

## D2 ADA | CORNER

### GRADUATE ASSISTANTS' VALUE WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF ATHLETICS

Graduate assistants (GA) are graduate students who provide support in various areas, i.e. academic, internal and external affairs. The GA responsibilities may be administrative in nature and consist of duties unrelated directly to teaching or research (such as academic advising, program planning, advising student groups, and assisting with the administration of student services offices). Furthermore, a graduate assistant may serve in a support role, usually while completing postgraduate education.

The purpose of this article is to encourage us as athletics administrators to be more conscientious in providing opportunity to students through mentorship, shadowing and investing in personal and professional development. We have a responsibility to those individuals who desire to seek this profession. By offering an opportunity, we are giving back and making a difference in the lives of young people who aspire to make an impact in athletics administration. When graduate assistants are given a bridge to connect learned college experiences with the real demands of the work place, it becomes valuable to them as individuals as well as the university community. Although it may seem risky, in essence it connects the student-athlete experience and the process for professional development harmoniously.

I remember days after obtaining my bachelor's degree in business administration from Alabama A&M University, I received a call from a former coach who just received the head coaching job at a member institution. He stated, "I have limited resources to hire a full-time assistant coach and thought that you would be an ideal candidate for a graduate assistant position. He went on to say I think that you will make a great coach and athletics administrator some day." My initial thought was no more school; I didn't have the opportunity to take a break with it being only a few weeks from conferring my degree. I was thinking about being an entrepreneur (didn't have a clue what I would own), returning to my hometown, getting the opportunity to engage with some family and friends that I lost contact with over my college years. Thank God for parents and wise counsel, I was encouraged to take an opportunity to pursue higher education and develop personally and professionally in an environment that I was most familiar and genuinely loved! Needless to say, I took the offer and started in January as the graduate assistant for the women's volleyball and basketball programs. There is an intriguing story behind the scenes of that decision, when after only months in the position I was asked to lead both programs as the interim head coach. The position paid great dividends:

- Maintained a 3.0 gpa., while satisfactorily conferring a master's degree in public administration;



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- Debt free during my matriculation, graduation assistantship included housing, a meal plan, full tuition and books; and
- Advanced professionally in the career of athletics administration.

This experience drives the passion that I have for students and athletes being provided the graduate assistantship opportunity. In a short period of time, I was able to learn on-the-job key areas that would be the foundation for my career such as scheduling, evaluation and recruiting, managing human and fiscal resources, enhancing my leadership and interpersonal skills, time management and so much more!

Honestly, I can't say I worked the 20 hours like most graduate assistants but I dedicated every moment outside of classwork and studying to the responsibility. In hindsight, I realize that although I earned my bachelor's degree and may have been prepared in many ways for corporate America, having the opportunity to reflect on what I learned during my undergraduate studies, redirect my focus to establishing a career and promising work life, and the rebirth in my spirit as I developed on what proved to be a safe training ground, an institution of higher education was vital to my success. I can't forget where I came from and those that reached back and pulled me up in the profession. In spite of the hardship and mistakes that are inevitable as GAs and inexperienced administrators, athletics directors have to be leaders with vision, purposely investing in students and providing them with a platform to grow.

Finally, GAs serve as a great asset to keep the current students and staff members connected with new ideas and enriched activities that appeal to the new generations. They also serve as ambassadors to inspire current student-athletes to strive to be leaders and demonstrate the work ethic vital to progressing at the next level. Therefore, I think that as athletics directors and administrators, it is our responsibility to encourage student-athletes in the direction they should go and demonstrate discipline, aspiration and interest in the profession. Even student-athletes who may not know what their plans are after college should be persuaded to pursue graduate assistantships, toward a career that fits.

#### Testimony:

Graduate assistant to the athletics director, P. Nick says, "As I aspire to one day become an athletics director and administrator in my own right, these experiences as a graduate assistant have undoubtedly prepared me professionally for the future. Dr. J, thanks for allowing me to represent my esteemed alma mater, Clark Atlanta University and the opportunity to foster student-driven public relations, marketing and promotions for all sports. What more can I say?"

Thanks for this article to Dr. Tamica Smith Jones, interim director of athletics at Clark Atlanta University and a member of the D2 ADA Board of Directors.