

Title:

Awakening the Formative Potential of Coaches

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Research tells us that role models are critical to the spiritual and leadership development of young adults. Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) believe “faculty are powerful role models for students; not only are they transmitters of knowledge and the facilitators of the students’ search for understanding, but they are also adults who model behavior that students frequently emulate” (p. 133). Kouzes and Posner (2008) explain that they often ask people in their classes and workshops to share a story about a leader they admire. More often than not it is “someone personally close to them who’s helped them learn and do things they weren’t sure they could achieve” (p. 142). One purpose of the Neumann University Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development is to place role models of faith in the lives of our coaches and student-athletes.

In order to equip these role models, we sought to better understand the culture in which coaches operate. The “Mission Integration in Athletic Departments of Catholic Colleges and Universities” study was conducted by the Neumann University Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development in 2006. Its purpose was to explore if athletic directors believed there is value in integrating the mission and values of Catholic colleges and universities into their athletic programs. The study’s findings revealed that eight of ten coaches participated in mission activities. In spite of this prevalence of mission training, athletic directors still questioned if they and their coaching staff are equipped to role model institutional mission and values. As this evidence suggests, varied and formative exposure to the mission is critical.

The work of Neumann’s Institute is constantly evolving. In 2012, a pilot study was conducted to learn more about what college coaches perceive their role to be in the leadership development of their student athletes. What emerged from this data is that even though coaches’ individual accounts of leadership opportunities differed, all of them assume the role as guide or mentor for their student athletes. Therefore, since coaches view themselves as guides and mentors, we have a responsibility to equip them to fulfill that role in a manner consistent with our Catholic Franciscan mission.

While Neumann has found its coaches embrace our Catholic Franciscan values, we recognize that there are some who are reluctant to play that role of faith mentor. While preparing for this seminar, I asked many of our coaches what resources they would use in order to fulfill this formative responsibility. A common practice among many coaches is to contact other coaches outside of their organization and inquire about best practices related to such things as practice plans, curfews and game strategy. One coach I spoke with suggested creating a network of coaches who embrace Catholic values and are intentional in how they educate their players about them. Coaches who are members of this network could contact fellow coaches on matters specific to faith formation and inquire about their best practices. I tested the idea with other head coaches and they embraced the concept. I welcome the opportunity to work with

those interested in pursuing this idea. More research needs to be conducted to test its viability, but an international network of coaches who are intentional about their formative faith role is possible. With organizations such as the Neumann University Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development and Catholic Athletes for Christ, we are blessed to have the beginning of an infrastructure already in place in the United States.

Coaches, no matter if they coach for a faith-based or secular organization, have a responsibility to integrate their organization's mission into their coaching. I am privileged to be a part of a Catholic Franciscan university that believes that responsibility to be a sacred one.

Resources

- Astin, A.W., Astin, H.S. & Lindholm, J.A. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (2008). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for exemplary leaders* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.