek additional opportunities to communicate academic, conduct and competitive performance expectations. It is recommended that campus leaders develop innovative communication strategies that result in more frequent in-person dialogue regarding expectations. Audiences for these messages include student-athletes, coaches, the university community, athletics boosters, alumni and fans. Delivery of the messages should occur in both large and small groups. The university is encouraged to seek out strategies from other institutions of higher learning and from NCAA education services.

3. A key to any communication strategy is establishing, communicating and reinforcing clear performance expectations. Many staff members are able to articulate the messages communicated by the university’s president and athletics director; however, these messages are not remembered nor repeated by all athletics department staff. The following recommendations are intended to assist in furthering the understanding of expectations for the athletics program, its coaches, student-athletes and administrators:

a. The university president has often articulated the following four priorities for the athletics program:

   (1) Focus on the student;

   (2) Follow the rules;

   (3) Be fiscally responsible; and

   (4) Be competitive.
The president’s priorities for intercollegiate athletics should be emphasized and provided in writing to all athletics department staff members. Distribution and communication of these priorities also should be made to student-athletes, prospective student-athletes; faculty and other university staff and other key constituent groups (e.g., governing board, media).

b. Academic expectations for the entire athletics program, for each sport and for each coach should be placed in writing and communicated to appropriate personnel.

c. Expectations should be presented clearly in the student-athlete handbook, which should be revised to efficiently present essential information that will be reviewed with and used by student-athletes.

4. The athletics department has both an opportunity and a need to foster strong positive relationships with the university’s faculty and administrative offices. Strategies that might be implemented for the purpose of building bridges include:

a. Implementation of a consistent advising structure, which was mentioned by several individuals as both an ongoing and needed enhancement.

b. Developing opportunities for coaches and student-athletes to interact with faculty and other university staff members outside of the classroom and away from the playing surface (e.g., guest coach, invitations to pregame events, and recognition of a faculty member at selected athletic contests).

c. Emphasis on developing and supporting proper communication and encouraging development of positive relationships between athletics department staff and faculty members. While there is an obvious need to avoid inappropriate requests and the application of academically related pressure on faculty members (and proper procedures should be in place to address this issue), the benefits of a positive relationship between coaches and faculty cannot be overlooked.

d. Enhancing advance institutional review of prerequisites completed by transfer student-athletes, which is a need identified by several individuals due to the relatively limited academic options available for those who fail to complete the necessary prerequisites prior to enrolling at Montana State.

e. Better use and coordination of efforts with university offices and resources, including the admissions office, the office of student activities and the diversity awareness office.
5. The football program must be better integrated into the athletics department and university as a whole. Observations related to the need for integration include:

a. The location of the football offices results in isolation from the rest of the athletics department, which limits interaction of the football staff and student-athletes with athletics department administrators and student-athletes and coaches from other sports. Similarly, the football offices are isolated from the rest of campus which, again, limits opportunities for interaction.

b. The current approach to recruiting football student-athletes effectively eliminates involvement of other personnel (e.g., athletics administrators, university administrators, faculty) within the recruiting process. While coaches may desire the ability to make recruiting decisions with limited oversight, this approach assigns coaching staff members a disproportionately high level of responsibility for recruited student-athletes. The university should implement a shared responsibility for recruiting, which involves more than just the football coaching staff in interaction, communication and evaluation of the prospective student-athletes who are invited to attend the university and participate in football.

c. The APR of the football program is significantly below the level required to avoid application of contemporaneous and historical penalties. It is imperative that steps be taken to increase the academic performance of football student-athletes under the various NCAA measurements. Identified football student-athletes must be included in the academically at-risk program as recommended by athletics department academic support administrators. Coaches may have input as to which student-athletes are to participate but the final decision should be made by athletics administrators.

d. While transfer student-athletes may improve the football program’s competitive status, over-reliance on transfers creates an ever-increasing need to recruit based on immediate needs for athletics talent. At Montana State, it appears the result has been prioritizing the team’s competitive needs without full consideration of the academic impact associated with large numbers of transfer student-athletes. As a result, the team’s APR and GSR have suffered, which ultimately has resulted in the imposition of contemporaneous-scholarship penalties and the potential for greater sanctions to be applied through the NCAA’s historical-penalty structure. Further analysis of the full impact of transfers on the football program’s competitive status and academic performance should occur, with the idea of identifying the proper balance between the team’s competitive and academic needs.
6. The university should re-examine existing strategies associated with communication and messaging of the athletics department mission and values. A goal of this examination is creation of a comprehensive outreach strategy that will:

a. Work with intent to better integrate the various sports and administrative offices of athletics into the overall department and the department into the university. Such a strategy should eliminate any current disintegration and prevent additional disintegration from developing within the athletics department.

b. Implement strategic and continuous efforts to communicate with the campus and community on athletics department successes and initiatives.

c. Revise the current format of student-athlete meetings to more effectively deliver messages to both large and small groups on a regular basis.

d. Create a "One Team" mentality (i.e., a message that we are all part of "One Team" that supports athletics) that will coordinate outreach efforts and produce multi-layered strategy involving:

   (1) Each sport team;

   (2) All campus departments;

   (3) Alumni, fans and boosters; and

   (4) The greater Bozeman community

7. The university and athletics department must recognize and work together to address challenges faced by ethnic minorities who leave their urban background to attend Montana State. The cultural and social differences in Bozeman present minority student-athletes with a unique set of challenges, which are articulated in different manners by the coaches of several sports. In order to foster positive transition of ethnic minorities into the Montana State and Bozeman community, it may be helpful to implement a mentoring program with the specific goal of introducing minority students to leaders with similar backgrounds who can serve as mentors and role models during the student-athletes' enrollment at Montana State. Obviously, such a mentoring program must operate within NCAA, conference and institutional guidelines, yet there appears to be an opportunity to foster interaction, personal growth and long term success through implementation of such a program. Implementation of such a program for all minority students would alleviate many concerns related to NCAA rules.
8. There is a need to enhance support provided to students-athletes, which includes a focus on three primary areas:

a. Academic.

b. Social.

c. Life skills.

Enhancement of this area was universally mentioned by coaching staff members as a key need at Montana State and the following recommendations are intended to strengthen existing efforts to meet the unique needs of student-athletes:

a. Expansion and/or creation of a physical facility that clearly communicates the importance of student-athlete academic success and provides an environment that will foster student-athlete academic success.

b. Addition of staff to the student-athlete support area. Several individuals praised the current academic support staff but also mentioned they are overworked and serve primarily to monitor student-athlete academic eligibility. Additional staff should be expected to enhance the provision of academic, social and life skills support to student-athletes.

c. Minority student-athletes would benefit greatly from the implementation of a mentoring program, as mentioned above, which would ideally involve former student-athletes, minority faculty or community members.

d. Implementation of a program that raises awareness of various social issues, including gender violence, alcohol abuse and conflict avoidance and resolution. Examples of these types of programs are Northeastern University’s Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Program and Adelphi University’s Sports Leadership Institute. The intent of this program would be to provide administrators, coaches and student-athletes with role playing and awareness raising training in a structured program under the leadership of trained facilitators.

9. The current approach to recruiting, which includes an unintentional review of prospective student-athletes academic credentials and relies primarily on interaction between prospective student-athletes and coaches, provides only limited opportunities for involving other university personnel in the recruiting process. In many cases, coaches bear exclusive responsibility for individuals recruited into sport programs. When problems arise, it
is reasonable to view coaches as primarily responsible for individuals who fail to meet
academic, social or conduct expectations. However, the exposure is not limited to
coaches, since responsibility for problems that may arise, undoubtedly, extends to athlet-
ics and university administrators, and to the athletics department and university as a
whole. As a result, there exists the need to develop and implement a collaborative proc-
ess for reviewing the prospective student-athletes.

In attempting to create a shared approach to recruiting, a strategy should be developed
that fosters recruiting-visit interaction between campus leaders and prospective student-
athletes. In addition, this strategy should include an approval process that is completed
prior to approving an official recruiting visit or a written offer of athletics financial aid.
This approval process should take into account the academic and social preparation of
each prospective student-athlete.

There are many prospective student-athletes who represent the ideals and priorities of
Montana State and who require little or no review. However, a process should be estab-
lished that establishes standards that result in varying levels of review by appropriate ad-
ministrators. In addition, defined outcomes of the review process should be established,
which may range from an approval of an official visit or offer of athletics aid to requiring
the cessation of recruitment.

CLOSING

Montana State, as any other institution of high learning, has unique strengths and unique areas of
concern. This review has demonstrated that the athletics department and university is successful
in many areas and has identified areas for enhancement and improvement. As a result of this re-
view, it is expected that the university and athletics leadership will work with various athletics
department administrators and other institutional personnel to continue to develop, implement
and refine policies and procedures designed to strengthen Montana State’s athletics program.