

BY JIM DAVES

When Virginia athletics director Carla Williams announced her ambitious Master Plan fundraising campaign highlighted by physical improvements to the athletic department's structural footprint, the most striking visuals were the architectural renderings and drawings. They showed a bright new future for UVA athletics with facilities that would help the department grow and succeed for future generations.

One critical component of the Athletics Master Plan was not represented in those colorful sketches, yet it might have the biggest and longest-lasting impact of all.

It is a program — and more importantly a dream — conceptualized by Williams to help student-athletes identify their goals and interests, grow as leaders and excel outside of sports. It is known as the Center for Citizen Leaders and Sports Ethics.

Its foundation is grounded by five areas: academic achievement, leadership development, personal development, career development and community engagement.

None of these are new or unique concepts, but blending them together and getting student-athletes to actively engage in programming to enhance their skills in these areas is the ultimate goal for the program.

“The NCAA has promoted these five key areas for decades,” Williams said. “It is up to each institution to determine how best to implement the programming. Making sure our student-athletes have a holistic experience is a core value for Virginia athletics.”

To accomplish that, Williams turned to Ted White, UVA's deputy athletics director for strategic advancement, to lead the project.

“It's simple, really,” said White, whose son is a pitcher for the Michigan baseball team. “We believe in the scholar-athlete ideal. Student-athletes choose UVA because they want a world-class education and a world-class competitive experience.

“We want each of them to have a chance to create the best possible versions of themselves. In order for that to happen, we knew we had to connect them directly to the incredibly passionate and talented people that make up UVA and Charlottesville and get out of the way.”

The program started with in-person experiences for UVA's student-athletes, but White knew he needed something to spark the involvement of the more than 750 team members on Grounds. That's where “Pathways” was born.

It is a web-based program that allows Cavalier student-athletes to customize their interests, goals and preferences. It focuses on academics, career opportunities, community



The Center for Citizen Leaders and Sports Ethics was developed by UVA athletics director Carla Williams to help student-athletes identify their goals and interests, grow as leaders and excel outside of sports.

PHOTO COURTESY UVA

PREPARING 'AMAZING CITIZENS'

'Pathways' Creates Unique Opportunities For UVA's Student-Athletes

service, leadership and personal interests to create a “path” for student-athletes to pursue.

The web tool, though, was just the starting point.

UVA staff spent the past year developing relationships and contacts that allow student-athletes, based on their Pathways profiles and assessments, to maximize the resources tied to the University.

“We know our student-athletes are naturally competitive, and we want to make sure they are well prepared and positioned to compete in the market, as well, once their playing careers are over,” Williams said. “We are committed to making sure we provide exceptional programming and education in career, personal and leadership development, as well as an emphasis on community outreach and academic achievement.”

Pathways tracks a student-athlete's progress with benchmarks and experiences, and pres-

ents opportunities to connect to programs and individuals of interest. It also allows student-athletes to identify and catalog transferable skills and start building personal networks. If they elect to change any element, Pathways creates new options for them. It grows in step with the individual student-athlete.

“It is about customization and active engagement,” White said. “We are able to help each individual student-athlete find their purpose — or pathway, as we call it — and then help them plug into networks and high-impact opportunities around their passions.”

“[Pathways] has definitely broadened my view of the University community,” said Rebecca Skoler, a first-year on the UVA women's golf team. “It is a great way to get involved outside of the athletics department. I think it is an excellent resource that can be tailored to each student-athlete's interests and goals.

“I have loved being able to use Pathways

as a way to see what the University has to offer and to connect with people outside of the athletics department.”

Through his team’s efforts, White is exposing UVA’s student-athletes to resources and experiences they probably would not discover on their own. More importantly, University professors, alumni, staff and local business leaders are providing opportunities for young men and women who share an interest in careers they have already forged.

“Carla and I share a passion for student development, and we go back 14 years working together [at UVA and Georgia],” White said. “When I got here, she said she wanted a one-of-a-kind program for our student-athletes — to match the one-of-a-kind environment that exists at UVA. For the first time in my career, we were able to build a program within limits.

“What we created is a University-wide effort unlike anything in higher education, much less college athletics. We’ve knocked down the barriers that typically separate athletics and a university community. As a result, student-athletes, coaches and staff are encouraged to collaborate directly with students, faculty, administration, alumni and community leaders to create shared, high-impact experiences.”

It did not take long for student-athletes to embrace the program and its technology.

“The magnitude and impact the program offers our student-athletes is boundless,” UVA third-year men’s soccer forward Cabrel Happi Kamseu said. “I am very excited to see the program grow because there is something for everyone. There are a plethora of initiatives, service opportunities and career options concisely placed in one program that is very user friendly. It is almost too good to be true.

“My first and second year I found myself having to do a fair amount of digging and research to connect myself with opportunities I thought would be worthwhile. However, now it is all readily available.”

“I love the variety of opportunities available on Pathways,” Skoler said. “Whether you are looking for classes to take, an opportunity in a career path, a faculty mentor or different life skills, there are many different opportunities for everyone.

“The Center for Citizen Leaders and Sports Ethics is central to the Master Plan. We have approximately 10,000 square feet dedicated to preparing our students for the rest of their lives. The sports careers of our student-athletes will end after college or after their professional careers, but at some point, all of us become ‘former’ student-athletes.

“The dedicated facility within the Master Plan provides one centralized space for the staffing and programming needed that will differentiate UVA as a unique destination for the nation’s best and brightest prospective student-athletes. This Center will also be a vibrant epicenter for our current student-athletes.”

“Each experience that I have had with Pathways has been great. Pathways has given me the opportunity to get involved with my passions outside of playing golf and being an athlete. Just through my engagement in Pathways, the faculty in the athletics department is able to connect and remind me of various opportunities each week, which is super exciting for me.”

Track and field All-American Owayne Owens appreciates the involvement of a support staff that helps him to navigate the process well after an initial assessment is made.

“My favorite part of the program is how

Pathways, and that number continues to grow as word of mouth spreads.

“We’ve obviously lost the ability to create in-person opportunities, which are invaluable,” White said. “But we’ve been able to create and sustain virtual connections, so our student-athletes have been extremely active in meaningful activities all year.

“I’d argue that our student-athletes have been more engaged than any student-athletes in the country because of this platform. That being said, we are all looking forward to seeing what can be accomplished when we’re back in-person.”



Pathways allows Cavalier student-athletes to customize their interests, goals and preferences via a web-based tool that serves as a starting point. It focuses on academics, career opportunities, community service, leadership and personal interests to create a “path” for student-athletes to pursue.

PHOTO COURTESY UVA

it takes my strengths and interests, and uses them to direct me to careers paths that my skills will allow me to excel in and where I could find my true purpose,” Owens said. “I also really like the fact that advisors can have access to this information, making it easier and more beneficial as they guide student-athletes throughout our time in college.”

The pandemic presented White and his team some unique challenges for a concept that was just getting its legs under it. The initial in-person experiences where student-athletes could interact with faculty staff and business leaders had to stop. The program pivoted to virtual experiences, but it also allowed for the opportunity to spend time adding resources to the venture.

White estimates that nearly half of UVA’s student-athlete population is actively using

Pathways quickly drew the attention of the University’s administration, and the program could become the genesis for a wider initiative for all students.

White says the reaction and willingness to participate in the program from the University has been overwhelming.

“I have been at this work for more than 25 years at a half-dozen universities across the country and have never experienced anything like it,” White said. “We would never have been able to pull this off at another institution because it requires such broad and deep community collaboration. I am continuously blown away by the cooperative spirit that exists throughout the UVA ecosystem. It really is humbling and awesome.”

Williams is excited about the program’s early launch and for its future potential.

“I love seeing student-athletes discover a passion or refine transferable skills that allow them to excel outside of their sport,” Williams said. “When I see them discover something that inspires them in the same way their sport has done their whole lives, that is a great source of joy for me.

“Their participation in collegiate athletics, especially at an elite level, is preparation for life, and we have a responsibility to make sure we do our part to help prepare them to be amazing citizens of the world.”

— UVA athletics director Carla Williams