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Athletics, academics unite

BY ADAM CHERRY
 NEWS REPORTER

The Athletics Department and the rest of the University will be enhancing the way they communicate with one another in response to two motions passed by the University Senate last month.

The motions include directives requiring the athletic director to give an annual "state of the athletic department" speech and requiring the Athletics Department to consult the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee, a group composed of faculty members and students, in several of its decision-making processes.

In addition, the chair of the IAC and the faculty athletics representative will present annual reports to the University Senate. A faculty member from the IAC will be included on the search committee when open searches for new head coaches are conducted.

The Senate based its resolutions on the findings of the President's Task Force on Athletics, which studied the relationships between academics and athletics from 2001 to 2004. The task force was created to address mounting local and national pressure for reform of collegiate athletics at big-sports universities.

The findings of the task force, which was headed by English professor Suzanne Clark and law associate professor Margaret Paris and included Athletic Director Bill Moos, were generally positive, Clark said.

"(Our final report) shows that the U of O differs from other institutions," Clark said. "We were surprised."

According to the report, the Athletics Department has succeeded in providing academic success for athletes, and the fact that it is financially self-supporting is "reason

ATHLETICS AT THE UNIVERSITY MYTHS VS. REALITY

Myth: Athletics take money from academics.

Reality: The Athletics Department is self-supporting. It receives no money from the University's general fund. The athletics programs at the University are cheaper to the institution than those of Ivy League schools or others with less emphasis on athletics because of the self-supporting nature.

Myth: Athletics Department administrators are over-represented on the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee. The committee has a pro-athletics bias.

Reality: Athletics Department administrators who serve with the elected IAC members do so in an advisory capacity only. They do not hold voting power.

Myth: Student athletes don't perform as well as other students in the classroom. Many drop out or use the University only as a professional training program.

Reality: Recent figures at the University show athletes with a graduation rate of 62 percent, 4 percent higher than the general population. Only an extremely small percentage of student athletes are on a track to compete in their sport on a professional level.

Myth: Student athletes all pursue the same easy majors.

Reality: The distribution of majors of student athletes closely resembles that of their non-athlete peers. Of the top 20 majors at the University, 18 are also the most popular majors for student athletes.

Myth: Student athletes lose their scholarships if they're injured.

Reality: It is the University's policy to continue scholarship support after career-ending injuries.

Source: Report and Proposals from the University of Oregon Athletics Task Force 2001-2004.

for pride."

"Our athletic programs do a remarkably good job of representing the academic integrity of the University," University Senate President and geography professor W. Andrew Marcus said.

The task force included representatives from the Athletics Department, and the panel's decisions were made by consensus.

"It was a remarkable agreement," Clark said.

The Athletics Department was unable to comment prior to the Emerald's deadline on Tuesday.

The bulk of the task force's recommendations for improvement came in the examination of the communication and governance structure between the two areas of the University.

"Although the governance structure regarding athletics is not badly compromised," the report reads, "it can be improved."

Low levels of communication can allow myths and rumors about athletic programs to circulate within the University community. Myths are part of the reason the task force put an emphasis on the community, Clark said.

"It's important to keep the working relationship between the faculty and athletic department alive and current," she said. "We were dealing with myths rather than dealing with reality, and we need to deal with reality."

Clark said there is "surely" animosity between the University's academic and athletic cultures.

"Some if it is because of real differences," she said. The values,

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Professor: Gassama worked to end apartheid

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States in 1975. He went to Virginia Tech, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree. He then attended Harvard Law School and passed the bar exam in New York in 1985.

After Gassama finished school, he joined TransAfrica, a lobbyist human rights organization, and worked to end apartheid in South Africa. After Nelson Mandela was freed in 1990, Gassama headed the U.S. non-government elections observation group for the first election in South Africa. He also recruited and trained 300 American elections observers. Then he became a professor in conjunction with his human rights work, which takes him around the world.

"After Nelson Mandela was freed, I was looking for something else to do," Gassama said. "It was a big moment in human rights, and it seemed like an important moment to move into something else. So I took advice to go into teaching law."

Gassama has a contagious passion for his job, colleagues and students. He says his colleagues are the reason he has stayed at the University.

"I love my colleagues. They are the most fair, extremely brilliant, energetic group," Gassama said. "And my students: It's really almost intoxicating to hear from bright young people who want to hear your stories and are eager to learn."

The stories that Gassama tells are fascinating. He recently traveled to Cuba for educational purposes and

had the opportunity to meet with Castro. He said his conversation with Castro is one that has stayed with him.

"We asked him about racism in Cuba and he said 'I'm so sorry to tell you that in Cuba there is still racism,'" Gassama said. "Then we asked why. He said 'I do not know. You should ask a psychologist. It is not a problem with the law, but you cannot change the mind with the law.'"

Another recent trip took Gassama back to his childhood home of Sierra Leone, north of Liberia on Africa's west coast, which has been devastated by a 12-year civil war, one of the worst wars in history. Gassama had not been back for 27 years since he left in 1975 and took a helicopter tour of the area, observing the complete devastation. He said virtually all the buildings and homes have been destroyed, but the house he was born in was still standing.

"It was the most personally fulfilling trip," Gassama said. "It was the most exciting and the one that I dreaded the most, but felt that I had to do. It was an extraordinary moment, going back to the house where I was born. It was truly something special."

Gassama, who received the annual award on Jan. 27 with three others at the University, said he doesn't understand why he received the award, but his colleagues certainly do.

"(Gassama) has been incredibly

instrumental in different human rights issues," law professor Garrett Epps said. "But he is also a very important guy inside the building and does the things that you don't get awards for. He will be asked to handle many different types of situations and will always do it. He has kept things running here."

The awards that bring Gassama him the most pride aren't given by a committee.

Gassama drives his daughter, Fatima, to and from school every day and calls her his life and joy. His eyes light up and a smile spreads across his face when he talks about her. Her picture is displayed prominently on the center of his desk.

Gassama gets a similar look in his eyes when talking about his students. He says that getting calls from students is the most rewarding part of his career.

"There is a guy that was in one of my classes and is now in Afghanistan," Gassama said. "He is dealing with mercy killings and standing up for the law. I feel pride, and it gives me so much joy to see what my students are doing."

He also has a post-it note on his door that a student left him while he was out, and Gassama said he has left it up as a reminder to pray for the student.

"Outside of my daughter, who is my life and joy, my students make me feel like my life is worth it and my presence on earth has meaning."

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