

ABQJournal Sports » UNM Goes Beyond Academic Advice

i

3 Votes

If you're a Lobo athlete and can't get your degree, you've either messed up badly or you just don't care.

Part of it's mandated. If you're going to compete, you have to stay eligible.

But some of it is personal — a mission accepted by a former Indiana State football player and education major.

Henry Villegas took over UNM's academic advisement program four years ago with a directive from athletic director Paul Krebs to take it beyond scheduling classes and tutors.

Villegas relished the opportunity. He knew the culture of college sports, knew how coaches operated, knew what it took to be a student and an athlete.

As he compiled academic information on UNM's athletes, a couple of themes emerged.

First, a number of athletes had learning disabilities.

Second, a lot of them had issues. Personal issues. Stress issues. Issues beyond classrooms and fields.

"Students in general are coming to college with a lot more baggage," Villegas says.

So UNM hired a learning specialist and a clinical psychologist and made them part of the academic advisement team.

A three-tier approach was devised: Transition in, transition through, transition out.

Information is gathered on Lobos before they step into their first UNM classroom.

Surveys are sent to parents. Information is sought from their high school coaches and counselors. If it seems a kid has a learning disability, he will be tested. If the information suggests she's a sharp kid, but needs a little push, it gets noted.

After surviving an accreditation process, a course was added to the UNM curriculum. Freshman 101. It is taught by main campus teachers — complete with papers and quizzes.

They are taught nutrition, life skills, drug and alcohol education, anger management, etc.

“Instead of just bringing them here and say, ‘This is college, good luck, hope you guys make it,’” Villegas says, “we want to help them make that transition.”

The advisement center takes up a whole second floor on a UNM south campus building across from the Pit. There’s a computer lab amid the various office spaces and study rooms. The average athlete will spend five to 10 hours a week there during the school year.

Villegas has five academic advisers and two fulltime interns to go with the psychologist and learning specialist for about 450 athletes.

The tutors are the same ones used by the main campus. They are no longer hired by the athletic department, but they are schooled in NCAA rules.

But the support goes beyond the center’s walls.

UNM partners with the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce to couple athletes with members of the business community who serve as mentors.

The Lobo Club is part of another program that brings back former Lobos to talk to current Lobos. If ex-UNM standout Kelvin Scarborough wants to warn current players about the dangers of alcohol and drugs, this is the program that should welcome him.

This year, UNM is joining the Bernalillo County substance abuse department in bringing in APD and MADD for a special presentation.

A class for senior athletes has been devised. It teaches them about finances, how to write a résumé, how to network, how to apply to graduate school.

“A lot of times,” Villegas says, “their identity has been as student athletes. Now they’re no longer student-athletes. In most cases, they’re not going to go pro. The ones that do, that’s great. But the ones that don’t have to transition into regular lives.”

UNM athletes’ grade point averages are up. The academic progress numbers demanded by the NCAA are up. Graduation rates are up.

And if all of this seems like special treatment, so be it.

“If we’re going to make these expectations and demands of these students,” Villegas says, “they deserve support. ... When they’re out there, traveling across the country, they are representing UNM. They take great pride in that.”

And, for better or worse, they continue to do so after their playing days are done. If a guy becomes a U.S. senator, he still gets mentioned as a former Lobo. If a guy gets arrested, you can figure the label “ex-Lobo” will be included in any media report.

Many face stress most college kids never do.

“Can you imagine,” Villegas says, “you’re an 18-year-old kid and there’s people out there

yelling and screaming at you for every little mistake you make?”

And if they don't make their grades, athletes lose eligibility. It's added pressure, but Villegas says pressure is OK.

“If there's going to be growth,” Villegas says, “and that's our goal, there has to be some type of test, there has to be some kind of pressure. At the same time, it's important we support those students as they go through that.”

All this doesn't guarantee Lobos won't flunk or won't get busted after a wild night downtown. They will still tug on an unsuspecting ponytail or draw the ire of a flight attendant.

Whether UNM should have athletics is another debate. If a UNM student feels he's not getting the academic support an athlete gets, he should demand change from the university. Bemoaning athletics does no good.

“If you look at UNM athletics,” Villegas says, “we generate about 85 percent of our budget, and so, in terms of our resources, they're putting them into the right things.

“I'm glad the money is going here. It's a special population that has unique needs.”
— This article appeared on page B1 of the Albuquerque Journal

Photo Credit – dean hanson/journal

Cutline – From left, UNM assistant athletic director Henry Villegas heads a team of academic advisers that includes Nicole Brody, Katie Scanlon, psychologist Stephanie Mahal and learning specialist Chris Baca. Villegas has been with UNM four years and has taken the program beyond helping athletes with schedules and tutors.
