Each year I present two reports to the Faculty Senate: in the fall, a report on student-athlete academic progress, and in the spring, an end-of-year report that also usually treats some more general issues in athletics oversight and governance.\footnote{The Fall 2013 report is available at \url{http://www.hawaii.edu/uhmf/minutes/2013_14/far_report_2013%20academic%20progress%20report.pdf}. Last spring’s report is at \url{http://www.hawaii.edu/uhmf/minutes/2012_13/far_report_Spring2013.pdf}. It contains links to my reports from earlier years.} This will be my final end-of-year report. I will be retiring in December, and the search is currently under way for my successor. The plan is to name the new Faculty Athletics Representative before we all disperse for the summer so that that new person can look over my shoulder during my final semester, in the fall. I will also be around in the spring to help in any way I can with the transition.

I have been the Faculty Athletics Representative for nine years now, and I have worked under three chancellors (in addition to the one who appointed me, just before he left the job) and three different Athletics Directors. I won’t indulge in any sentimental reminiscences here. A lot of things have changed over those years and in many ways I am pleased with what we have been able to do, but in assessing where we are, it is more important to think about the future and about the challenges that we still face, as we strive to maintain an intercollegiate athletics program that is consistent with the values and the educational mission of our university.

\emph{Academics}

When I began, our student-athletes lagged behind their UHM undergraduate peers by every measure. That is no longer true. For the last three semesters (Fall ’12, Spring ’13, and Fall ’13), the student-athletes’ mean GPA has exceeded that of UHM undergraduates generally. As I reported in the fall, there are many who can share in the credit, including the Athletics Department administration, which conducts regular workshops for the coaches on ways of encouraging academic success, and the hard-working staff of Student-Athlete Academic Services. The greatest amount of credit, however, belongs to the student-athletes themselves. The numbers indicate that they are simply better prepared for success in college than the student-athletes that we have recruited in the past. We now have, for instance, fewer student-athletes who came to us from junior colleges who were Non-Qualifiers under NCAA rules when they graduated from high school than we had in the past.
This group alone used to account for a large number of the points that we would lose in the calculation of our Academic Performance Rate (a metric devised by the NCAA to measure current academic success), they made up a significant portion of our non-graduates, and as a group they consistently had the lowest GPAs. The NCAA is tightening up its academic eligibility rules even further over the next three years, and we should see the results in even more improvement in the academic profile of our student-athletes in the future.

That said, another set of numbers indicates that we have not yet met our goal of applying the same freshman admission standards for athletes and non-athletes. That goal is now explicitly contained in a new Board of Regents policy (section 7-8.b.1 of the Policy Manual), which reads, “Student-athletes are first and foremost students. Student-athletes shall be admitted under the same standards as applied to other students, and their academic performance and progress shall be comparable to non-athletes.” With the help of the Admissions Office, the Academic Integrity Committee of the Athletics Advisory Board recently compiled some data on the academic profile of entering freshmen during the last three years. It found that the scholarship student-athletes had average test scores almost 100 points lower than the entering freshmen as a whole, and that their core course GPA was about .36 lower. It also found that a quarter of the athletes had been admitted only upon “reconsideration,” after being initially rejected (compared to about 4% of all freshmen), and that in the last three years, only one student-athlete who had asked for reconsideration had been denied. To quote from the committee’s report: “There is more than one possible explanation for this last disparity: the Athletics Department, with its years of experience, may simply be more selective in whom it proposes for reconsideration. It may also have better understanding of how to prepare a successful application. The disparity in the entering profiles is also a little less troubling when one examines the academic performance of our student-athletes once they are here, for their average college GPA now slightly exceeds that of their undergraduate peers. These numbers do raise the question, however, of how consistent our admission standards are, and whether we are truly living up to the NCAA requirement and our own Board of Regents policy of holding athletes and non-athletes to the same standard.”

Graduation rates of student-athletes have also improved recently. There was a spike in 2013 (for the class that entered in 2006), and there will be a drop-off in the report that is issued later in 2014 (for the class that entered in 2007). But I am frankly not sure what these numbers mean. The only figure that we have that allows us to compare athletes to non-athletes is the Federal Graduation Rate, which counts only fall freshmen (thus leaving out all transfers and anyone who enters in the spring) and which counts anyone who leaves without a degree as not graduating, even if we know that they transferred to another school. It is really a retention rate rather than a graduation rate, and since I have never attached very much significance to it when the student-athlete rate was lower than the undergraduates’, I have trouble doing so now that it is higher, since it does say more about mere retention than about real academic success. The NCAA has devised a
better measure called the Graduation Success Rate, but it is calculated only for student-athletes, not for other students, and thus our only point of comparison is to student-athletes at other schools. There we are catching up, but we still have a way to go. There are some key facts that have to be taken into account in using these numbers for comparison. Student-athletes tend to be more mobile than non-athletes, and their transfer rate cuts down on their FGR. We also believe that we lose more students to homesickness than the schools to which we compare ourselves on the mainland, which undercuts the significance of the GSR. It is when we look at the individual stories rather than the statistics that we learn the most about what we can do better. There I am encouraged. We have, for instance, through a number of strategies, sharply cut down on the number of student-athletes who play for us for four years and then leave without a degree, and we have also reduced by more than half the number of student-athletes who simply flunk out before graduating. By looking beyond the averages, we have been able to identify some areas in which intervention can result in a meaningful improvement in the the student-athletes’ academic experience.

One area in which I feel that we need to do more is to broaden the number of majors that are accessible to student-athletes. The time conflicts are real, but as I have tracked the student-athletes’ majors over the years, I have seen the numbers go up in what might be considered “hard” majors, such as Engineering, Business, and the sciences. Some others still seem to be out of bounds, and nothing distresses me more than to learn that an athlete has not been able to pursue the major of his or her choice. We may need to find more ways of accommodating these students, on both sides. This is unfinished business, and I leave it for the next FAR.

The Business Side

Most of what we have been reading in the newspaper about the Athletics Department recently (as opposed to what we read about the student-athletes themselves) has been concerned with money. Athletics programs are expensive, and at most schools (including ours), they don’t pay for themselves. The Athletics Director would be happy to share with you the figures that show that our Department receives less financial support from the university than at almost all other institutions that we might consider our peers. The consequence has been carried on the books as a “deficit” (another way of looking at it, of course, is to say that the Department is underfunded), and it has been scrambling to make up the difference from other sources.

The Athletics Director and the new head of Koa Anuenue, the umbrella organization for the Department’s boosters, have attacked the problem with impressive energy. They are constrained by two conflicting expectations: one first articulated as policy by President Kenneth Mortimer, that Athletics should pay its own way; and the other the public’s belief that their athletics entertainment should come at the least possible cost to themselves. They are also operating within a very rapidly changing
environment in which they are faced not just with paying the bills but also with keeping up with the competition.

For some schools have found a way to finance large athletics programs, in particular, during the last couple of years, through cable TV. The same five conferences that already enjoyed the largest fan bases are now able to reach even larger audiences, and with their bigger budgets, they have also started throwing their weight around. The NCAA has been forced recently (under an unspoken threat that these conferences might break off and form their own national organization) to grant these schools more autonomy in deciding how to spend their extra money, and it has also loosened the rules on what sorts of things schools can spend money on. A new NCAA rule, for instance, allows schools to provide virtually unlimited food to all student-athletes. As a benefit for the student-athletes, that sounds fine, but only the schools in the “high resource” conferences (also known as the “Fat Five”), will be able to afford it. (We are already running a deficit. We cannot.) Within a short time, we should expect to see lavish new cafeterias appearing on these campuses, open to student-athletes alone, like the separate academic centers for student-athletes that these schools have already been allowed to build. With their new autonomy, the same conferences are expected to increase the amount that they can offer in scholarships beyond what schools like ours can afford. One predictable result will be to heighten the existing differences in the recruiting landscape. One of the purposes of the old limitations on expenses (if you’ll pardon an athletics metaphor) was to level the playing field, so that all schools had the same chance in recruiting the best athletes. That is going to change: the schools that can’t afford the benefits that the Fat Five can promise are going to become the new Division 2 as the best athletes flock to the “high resource” schools. And as the difference in the quality of play becomes more evident, the interest of the fans is going to shift even more to the conferences that already have the most money.

While all this is going on, there is a separate movement, initiated by some student-athletes themselves, to have athletes recognized as employees of the university rather than merely as students. For some this is merely an acknowledgement of the status quo: some sports have already become big money enterprises, and it is the student-athletes who have supplied the labor. Others refuse to abandon the principle that athletics can have a place on our campuses only if its primary function is to provide an educational experience for those who participate, and that student-athletes must remain students first, who add to their education by participating in intercollegiate sports.

These two movements obviously go hand in hand. The domination of the five big conferences is perhaps only one symptom of the increasing professionalization of college sports. And the future of all college athletics is being shaped by football and men’s basketball, the sports that generate the most money through TV. What all this means for our own athletics program we can only guess, but I am not optimistic. The Athletics Director has set as a goal becoming a “top 50” program, but as I have said to him, those other 49 schools have access to the cable TV spigot, and we’re not
going to be able to do it with just cake sales and car washes. A lot of hope has been pinned on someday joining the Pac 12 (when it decides to become, say, the Pac 16). I am a little troubled by the fact that there doesn’t appear to be a Plan B. And while joining one of the big five conferences would solve most of our money problems, I have to wonder if it might perhaps be a Faustian bargain. Do we really want all of the consequences of participating in big time sports? Do we really want professional athletes posing as students on our campus? Do we really want our athletes to be more segregated from the student body than they already are? Are we willing to accept the multi-million dollar coaches’ salaries that are increasingly common at the big money schools? And do we want to become active participants in the redefinition of the “university” that is implied in making it the setting for paid, professional sports?

These are only some of the choices that we might have to face. And if we don’t get the opportunity to move into a power conference, then the choices won’t necessarily be easier, given the present financial picture: either to commit more institutional resources in order to stay abreast of the bigger schools, or to accept—and get our public to accept—an athletics program with greatly reduced expectations, more consistent with what we (and they) can really afford.

These are important decisions with implications that reach far beyond the athletics program, and with the landscape changing so quickly, it looks like we are going to have to face them soon. I hope very much that the faculty will be involved in these decisions, but I also hope that they realize that there are strong competing interests involved, and the fact that the choices will be hard also means that they will not be simple.