

# Open Door Policy

Even at the college level, parents of today's athletes want to be heard. With the right approach, engaging them can actually reap rewards for your athletic department.

By Earl W. Edwards

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There are many constituency groups that we as athletic administrators have to work with on a daily basis, from alumni to faculty to corporate sponsors. One of the more critical groups has become parents of student-athletes.

Parents no longer drop their son or daughter off at campus with a "see you at Thanksgiving" send-off. Instead, they communicate frequently with their children, eager for news about their struggles and successes. In response, it is imperative that we in athletics have strategies for working with parents of student-athletes.

Here at the University of California-San Diego, we have found that doing so leads to many positives. When parents understand how we operate and what their role is in our program, it minimizes personal confrontations and interference. It also creates an environment where they become allies and supporters of the athletic department and the university.

## **PART OF THE FAMILY**

UC-San Diego has two ways that we engage parents of student-athletes. The first operates university-wide through the newly-created position of Director of Parent Relations and Programs. This program is housed under Student Affairs, which is the same division that oversees athletics.

The goal of the program is to develop lasting relationships with parents and families that strengthen university ties during the college experience and beyond. This is accomplished by keeping parents updated and involved, primarily through a dedicated Web site and electronic newsletter. The program serves as a trusted resource for UC-San Diego parents and as a conduit of information.

In the athletic department, we have implemented a second tier of parent interaction that begins during the recruiting process and continues throughout the student-athletes' time on campus. Every coach is responsible for developing methods of welcoming parents to our athletic family and communicating with them regularly. As Athletic Director, I have also developed strategies for reaching out to parents.

It all starts when I meet recruits and parents on their campus visit to explain the UCSD student-athlete experience and encourage the parents' support of their son or daughter. We talk about the proud tradition of academic and athletic excellence at UC-San Diego and the Triton Family atmosphere that we have created.

I relate how most of our programs have a parent support group that cheers the team on and hosts dinners while athletes are on the road. I also make it clear we have a department rule that parents may not talk to coaches about playing time. Parents who are not initially receptive to this policy come around in a short period of time since we enforce the rule strongly.

## **TEAM EVENTS**

Once student-athletes become part of the Triton family, parents are welcomed with events set up by coaches. Baseball does an excellent job engaging families starting with a parent day orientation. The meeting lasts approximately two hours, and the agenda includes a review of the athletic department organizational chart, an introduction of coaches and administrators, and a PowerPoint presentation about baseball at UC-San Diego.

The organizational chart provides parents with a clear understanding of how the athletic department works at UC-San Diego, and we emphasize the chain of command when parents have things they want to discuss: First, speak to the coach about any concerns, then to the athletic administrator who supervises that sport, and then, if necessary, to the Athletic Director. Providing parents with this structure gets more buy-in from the beginning.

The head coach then talks about the philosophy of his program, special projects, and the role of each coach. He also clearly defines the parents' role as supporters of the program.

After the orientation, the team has a barbeque and scrimmage at the field. The parents of our baseball team are very supportive and engaged. In fact, two recently signed on to help with department events and committees.

Our women's basketball team starts its engagement with a parent picnic, where all the parents and athletes play introduction games. The players are then asked to leave for a few minutes so the coaches can answer questions from the parents. The coach makes it clear that their daughters are adults and she treats them as such. She also reminds parents of federal laws that prohibit coaches from discussing athletes' grades, injuries, and so forth.

We also have several athletic events that have become a traditional time for parent gatherings. The men's and women's crew teams host a reception for parents, athletes, and alumni at the San Diego Crew Classic. This is a major regatta with crew teams from all over the country and our parents provide food, tents, and tables. The track team does the same after the Triton Classic track meet. These special events provide a great opportunity for coaches to engage parents.

### **KEEP THEM UPDATED**

Throughout the year, we work hard to keep parents in the loop. We have partnered with the Parent Relations Program to produce an electronic newsletter titled "Triton Family Connection." This newsletter keeps parents informed about campus happenings and programs specific to their needs, as well as athletic events and news. The newsletter is expressly for parents, and has been a great way to keep them involved with our programs.

We also keep parents, alumni, and supporters updated weekly through our electronic "UC-San Diego Athletic Update" which goes out every Monday. Currently 16,877 individuals receive this e-mail, including approximately 2,000 parents and alumni parents. Each issue includes news, notes, and a brief summary of each contest.

Individual sports programs communicate with parents through a variety of methods. Many use frequent e-mails to a parent list. For example, our cross country coach begins e-mailing our incoming freshman parents to inform them of the tryout process, preseason housing, and camp information. Once the season starts, parents receive a weekly e-mail update about training and racing progress.

Another coach writes individual letters to parents to let them know how their child is doing at least once a year--usually twice. He further communicates with families based upon their desire for involvement. He is accessible to parents and responds promptly to their inquiries.

### **THANKS & HONORS**

One final way we engage parents is through recognition at our end of year all-sports banquet. Since 2003, we have handed out Parents Awards to recognize those parents of student-athletes who have stepped forward in a big way to support UC-San Diego Athletics.

With the shifting role of parents in our program, we wanted a mechanism to publicly thank those who significantly assisted our program. The award and presentation also encourage others to get involved. However, we make it clear that the individuals receiving the award represent all the parents we want to thank.

In the short run, it may seem easiest to discourage any parent involvement on collegiate athletic teams. But in the long term, welcoming parents can strengthen an athletic department in many ways.

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