

45. Amber Burdge: The “Student” Side of Student-Athletes

Tonya Oaks Smith

Hey y'all. Welcome to Beyond 1894. It's Louisiana Tech university's official podcast. We are joined today by Dr. Amber Burdge, who is our Associate Athletic Director for student athletes Success Services. That's a mouthful, and she told me it was SASS. So Thanks, Amber, for joining us today. And I purposefully stick the doctor in there because I'm so proud of you you not too long ago, finished your EdD program says, Tell us about that.

Amber Burdge

It was an exercise in discipline. You know, I started on my EDD after I had been here about a year was really focused on elevating what it is that we do within athletics. A lot of the folks in our field have started to focus a little more on research, because there are folks outside of athletics who are doing research within athletics, and they don't necessarily have that boots on the ground experience. So it's very important that those of us who do have the boots on the ground experience, do that research, and put that research out from our lens to really give folks a better idea of what it is like to be inside of athletics.

Tonya Oaks Smith

So I think I jumped ahead a little bit, though, and we probably should have talked about what exactly you're responsible for in Louisiana Tech athletics. Because, you know, we've, we've talked about this before, a student athlete is a unique human being, and so least and you're responsible for, for helping them stay eligible. And so explain that to our listeners. Yeah.

Amber Burdge

So we're involved in the recruiting process. And most frequently, we talk to parents during the recruiting process, because when we ask the prospective student athletes, if they have any questions, they sometimes stare at you blankly. But the parents always have a list of questions. So we talk about the support that we provide, once the student athlete gets there. That's when we're providing that support. When they walk into our facility, always say this is where the magic happens. But you know, we are in our office responsible for the academic support. So we're providing that dual advising system, where they have an academic advisor on campus, but then they also have us in athletics, who are looking over their degree plan to ensure that they're taking the appropriate classes for the time of the year. So are they in season? Are they out of season? Are they going to meet their benchmarks for the NCAA continuing eligibility requirements. And that's kind of just the tip of the iceberg of what we do. We provide career development services, we provide major selection assistance, you know, we we partner with our Career Center here on campus for some of those pieces. But we're also helping our student athletes identify the major that they're interested in studying. We help them find tutor services, but we also have tutoring services available through our system. So the other piece of what we do is student athlete development, right. And the student athlete development is really the holistic piece of our

program that can be programming from how to change a flat tire, how to be mindful of safety when you're out in the world, all the way to developing a resume an elevator pitch, mock interviews. Most recently, the NFL education piece has fallen on me and that has been very invigorating. I have thoroughly enjoyed jumping into that world with both feet. Because when you look at it realistically, that translates into the world of work. Adidas has stepped out and said that they are going to partner with all of the Adidas schools and give those student athletes an opportunity to be a brand ambassador. One of the pieces that I'm very grateful for Adidas for doing is requiring a resume in order to be one of their brand ambassadors. That's excellent for me. That helps us in To emphasize the importance of a student athlete having a resume, before they ever even get to a point where they're being invited to career fairs on our campus. So even the rest of the NIHL education, which is name, image and likeness, which, as of July 21, our student athletes can monetize their name, image and likeness. They're developing an elevator pitch, they're going through those mock interviews, everything that we're doing for professional development, career development plays into that in i l education that our student athletes are actually excited about now, when in the past, we're trying to find ways to get them excited about the career development programming that we put on. So in a nutshell, we are everything to some student athletes and to other student athletes, we are someone to look over their schedule and make sure that it's not going to conflict with the time of season that they're in.

Tonya Oaks Smith

So that's an you and I have talked in the past. Because I came to Louisiana Tech, a division one school from a division two school, which the the approach to student athletes is very different in those two divisions. And one of the one of the steadfast things, is the fact that our student athletes have an immense amount of responsibility in a lot of ways. They not only have they have to stay in school, they can't, they can't skips class, they have to make grades, they have to make practice. So tell us about the life of a student athlete and perceptions are not always accurate sometimes. So let's talk about that.

Amber Burdge

salutely. And I think that's, that's a very accurate statement to say that, you know, perception is not necessarily reality, all the time. Because when you're at the division one level, a lot of the student athletes who come in, folks think about men's basketball, football, and they think about professional athletics. Not to say that the student athletes are not also thinking about a future in professional athletics. But you see, during March Madness, the NCAA commercials that say that, you know, there's so many student athletes, and only a fraction of them are going to go on and play professional athletics. You know, on one hand, we want to recruit those student athletes who have professional aspirations, that means they're hungry for the game, they are a student of the game. So we do want to bring student athletes to this campus who are at the highest level of competition in their sport. So that's one level of what it means to be a division one student athlete. But the other side to that is, there's an awful lot of scrutiny that comes along with it. You know, when we have a student athlete that comes into our office, I always talk with staff about eliminating the plan B talk. Imagine what it's like, if you were to tell someone that you wanted to become a business owner. And the first thing that they say to you is, Well, you better graduate college because what if you don't become that business owner or you're an unsuccessful business owner, you need something to fall back on. The first thing that comes to their mind is this person who I'm speaking with, does not believe in me, and doesn't believe in my dream. So we talk to our student athletes about capitalizing on their dream. So what is how can they utilize their

experience here at Louisiana Tech, to monetize even greater their professional athletic experience? That way, if they don't make it to the professional level, then look at all of these skills that they've picked up while they've been here. We've taught them the mock interview skills, so they can go out and interview for a position. We've taught them the elevator pitch, maybe they do want to be an If they want to have a clothing line, they want to start their own business, you know, whatever it is that they might want to do. Now they have the basics to go and and do that, right. But Louisiana Tech is also incredibly unique in our structure in that we are the quarter calendar semester, our institution. And when, when you think about division one athletics, all of the most of the other division one schools are semester school. So they're doing the exact same thing that we're doing in 10 weeks, in 16 weeks. And when you think about the the athletes week, during season, they have their 20 hour week, is it really 20 hours if you're a student of the game? No, you're in the gym, you're putting up extra shots, you're asking your coach, if you can watch film with them. So they can help you break down the things that you need to change through practice. The exact same way that you need to practice math to be successful. When we're doing this in 10 weeks, it's tough. Our student athletes are physically in the classroom for a greater number of hours per week. And then they are spending the exact same amount of practice time. But oh, by the way out on that homework. And don't forget, I already discussed that these student athletes are in asking their coach for extra reps if they want to get better. So Louisiana Tech makes it a little more challenging to be a successful division one student athlete, because we say, hey, there's a spotlight on you, you have to go to class, you have to meet the NCAA continuing eligibility benchmarks. But now we're going to ask you to take this class, that your counterparts, your peers, are taking in 16 weeks, in 10 weeks time.

Tonya Oaks Smith

And we're selective admissions. Yeah, so So what that implies is, is that our students are going to have a more robust experience anyway, in the classroom. So it does, that figures into it as well, I'm sure, they're really

Amber Burdge

the students that are on this campus. The students that are on this campus are bright, so are our student athletes. And when you look at the fact that we are selective admissions, that means there's competition in the classroom. And our student athletes thrive in a competitive world, let's just be realistic. They love competition, or they wouldn't be a division one student athlete. But too often through social promotion, or through No Child Left Behind. They've been taught to the test. And they're not prepared to do the work at the level that is expected of them when they walk on this campus. Be that a student, or be that a student athlete, because that's not just a student athlete experience. Maura often than not, what we find, though, is I have a couple of different categories of student athletes. I have the student athlete who has always excelled in the classroom, they've never been challenged, and they come to college. And they find that first class that challenges them, and they realize I didn't know how to study. So we have to backtrack and learn how to read a chapter of a book, How to really conceptualize the information that they're getting in a classroom. Then you also have those student athletes who have been socially promoted, and they've been told you better be really good at your sport, because you're not very intelligent, you're not going to make it in school. Let me tell you, sports is not an easy thing to understand. If you can understand your playbook in any one of our sports, you can do the work on a college campus. You just may not have the confidence built in you that you need to be

successful in the classroom. And so we do start with some what we call small successes. We celebrate the small successes for those student athletes who have been consistently told that They need to excel in athletics because they don't have another route to, quote, make it in the world. Because if they got here, they got into a selective admissions institution, they can make it. So we have to find different routes to build that confidence. And it's, that's what's rewarding in our field to watch the student athlete who realizes that they just conceptualized the information that they picked up in a lecture to send me a screenshot of an exam where they made an 88. And they've been in for hours, six hours of tutoring every week preparing for that exam. That's celebration time, we need to celebrate that. And our coaches have done an excellent job of making sure that they take those pieces of information. And they bring that into the sport that they celebrate that in the locker room as well.

Tonya Oaks Smith

That's awesome. And I know that one of the wonderful things that we do, too, is have special a stole ceremony for our student athletes. And it it aligns with many of our student organizations that have stole ceremonies, when they have graduates come up. I know that special to our student athletes, I know it's special to our administrators who work with those sports. Tell us a little bit about you know, before we started recording, you were talking about two of your teams that you're really proud of that that you're the service sport administrator for those for those two teams.

Amber Burdge

I'm their Academic Advisor. Okay,

Tonya Oaks Smith

so you've got softball, and you've got track and fields. Both of those teams are competing. postseason. Correct right now.

Amber Burdge

Yes, they're in Conference USA championships.

Tonya Oaks Smith

Cool. So tell us, tell us about, you know, the the road to get to that point,

Amber Burdge

I think resilient would be a nice word to describe both of those programs, student athletes, they had to show a great deal of resiliency, they had to be disciplined, in order to get to our conference tournament. And none of them feel like conference tournament is the end, because that's never the goal. You want to go beyond Conference USA tournament, you want to go to a regional, and that's what we're aiming toward all the time. So these student athletes have managed to balance athletics, along with exceptional academic performance. Because, you know, when I break down all of the majors for our student athletes, just the number of engineering student athletes, biology, student athletes, it's outstanding to see that we have so many student athletes in really the our highest concentration is in the College of Business. So that's not an easy program to get through. So our student athletes are really excelling in the classroom. And they're excelling on their field of competition. But I have to send out travel notices. And this time of the year for those sports that travel notice says something along the

lines of due to the unpredictable nature of postseason play. You know, we don't know how long they're going to be at a tournament. I can't tell you, I hope softball is having to reschedule some finals. Because I would hope that we're continuing on past our conference tournament. So sometimes that's a challenge for our faculty because I'm asking a great deal of them. I understand. I'm a faculty. I'm an adjunct faculty member. I know what it's like to have to develop an alternative exam for someone who's going to miss your final. So I realize what I'm asking and what our student athletes are asking our faculty to do. But I think it's a nice trade off, because our student athletes are getting to represent our institution many times on a national level. And that's big time for us.

Tonya Oaks Smith

So tell us I, it sounds like you want to say thanks to those professors, the faculty members, the deans, the associate Dean's, who help our student athletes out and who helped them achieve those classroom goals while there were working to achieve the on field goals.

Amber Burdge

Oh my goodness, we have so many faculty members who, what I call bend over backwards or put themselves in a pretzel to, you know, in engineering that's to break the block. Because a student I specially a freshman student athlete does not want to miss practice. That's their first impression on the coach, when they get here. They don't want to be the one who's coming to practice late or leaving practice early to get to a class, especially when there's another section available, even if it's not in for engineering their block, you know, but even more so we have faculty members who, yes, create alternative exams, who trust in me to proctor an exam, under their requirements. I appreciate that faith, I think more than anything else, because that says a lot to me that they believe that I'm going to uphold the integrity that they would have in the classroom, in our setting to be able to proctor an exam to allow a student athlete to be on the road and compete. And then to make up that exam. That proctoring those exams is just one of the services that I feel like it's great that I offer because that alleviates some of the inconvenience that because it is an inconvenience, that we're asking of our faculty when a student athlete is is traveling, because the reality is it's not all confetti and balloons on the road. Our student athletes time when they are traveling and competing, is booked from the time that they get on the bus or the plane to the time that they arrived back in Ruston. So, no, we hope that they don't have to do work while they're on the road. Best case scenario, they finish it before they leave. That's not always the case. So yeah, I'm grateful that they would allow me to help them by proctoring an exam when the student athletes return.

Tonya Oaks Smith

So tell us, I know that that we've been talking with the athletics department about a new student athletes Success Center. So tell us why that's exciting. Because it's exciting to me. It's exciting to have something so closely affiliated with an athletic forum that is focused on the academic side to it's a partnership, it feels like so tell us about that.

Amber Burdge

Yeah, that is exciting. We're we're counting down the number of days until we break ground. But it's exciting because right now, the the space that we're in is an open floor concept. And I mentioned that we have our tutors, we also have mentors that are working with our student athletes. And in that open

floor concept. When a tutor and a student athlete are talking about chemistry about math, the person beside them may be talking about English literature, and it can be very distracting. So one of the concepts that we will have in the new space is private tutor rooms. So our student athlete and the tutor will be able to go into a room, close the door with a large window. Because we do make sure that they're studying while they're in there. You know, and actually have a discussion about the subject that they're tutoring without the distraction of hearing the next tutor right beside them. Right. So that's one of the things that's going to be really exciting. Another piece that's going to be exciting is that first floor, because right now all of our student athlete development programming is in the Wagner room. We'll be able to have programming in that new space, that I hope we are able to keep the small kitchen area in there. Because when you ask student athletes what will get you to come to programming, it's two things, T shirts and food. So we would be able to provide food for more of our programs that we're doing for student athlete development. But then we have a different space available for some of the celebration, some of the celebration that we're able to do with the stole ceremony with, you know, just recognizing academic excellence for our student athletes. And it's kind of exciting that we're also going to be able to use that that space during game days for alumni, student athletes, when we had the spring game, and I've been here for seven and a half years, which means I've seen a few graduating classes come through, it was great to see some of those student athletes come back and tell me more about what it is that they're doing in the world of work. And we've been able to incorporate that in some of our student athlete development programming. And we just finished up with an alumni career panel, where alumni student athletes have been able to talk to our current student athletes about how their athletic experience transitioned into really skills in the world of work, and how that benefited them. So that space will be something that we're going to utilize and we're already dreaming about the the many different things that we're going to be able to do in there. And, and it's just, it's great to be able to give something to the student athletes who are giving so much to this institution.

Tonya Oaks Smith

Well, it sounds like the ideal space, or at least the plan sound like the ideal space, to provide a connection between alums and current. And that mentoring that can develop between the two groups that that that's something that we do, you know, through different colleges, there are mentoring opportunities set up, but it's good that that our student athletes will be able to engage in that too. Well, thanks, Amber, Dr. Burch for joining us today. We will be able to talk more about those wonderful teams and what they're accomplishing. And thanks so much for joining us.

Amber Burdge

Thank you. I'm glad you had me on. I'm happy to be here. Thanks.

Gavin Kelly

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