

Report: Discussion Group on Intercollegiate Athletics

Report of the Intercollegiate Athletics Discussion Group Introduction

The University of Mary Washington intercollegiate athletics program is committed to providing students an opportunity to pursue athletic excellence in an environment that is consistent with and supportive of the mission of the university and the Office of Student Life. The program, 23 varsity teams, is structured to promote the development of the whole student with emphasis on the academic achievement, physical & emotional well-being and sound social development of all student-athletes. The program functions in concert with the goals and objectives of UMW, Student Life and those stated in the NCAA Division III philosophy including: (1) placing special importance on the impact of athletics on the participants rather than on the spectators and greater emphasis on the internal constituency (students, faculty and staff) than on the general public and its entertainment needs; (2) encouraging participation by maximizing the number and variety of athletics opportunities; (3) providing equitable athletics opportunities for males and females and give equal emphasis to men's and women's sports and (4) supporting student-athletes in their efforts to reach high levels of athletic performance, which may include opportunities for participation in national championships, by providing all teams with adequate facilities, competent coaching and appropriate competitive opportunities. The program also provides multiple experience-based learning opportunities that will enable student-athletes to develop, learn and improve; (1) leadership skills, (2) interpersonal skills and (3) wellness-related skills.

The UMW athletic program, beyond its direct impact on student-athletes, also significantly and positively impacts the university in six key areas.

1. Athletics Supports Recruitment and Retention

There is a very specific set of academic expectations among the teams at the University that requires regular study hall attendance for some and grade monitoring for all – two activities that work for the retention of student athletes. In a NCAA study among five Division III schools, results cited an increase in time spent on academic activities and in academic activities among student athletes in five schools. The study was, in part, findings from a project to study social norms intervention campaigns for student athletes. Student athletes who have been members of the UMW Intercollegiate Athletics Advisory Committee (IAAC) committee have often remarked that their academic performance is enhanced when they are in season because efficient time management requires effective use of time mandates for both academics and athletics.

UMW has a unique relationship between the Admissions and Athletic departments. All coaches prepare a “gold sheet” for recruits they have contacted, listing achievements in specific admissions criteria, and also highlighting athletic accomplishments. While no admissions preference is given to potential student athletes, the admissions pool is more diverse, particularly

for increasing the male population. The relationship between the two departments provided additional background information for admissions to review in the student selection process.

2. Athletics and the Culture and Student Life of UMW

In the mid-seventies the university began development of a comprehensive athletic program, including expansion of an intercollegiate program at the Division III level. The program grew steadily thereafter, achieving extraordinary success while remaining consistent with the liberal arts emphasis of the institution. Throughout, the UMW program gave real meaning to the term “student athlete.”

The program has been important for a number of reasons, notably including its role in recruitment of high-quality students, many of whom would doubtlessly reject attendance at a university that did not offer an adequate sports program. Moreover, it is an integral part of the extracurricular environment, providing attractive options on a campus that has long been criticized as a place where there is “nothing to do.”

Students participate fairly extensively in the intercollegiate program, and those who do are certainly enthusiastic about the sports in which they compete. To them, the experience is surely an important aspect of the culture of the university. Sports clearly constitute an important aspect of the Mary Washington experience and the existence, or expansion, of such a program is consistent with high academic standards and the overall mission of the university.

3. Athletics Promotes Student Achievement

Athletics supports student achievement in a variety of direct and indirect ways. Athletes need to have well honed time management skills in order to complete their team and academic tasks. They frequently report having better academic success during semesters when they are active in sports because they must use their time wisely in order to be successful. Athletes typically must work hard to be competitive in their sport, which translates into a strong work ethic. Their coaches help them establish goals for success on the playing field, and also work with them to do the same for academic achievement.

Sports require team work for optimal success, and this spills over into academics. Athletes support the academic achievement of other team members through teaching study skills, tutoring in specific subject areas, leading team study-halls, and mentoring first-year students, all of which fosters becoming part of a learning community. Recognition of achievement, both on and off the field, is a great reward for student athletes, reinforcing the habits of hard work and perseverance.

4. Athletics enhances visibility and name recognition of the University

Most high school young athletes who plan to continue sports at the college/university level read or peruse the sports page of their local/state newspaper. This gives them the opportunity to see the results of contests between local/ state and interstate college teams and may pique their interest to investigate the opportunity to participate at the collegiate level. The general public’s

perusal of the sports page gives them the opportunity to see the UMW name, win or lose, if UMW is reported by their local or state newspaper.

5. Athletics Enhances the UMW Alumni Relationship

The Homecoming festivities at the Battleground, alumni day activities, the retiring of jerseys from standout athletes, the hanging of recognition banners, the existence of the Hall of Fame and the banquet, the displaying of athlete awards in Goolrick Hall, plus the banners and whiteboards with All-Americans in the gym, at the outdoor fields and in the tennis center all help with alumni relationships. Student athletes forge relationships with teammates, coaches and the program that continue after graduation and some coaches maintain this connection with information letters and/or alumni games held on campus. Except for their academic work, participation in the athletic program is often the most significant and memorable activity that student-athletes experience at UMW.

6. Athletics supports fundraising efforts

For many colleges and universities, a robust athletic program serves as the “front porch” of the university, i.e. sporting events can and do provide a venue for any university constituent (current students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni and non-alumni supporters) to gather, reconnect with and strengthen their affinity for the school, learn new things about the institution, and welcome newcomers into the fold—all of which can lead to increased financial support. In fact, the athletic program can be one of the best ways a university can garner support from people with no formal connection to the institution, and countless Mary Washington alumni report their participation in a varsity sport as the defining quality of their Mary Washington experience. Those alumni are telling us they would likely support athletics if we educated them about how to do it and asked them to support their team.

The academic reputation of other D-III institutions such as Williams, Kenyon, Bowdoin, Washington University of St. Louis, and closer to home, Washington and Lee, combined with the success of their athletic programs has made for a powerful combination which has resulted in extraordinary financial support from alumni and friends, which, in turn, continues to foster academic and athletic excellence. How athletics can support UMW fundraising is obvious and supports the case for why a robust athletics program is good for UMW in general.

10 Year General Intercollegiate Athletic Goals

Consistent with the goal of UMW becoming the preeminent state supported liberal arts and sciences university in the United States, the intercollegiate athletic program will seek to regain state, regional and national prominence in NCAA Division III competition. Resources will be made available to address significant voids in personnel positions and facilities renovation and construction. UMW will develop a strategic plan for athletic fundraising spearheaded by a person in our Development Office whose major responsibility will be in that area.