Defining the Profession

Establishing Professional Standards for Learning Specialists

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Historical Background
The origin of learning specialists is unclear, but we know the position did not originate within student-athlete support services. For decades, learning specialists have been employed by various higher education programs providing assistance to underprepared students and those with learning disabilities. Only during the past several years has there been a noticeable increase in the number of learning specialists hired specifically to support student-athletes.

Growth of the Profession
Since last year’s convention, the learning specialist profession has expanded perhaps more rapidly than in any year prior. The total number of learning specialists increased by 18%, compared to only a 4 – 5% increase among advisors. Considering the remarkable increase in learning specialists across the country, we believe now is the time to define the profession and establish professional standards.

Surveying the Field
Academic support directors recognize the need for learning specialists but are often unclear about what learning specialists do. Using a survey distributed to learning specialists nationwide, we investigated learning specialists’ experiences being evaluated on the job. Among the 53 respondents, 57% reported their supervisor has not directly explained the criteria by which they will be evaluated, and 60% reported they expect their performance will be evaluated at least somewhat according to their students’ grades. Moreover, open-ended responses concerning past performance evaluations revealed the prevalence of generic evaluation tools that learning specialists often perceive as irrelevant to their positions.
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Professional Standards
In our survey, we asked respondents to suggest the criteria by which they believe learning specialists should be evaluated. From their responses, we developed the nine professional standards outlined below. We believe these standards can define the profession and thereby serve as the basis for a learning specialist job description and an effective performance evaluation tool. Even more importantly, they can provide a set of best practices for supporting student-athletes' learning needs.

1. **Assessment**: Professional learning specialists assess individual students’ learning needs to identify potential learning challenges, determine effective educational interventions, and make referrals for further assessment when appropriate.

2. **Intervention**: Professional learning specialists develop and implement effective educational interventions and teach research-based learning strategies in accordance with individual students’ needs.

3. **Student Evaluation**: Professional learning specialists monitor and evaluate individual students’ learning progress and make data-based recommendations for further academic support.

4. **Service Coordination**: Professional learning specialists effectively coordinate learning-related services with external providers in accordance with students’ needs.

5. **Organization**: Professional learning specialists maintain a comprehensive system for documenting and reporting students’ learning needs and progress.

6. **Communication**: Professional learning specialists communicate clearly and consistently with academic counselors, coaches, and other service providers regarding students’ learning needs and progress.

7. **Student Engagement**: Professional learning specialists establish and maintain high expectations for students while also providing the encouragement and constructive feedback students need to feel supported.

8. **Program Evaluation**: Professional learning specialists develop measures for evaluating their learning program’s overall effectiveness and demonstrating its value to the broader student-athlete academic support program.

9. **Professional Development**: Professional learning specialists take initiative to learn and improve on the job, by remaining informed about advances in learning sciences and actively participating in professional organizations related to the field.