

*Commentary*



**Diplomas Won and Lost**

What's called for in college athletics is measuring coaches' success in terms of the graduation rates of their athletes, write Gerald S. Gurney and Jerome C. Weber.

(Illustration by Jon Krause)

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## **A Better Way to Measure Coaches' Wins and Losses**

By GERALD S. GURNEY and JEROME C. WEBER

College athletics, especially men's basketball and football, enjoy a unique and central role in American higher education. They bring great visibility to their institutions. Yet while college sports excite and electrify millions with performance and spectacle, their positive attributes have become increasingly tainted by scandal, as big-time programs have swelled into businesses that look more like entertainment than education. The pursuit of dollars has had a corrupting influence on every aspect of student-athletes' recruitment, retention, and graduation.

But none of the efforts at academic reform introduced over the past several years have involved the central figure in the recruiting and training of college athletes: the head coach. We suggest holding coaches publicly accountable for the graduation rates of their athletes.

Why focus on head coaches? They are the ones who gauge their institutions' priorities and academic demands, select recruits, and convince those athletes of the fit between their academic preparedness and the institution's academic expectations. It is the coaches who largely determine whether a team's culture will encourage a student to engage fully in the institution and seek a degree, or whether that team will judge a student-athlete based only on his or her athletics contribution. It is the coaches who have recruits sign letters of intent, often without input from faculty members or administrators. It is striking and unacceptable that the most important people in the college-athletics arena have no accountability apart from their won-lost records.

What's more, many head coaches typically use jobs at midmajor, steppingstone institutions to establish winning records by recruiting student-athletes who have little academic promise or fit with the institutions. Those coaches then leave, after establishing winning records, for more-lucrative positions elsewhere. Colleges are then left with marginal students who fail to graduate. So college presidents, too, should welcome an accurate index of prospective head coaches' attention to recruiting academically capable students who can and will graduate. An accurate measurement could support hiring or salary decisions based at least in part on the academic performance and graduation attributable to an individual head coach's recruiting activities.

We propose measuring coaches' success in recruiting student-athletes who succeed academically in college. We call that measure the Coaches' Graduation Rate. The CGR, determined by tracking the graduation rate of every athlete whom a coach recruits, would establish a standard of accountability for coaches. By adopting and enforcing such a standard, colleges and universities can make it clear that the academic life of the student is a central, not tangential, part of his or her life on the campus. Monitoring athletes' academic performance would signal that the institutional fit of a potential recruit is a real consideration, in addition to the student's athletics prowess. It would also serve to provide information about an institution's academic expectations and its athletes' academic performance — valuable information for recruits and their families that should be part of the decision of where to attend college.

The concept is simple: The measurement of a Coaches' Graduation Rate would begin with a new coach's first recruiting class. Each student-athlete who signs a letter of intent or a financial-aid agreement would be assigned an identification number and attached to the coach's CGR record. A student would have six years to graduate before being considered a nongraduating athlete. Student-athletes who transfer while still eligible to play sports would be removed from the coach's cohort. The CGR would thus determine a basic "won-lost" percentage of student-athletes who graduate from the institution to which they were recruited. If the coach is terminated and later takes another head-coaching position, the CGR would remain with him or her and be renewed with each additional signee. After six years, whether that coach remains at the institution or leaves for another position, his or her graduation rate would be established. It is our hope that the National Collegiate Athletic Association would then publish the data as part of its academic-reform efforts.

Some would argue that a coach is not the only factor determining a recruit's academic success at a particular institution. That's true. However, it is equally true that the coach is an important part of the story and, as such, should be clearly accountable for the academic aspect of a student-athlete's college career.

Some might also argue that our proposal doesn't differ significantly from current NCAA regulations and federal graduation measures. But there are differences: Most notably, the Coaches' Graduation Rate would hold coaches accountable for the academic success or failure of the students they recruit. The NCAA's academic-reform efforts, while laudable, center on institutions and provide little or no incentive to coaches to pay attention to the academic life of the student-athletes they recruit. The NCAA also has done little to change the culture in the recruitment of football and men's basketball players. The association punishes colleges but does little to establish shared accountability with coaches.

The Coaches' Graduation Rate is the only instrument that would offer a long-term assessment of a head coach's judgment and choices regarding prospective student-athletes' academic promise, institutional fit, and rates of graduation. For those who believe that there is inherent academic justification for athletics in colleges, such a measure would serve at least as a standard for accountability, and might at best be a catalyst for academically responsible behavior.

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