

Academics top list for UWO athletes

By Todd Devlin, Special to The Londoner

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For the 800 or so student-athletes that don the purple and white of the Western Mustangs on a varsity sports team, their athletic endeavours make up a large part of their overall university experience.

But, alas, the 'student' in student-athlete comes first for a reason.

Academics should always take priority over athletic pursuits, and that's something the university's athletic department has taken steps to ensure when it comes to their athletes.

To that end, the department has unveiled a new initiative this year called the 'Academic Success Program', which is designed to assist student-athletes in the transition to university life and, most importantly, to foster success both on the field and in the classroom.

The initiative was spearheaded by Western's athletic director, Therese Quigley, who served in a similar capacity at McMaster University for 18 years. The program's administrator, meanwhile, is Bonnie Cooper, a varsity sport coordinator.

"McMaster has a similar program there," said Cooper, who herself was a varsity athlete at Western in the 90's. "Therese kind of laid out the idea to start something here."

To start, a research study was conducted on what other schools' athletic departments – including those at U.S. institutions – offered to get a better idea of a structure for a program at Western.

"Then we brought coaches and academic counsellors in and had a roundtable to decide exactly what we wanted to offer in the program," Cooper said. "That's something the coaches thought was valuable. They were able to pick out the seminars they wanted."

Those seminars, covering topics like time management, research skills, learning from lectures, essay writing, and test preparation, are provided by the Student Development Centre at Western, a multi-disciplinary service that offers a variety of learning programs to students, as well as psychological and career counselling.

There are six seminars in all, and they're mandatory for all first-year student-athletes.

"It's been really positive," Cooper said of the program to date. "A lot of them [first-year athletes] are nervous about managing the time commitment of sport and the workload of school and just generally the transition from high school to university."

Natascha Wesch has seen that firsthand. The head coach of Western's women's rugby team has witnessed countless first-year students struggle to balance the demands of academics and athletics in their first foray into university. For that reason, Wesch was behind the academic success program from day one. In fact, she'll be sending her entire team to the seminars.

“I felt that they needed some support,” she said. “Any first-year student is going to have a hard time making a transition. But athletes have extra time commitments, and we want to make sure they succeed.”

Aside from the useful seminars, Wesch will also be enrolling her players in the ‘study hall’ component of the program, where student-athletes will get the opportunity to gather at a quiet place to do schoolwork and/or prepare for tests. Across all varsity teams, first-year athletes are required to attend twice a week for a total of four hours.

The early feedback Wesch has received from her players has been positive. One such player who has already reaped some benefits from the program is London native Meaghann Buitinga, a first-year engineering student.

“I’ve gone to four [seminars] so far, and they’ve been pretty helpful,” Buitinga said.

In particular, the Medway high school graduate benefited most from the seminar on test preparation, where she took away tips and tools for better studying strategies.

“Most of our exams are multiple choice,” she said, noting that the format is a big change from high school. “It’s helpful to know how to study.”

Anything that can save her time and improve her academic efficiency is something Buitinga will accept with open arms. After all, in any given week, her team is on the field for practices Monday, Wednesday and Friday, has weight training on Tuesday, a team dinner on Thursday, a game Saturday, and a video session on Sunday.

“I have a lot of stuff on my plate,” Buitinga said. “Everything is different [at university]. It’s a big change from high school. I moved away from home, I’m meeting a whole bunch of new people. I’m really busy, and it’s been a challenge.”

Helping their student-athletes tackle those challenges successfully is exactly what Western’s athletics department hopes its new academic success program will help achieve.

But besides that, they’re also hoping the program will serve as a recruiting tool. It seems like a natural outcome for Cooper.

“What student or parent wouldn’t be more reassured knowing that a program like this is offered?” she said.