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Supporting student-athletes at Saint Mary's

By Jon Kingdon



Staci Byrne and her husband Bryan at the World Series. Photo provided

ground running and I learned as I went."

The demands put on the athletes are exacerbated by the amount of time they have to invest in training, practice and traveling to games. "Most of their life here is academics and sports so we're working to help them with the scheduling of their classes and making sure that it's fitting in with the missed class policy that the college has," says Byrne. "We are here to be advocates for the athletes to make sure that they can be successful in their sport while maintaining the balance of academics."

The competitive attitude that the athletes bring to their sports carries over to their studies as well, says Byrne: "Most of the athletes are competitive in everything which also carries over to their classes. The individual teams want to have the highest GPA compared against the other teams at Saint Mary's and in putting in their community service hours. They want to win. The WCC conference has a community service award for the number of hours completed by the school which they started three years ago and we won the award in the inaugural year."

There are athletic-academic advisors at a number of the Division I schools whose job is to keep their basketball players eligible for at least one season, knowing they will be using the one-and-done rule to go on and play professional basketball. For the top football players, it's three years that they need to stay eligible before than can declare for the National Football League.

At Saint Mary's and for the entire West Coast Conference, this is nothing like their policy, says Byrne: "In this league, all of the schools have a similar standard with academics. Our student-athletes are here to graduate."

Byrne, a people person, finds the interaction with the athletes the most satisfying aspect of her day: "You build a relationship with each of the student-athletes. That is what really attracted me to this career, helping them stay on top of their classes. Seeing them be successful with their sports while also having high academics, that's probably the most rewarding part of the job."

It's a four-year process for Byrne and Montero that will then carry over past graduation. They will meet with all of the freshmen and sophomores individually, ensuring that they are making the appropriate adjustment to college and beginning to plan for a career and determining what they are going to do with their future.

This is where Byrne utilized her background in marketing: "I was able to use that experience enlarging our career events, working with the upperclassmen showing them how to handle a business dinner or a cocktail hour when you're trying to schmooze with people and learning how to enter or leave a conversation."

With the recent spate of negative press regarding the falsification of athletic participation of students by parents who felt the need to purchase their offspring's way into colleges, it actually puts a more positive light on the athletes who were accepted by schools based on their legitimate academic and athletic qualifications. There are instances at various colleges and universities where the academic standards for some of the athletes have been nowhere near the student body at large. This has not been the case at Saint Mary's College.

Because of the demands placed on the student-athletes at Saint Mary's, they have established an Athletic-Students Services Office. Sharing the responsibilities for the nearly 300 student-athletes are two women: Kari Montero, in her 17th year with the Gaels, is a UC Davis graduate and basketball player who is in the Davis sports Hall of Fame and Staci Byrne, a Saint Mary's graduate and softball letterman, who is in her 14th year at SMC. Byrne's husband, Bryan, played baseball at Saint Mary's and in the minor leagues and is currently a scout for the Washington Nationals.

When Byrne was offered the position of Athletic Academic Advisor, she was employed at the time by Saint Mary's in marketing, a skill which she was able to carry over into her new department while being exposed to a whole new area of academia: "I just had to hit the

Though all of the student-athletes accepted at Saint Mary's meet the academic requirements, some are more prepared for college than others, says Byrne: "Some may need more help and we'll spend more time with them, particularly in the first year. There are kids that are so on top of things they really don't need much direction, as they know what they want to do and are able to handle their classes without much help. Still, I will make it a point to check in on everyone."

The biggest adjustment for freshmen, according to Byrne, is learning time management: "Since the athletes have to be on a schedule, freshmen year is an adjustment for some but as the years go by, they get dialed in and know when they have to go to class and then to practice and then to fit in their studying and their personal life and finding that balance with everything. That's the biggest challenge for our freshmen and we will work with them in trying to figure out how to keep a schedule. We have lost very few athletes who have flunked out and the ones that did were usually first semester freshmen that would have failed everything. We have not as a rule lost any of the upperclassmen."

It's a unique job that brings new challenges every day for Byrne: "Every day is different. It's not a 9-5 job. You may have a list of to-do's and then something comes up and you have to change your plans and a coach may bring something up or a student-athlete may have an issue and you have to work on that and then you can go back to what you were originally working on."

It's not just the athletes at Saint Mary's who are provided counseling: "Everyone has a faculty advisor and a Student Engagement and Academic Success (SEAS) coach," says Byrne. "They do what we do in a sense in being an all-everything resource who the students can talk with about career plans and their classes."

This past January, Saint Mary's reported that of the 16 varsity sports the athletic department sponsors, 15 of them earned fall semester grade point averages above 3.0, the most in the history of the athletics department. Department-wide, the Gaels averaged a 3.28 grade point average in the fall of 2019, while every team was above a 2.85 GPA. "I am extremely proud of the efforts put in by our student-athletes," Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics Mike Matoso stated. "The rigors in the daily life of our student-athletes are intense, but they continue to show that work off the court, off the field, and in the classroom is the foundation for success in their respective sports."

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