

Cottonham noted that the majority of Ragin' Cajuns who have turned pro before graduating have returned later to finish their degree requirements. "They understand the value of a college diploma."

Student-athletes receive a Sun Belt

Conference medallion during commencement. "It comes from the Sun Belt Conference but it's presented by the institution that the student-athlete attended. It has become a very proud moment for me because I get to present the medallions and

make a little speech. I remind them that most of them have been successful in a sport but it was a team sport. This medallion is an individual award. Regardless of how much support or encouragement they received, they had to earn this on their own." ■

Best Yet

Almost half of Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns® earn a 3.0 GPA or higher

HOW DID UL LAFAYETTE'S TEAMS fare in the classroom for Fall 2005?

Better than ever.

For the first time since UL Lafayette began keeping records, every Ragin' Cajun® team earned a cumulative grade point average of 2.5 or higher.

Almost half – 49.7 percent – of UL Lafayette's 346 student-athletes and student support staff finished the Fall 2005 semester with a 3.0 GPA or better. A total of 22 earned a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Women's tennis had the highest GPA of all sports, a 3.43, while the best GPA for a men's team was earned by cross country, a 3.15.

"We've found that there's a healthy competition among sports. Teams are vying for a higher ranking," said Danny Cottonham, director of UL Lafayette's Student-Athlete Academic Center.

Also, a team's GPA can be a powerful recruiting tool. "If your team has a 3.0 GPA and better, and you can say that to a mom and dad when their son or daughter is being recruited, that's a plus. It tells them that we are mindful of the real reason why a student-athlete is at UL Lafayette and that's to get an academic degree," he said.

Student-athletes' GPAs are of particular concern to the NCAA, which has implemented measures intended to ultimately improve their graduation rates. (See related story, page 36.)

Through its Academic Progress Rate formula, the NCAA keeps track of current student-athletes' grades. It awards two points for each student-athlete who meets academic-eligibility standards and remains enrolled at the same school. The APR is determined by dividing the total points earned by a team by the total points possible. If a team's APR doesn't add up to at least 925, it may lose a scholarship. That

925 score foretells a 60 percent graduation rate, according to the NCAA.

Cottonham said the NCAA's decision to penalize teams by cutting scholarships may not be popular with all coaches. "But I think it's a positive thing because it really does help us focus on why kids are here. We know that every student-athlete is not going to play professional sports. But we should take advantage of the opportunity to help every kid earn a degree. If we do that, then I think we're a better institution for it."

The NCAA's concentration on boosting student-athletes' academic performance dovetails with UL Lafayette's efforts. For instance, the university hired an additional full-time academic counselor

in 1998, and another in 2000, for the Student-Athlete Academic Center. UL Lafayette implemented selective admissions in 1999, which established academic entrance requirements for all first-time freshmen, including student-athletes. Those standards have been strengthened gradually.

Cottonham said UL Lafayette coaches stress – more than ever – performance in the classroom as well as on the court or playing field.

Tony Robichaux, head coach of Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns baseball team, decided that a fourth coach allowed by the NCAA – a volunteer coach – should concentrate on helping players attain higher grade point averages. When volunteer Chris Domingue joined the baseball coaching staff four years ago, the team had a 2.4 GPA. For the Fall 2005 semester, the team GPA was 3.1.

For their part, the center's academic counselors monitor players' progress throughout a semester. If a player is having trouble with a subject, they will assign a tutor to help.

There's a study hall in the Conference Center on campus for student-athletes. It's being upgraded with the assistance of donors such as Charles and Elaine Dill of Abbeville, La. This past October, the couple pledged \$10,000 annually, for three years, to be used by the Student-Athlete Academic Center. Cottonham said the first priority is purchasing new desktop computers.

A Student-Athlete Academic Fund has also been set up.

Cottonham noted that players need laptop computers when they travel to out-of-state games so they can retrieve class assignments and communicate via e-mail with instructors. "We need to put student-athletes in a more competitive situation, not only on the field of play, but in the classroom." ■

UL STUDENT-ATHLETES GRADE POINT AVERAGES	
MEN	
Cross country	3.15
Golf	3.11
Baseball	3.10
Track and field	2.73
Tennis	2.62
Football	2.58
Basketball	2.50
WOMEN	
Tennis	3.43
Soccer	3.32
Volleyball	3.15
Cross country	3.12
Softball	3.07
Track and field	2.89
Basketball	2.58