

**Athletics Committee
Minutes
13 November 2025**

Attendees

Voting Members Present:

- Cindy Black - Assistant Professor, Counseling Department (Chair)
- Jedediah Bragg - Assistant Professor, School of Social Work (Secretary)
- Mario Gonzales - Professor, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice

Ex-Officio Members Present:

- Ben Bencomo - Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR), Associate Professor, School of Social Work
- Craig Cox - Student Athlete Achievement Coordinator

Members Absent:

- Seonsook Park - Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction (at conference)
- Scott Noble - Athletic Director (traveling)

Call to Order

- Cindy Black called the meeting to order at 8:05 AM, noting that Scott Noble was traveling and would attempt to sign in if possible.

Review of Previous Meeting Minutes

- Minutes from the October 9, 2025 meeting were reviewed.
 - **Note:** Scott Noble's personal cell phone was intentionally not included in the minutes for privacy and security reasons, as minutes are distributed to Faculty Senate and posted on the website.
- **Minutes Approval:**
 - **Motion:** Jedediah Bragg moved to approve previous meeting minutes
 - **Second:** Mario Gonzales
 - **Vote:** Approved unanimously

Quorum Discussion

- Mario Gonzales inquired regarding quorum status.
- **Confirmation:** Committee confirmed quorum requirement is three (3) voting members. Current attendance: three voting members present (Cindy Black, Jedediah Bragg, Mario Gonzales).
- **Committee Composition:** Committee currently consists of four voting members total.
- **Outstanding Nominations:** Faculty Senate reported no new nominations to date. Representation still needed from School of Business and Arts & Sciences.

- **Action Item:** Ben Bencomo recommended reaching out to Dean Parboteeah and Dean of Arts & Sciences to place nominations on agenda for their respective faculty meetings.
- **Action Item:** Cindy Black will contact relevant deans regarding committee recruitment.

Standing Reports

- **Athletic Director Report (via Craig Cox):**
 - **Fall Sports Updates:**
 - **Soccer:** Season officially concluded. Program has identified bright spots but continues evaluation for program success strategies.
 - **Volleyball:** Significant improvement from previous year. Finishing season strong.
 - **Final Competition:** Playing #1 Metro State and #2 University of Colorado, Colorado Springs this weekend; difficult end-of-season schedule.
 - **Football:** Currently 6-5 record with opportunity to finish 7-5. Final game this weekend at Black Hills State (Spearfish, South Dakota).
 - **Football Program Highlights:**
 - **Crowd Support:** Consistently large attendance contributed to season success; important consideration for potential stadium renovations.
 - **Regional Recruitment:** Coach Gage Guardiola (product of Las Cruces and Rio Rancho) recruiting from New Mexico area; top 65 New Mexico athletes: 33 committed to Highlands last year.
 - **Playing Roster:** Approximately half of players on field at any given time are from New Mexico (22 players defense and offense).
 - **Wrestling Program:**
 - **Unique Position:** Only NCAA Division II wrestling program in southwest United States (Texas, Arizona, New Mexico region).
 - **Coaching Leadership:** Coach Chris Freije goal is regional emphasis.
 - **Recent Performance:** Wrestled in Trinidad Friday; gave up only 3 points and won by 30+ points.
 - **Program Growth:** Program improving significantly.
 - **H Club Support:** David Luna, H Club president and former Highlands wrestler, supporting program; bringing in state winners from southwest United States.
 - **RMAC Competition:** Excited to compete against RMAC schools; strong performance against NAIA schools to date.
 - **Wrestling Duel Event:**

- **Event Title:** "High Noon at the Saloon" (coined by Scott Noble)
 - **Date:** Sunday at Buffalo Hall, Vegas
- **Regional Recruitment Discussion:**
 - **Context:** Cindy Black noted personal background in New Mexico public high school system (Los Alamos area); high school athletics performing well (football undefeated, wrestling strong, soccer strong, girls cross-country state championship winners 10 consecutive years).
 - **Recruitment Pipeline:** Coach Bob recruits cross-country runners from northern valley area (Espanola region).
- **Stadium Fundraising Discussion:**
 - **Inquiry:** Cindy Black asked whether Athletics Department had approached LANL.
 - **Clarification Provided:** New stadium not for aesthetic purposes but to bring athletes back on campus due to substandard facilities.
 - **Fundraising Leadership:** Craig Cox indicated President Wolf, Paul Grindstaff, and Scott Noble working together as team to secure continued support.
 - **Facilities Comparison:** Referenced Western State University as example of what successful program can accomplish; Western recently installed video boards for softball and football fields year before Scott's departure from Western.
- **FAR Report (Ben Bencomo):**
 - **Faculty Appreciation Event:**
 - **Event:** Athletic department hosted faculty appreciation at football game past Saturday.
 - **Attendance:** Low attendance; opportunity for committee to improve future events.
 - **Suggestions for Improvement:**
 - Earlier advertising
 - Senior athletes providing individual faculty member invitations (particularly for senior night)
 - Model success from academic night at basketball game (spring) coordinated by Craig
 - **Academic Honors Recognition:**
 - **RMAC Academic All-Conference Honor Roll:**
 - **Women's Soccer (Seven honorees):**
 - Devin Gunn -, applying to DPT (Doctor of Physical Therapy) programs; accepted to Northern Arizona University; interviews pending at Texas Tech and UNM
 - Stella Albright
 - Kate Rainer

- Ariana DiMartino
- Peyton Greener
- Haley Driscoll
- Mia Royball
- **NCAA Postgraduate Scholarship:** Ben Bencomo working with Devin Gunn on postgraduate scholarship application; expected submission within one to two weeks.
- **Additional Academic Recognition:**
 - **Ivan Smith:** Social work student, wrestler competing in High Noon at the Saloon event at Buffalo Hall on Sunday.
- **Craig Cox Commendation:**
 - Craig Cox commended for strong academic support work, particularly post-midterms check-ins with 400+ student-athletes regarding academic progress, identifying struggling students, discussing class withdrawal options, and connecting students to additional support resources.

Academic Support Needs Discussion

- **Second 8-Week and Intersession Courses for Student-Athletes:**
 - **Issue:** Some student-athletes experience difficulty during first half of semester while adjusting.
 - **Challenge:** Need to ensure students progress toward degree while also considering appropriateness of course selections; balancing support without promoting "fluff courses."
 - **Proposed Solution:** Develop second 8-week and intersession course options to support student-athlete academic progress.
 - **Discussion Context:** Committee has discussed this topic over time; conversations ongoing with athletics regarding implementation.
 - **Department Representation:** Cindy Black noted importance of having departmental representatives on committee to carry message back to their departments.
 - **Barriers to Summer Courses:** Craig Cox addressed that while summer courses are available, scholarship and financial aid limitations create barriers for student-athletes; some departments use alternative providers (Straighterline, TEL) for online courses at lower cost.
 - **Cross-Listing Possibility:** Jedediah Bragg explored potential for cross-listing BSW courses (particularly 8-week online sections with hybrid Zoom/asynchronous format) to count toward gen ed requirements; Ben Bencomo noted this would require lengthy approval process through internal channels and New Mexico Higher Education Department, unlikely to be implemented within 2-4 years.
 - **Action Item:** Cindy Black to reach out to deans of Business and Arts & Sciences departments to place nominations on committee to facilitate

departmental conversations regarding intersession and second 8-week course offerings.

- **Mental Health/Athletics Support Internship Pilot Program**

- **Goal:** Develop mental health and global support system for student-athletes, complementing existing CARES services for all students while providing specialized support for unique pressures faced by athletes.
- **Program Structure:** Proposal to pilot program with undergraduate social work students completing practicums; initial focus on psychoeducation and generalized mental health outreach rather than direct clinical services.
- **Current Recruitment:** Ben Bencomo identified Ivan Smith (social work student/wrestler) as interested participant; also talking with a volleyball player for potential pilot program participation.
- **Existing Model:** Jedediah Bragg referenced successful program at University of Alabama developed by first two social work students who created comprehensive guide now used by Alliance of Social Workers and Sport; guide is mapped to CSWE accreditation standards for both BSW and MSW levels.
- **Implementation Framework:** Program could utilize existing Alabama framework adapted for Highlands context; would eventually expand to include clinical services through MSW and Counseling graduate students.
- **Supervision Structure:** Program would likely house under HU Cares with:
 - Faculty supervisor (LCSW for clinical work, CSWE-accredited social work faculty)
 - Site supervisor/preceptor (could be Craig Cox or others in athletics)
 - Potential connection through Felicia (HU Cares social worker) as field instructor and Sarah Rodriguez (licensed counselor at HU Cares)
- **Benefits:** Student-athletes as peer outreach providers would have built-in trust with other athletes due to shared experience; program would support athletes through scheduled check-ins at key points (pre-midterm, pre-final) rather than waiting until crisis; could alleviate burden on Craig Cox and coaching staff.
- **Unique Positioning:** Division I programs (Alabama, OU) have similar models; positioning Highlands as innovative D-II institution in mental health and global athlete support.
- **Prevention Focus:** Program designed as preventative rather than reactive approach to student-athlete mental health and wellness.
- **Next Steps:** Continue conversation at future meetings; finalize details regarding student recruitment, supervision structure, and reporting relationships; consideration of Selena Foster (Athletics Chief of Staff) as potential program coordinator.
- **Craig Cox Input:** Confirmed willingness to work closely with program; noted current role already bridges athletics and academic/wellness support; expressed awareness of Colorado State Pueblo model where academic

advisor also serves as Assistant Athletic Director for Student Athlete Wellbeing and Development.

Spring Meeting Dates

- **Decision:** Meetings to be held second Thursday of February, March, and April at 8:00 AM.
- **Meeting Time:** Confirmed as 8:00 AM to accommodate child care for chair; Ben Bencomo requested hard stop at 8:50 AM due to 9:00 AM class on Thursdays in spring.
- **Spring Dates Established:**
 - **February 12, 2026** (Second Thursday)
 - **March 19, 2026** (Spring break conflict moved from March 12)
 - **April 9, 2026** (Second Thursday)
- **Committee Continuity:** Dr. Seonsook Park currently on sabbatical spring semester; Faculty Senate committees require department to provide replacement; Park has been notified of replacement requirement during sabbatical.
- **Adjournment**
 - **Note:** Mario Gonzales departed prior to discussion of internship program and upcoming meeting dates.

Meeting adjourned at approximately 9:00 AM MDT.