Liberal Arts lunch with colleagues from Physical Education and Athletics – 1/21/13

Present: Bill Beaney; Martin Beatty; Kelly Bevere; Jeff Brown; Katharine DeLorenzo; Missy Foote; Suzanne Gurland; Bob Hansen; John Illig; Julia Ireland; Peter Kim; Bill Mandigo; Chris McGrory-Klyza; Jamie McKenna; Mike Morgan; Noreen Pecsok; Erin Quinn; Sarah Raunecker; Bob Ritter; David Saward; Pete Schumer; Bob Smith; Noel Wanner; Nicole Wilkerson

There was broad agreement that a liberal arts education should include some form of physical education (e.g., varsity athletics, intramurals, club sports, P.E. classes). Opinions varied widely, however, on the best way to implement that education. Specifically, opinions were mixed on whether there should be a physical education requirement at all, whether it should be absolute (as it is now) or flexible (such as including PE as a distribution requirement, and making 7 of 9 required), how many credits should be required, and whether independent physical/athletic pursuits (such as running a marathon) should count for PE credit. A variety of factors affected individual opinions on these issues: for example, the experience of having spring-semester seniors in PE classes who are simply squeezing in a requirement before graduation; the variety of past athletic experiences among different subsets of students such as international students; policies at other NESCAC schools, which reportedly do not have a PE requirement. Finally, it was noted that two particular misconceptions sometimes accompany discussions of the PE requirement. First, some on campus might maintain that if there were no PE requirement, then those in PE and Athletics would no longer be considered faculty. However, it was noted that regardless of whether PE courses are required of all students, PE and Athletics faculty would continue to teach them. Second, some might imagine that if there were no PE requirement, the FTE count in PE and Athletics would change substantially. However, the point was made that PE and Athletics faculty are hired as coaches, and teaching PE courses is one among many responsibilities. The FTE count would therefore not change if the PE requirement were to change.

Discussion then turned to the question, “What do athletic faculty wish academic faculty knew?” One theme that emerged is the difference between how students’ attempts to balance academics and athletics looks to academic faculty and how it looks to athletic faculty. Specifically, some academic faculty have the idea that students chronically prioritize athletics over academics, but what athletics faculty see is students’ deep commitment to their academics, and their difficult dilemmas when academic commitments conflict with athletic ones (particularly during times that are supposed to be reserved for athletics). Related to this, the point was made that academics and athletics don’t need to be mutually exclusive. In fact, we could all be helping to model for students how to balance multiple priorities and responsibilities in healthy, sustainable ways. Athletic faculty, particularly in their roles as coaches, focus quite a bit on this kind of “life skill” learning, with respect to things like personal discovery, facing challenges, working as a team, making healthy decisions, and overcoming adversity. In this sense, athletic faculty are part of a broader Student Life initiative, and have been active in bringing their players educational programs on responsible alcohol use, hazing prevention, and other relevant community and social responsibilities. Another key theme to emerge was the sense that increased communication between academic and athletic faculty would be beneficial to everyone. For example, there is a sense that academic faculty have become less supportive of athletics over time, and less likely to pick up the phone to resolve a difficulty directly with a coach, yet it is exactly this kind of informal communication that can prevent future conflicts. Furthermore, it is through these contacts that faculty from various parts of the college learn about one another’s challenges. One example is that the football team practices entirely within the time parameters set out for athletics, and yet never has perfect attendance at practice because there are always conflicts with academics. Most academic faculty do not know or appreciate that. The other benefit of direct faculty-faculty communication is that it eliminates students as conduits for information. Sometimes the way students report things to their academic professors or their coaches is influenced by their (sometimes erroneous) perceptions of the truth.

Finally, there was recognition that academic and athletic faculty share the goal of modeling and achieving balance, and helping student-athletes become able to do so, as well, in healthy and sustainable ways. Athletics and physical education can be one important antidote to unbalanced, over-scheduled lives if we do well at managing the integration of the academic and the athletic, and avoid the pitfalls of over-specialization.