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Now We Must Reform Athletics Reform



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Last spring the National Collegiate Athletic Association announced the latest nuance in its academic-reform program: the Coaches' Academic Progress Rate. The report includes coaches' career APR scores, measuring the retention and eligibility rates of their teams' players. This follows the initiation of the Academic Progress Rate in 2005, designed to improve student-athletes' eligibility, retention, and graduation rates, while punishing underachieving teams and institutions.

Before the NCAA rolls out the Coaches' APR, in 2010, it should concentrate on the serious drawbacks of the current reform movement. Academic reform must establish minimum admissions standards that mandate mastery of the most-basic academic competencies. After nearly 30 years of work with student-athletes' educational aspirations, I recommend the following steps to reform academic reform.

Raise preparedness standards. The NCAA's recent decision to change initial-eligibility standards by removing minimum standardized-test scores in favor of a sliding scale has resulted in the intended greater access to higher education. But although more student-athletes can now compete on the field, they are less likely to be competitive in the classroom. Theoretically, prospective student-athletes can establish athletics eligibility without a single correct answer on a standardized exam.

The late Myles Brand, a former president of the NCAA, correctly noted that institutions are obliged to determine the likelihood of success for each student-athlete during the admissions process. However, the NCAA should also set eligibility standards, to ensure that those students are at least minimally competent to handle the rigors of most colleges. It is naïve to believe that many college presidents will place their coaches—who may earn more than \$1-million per year—at a disadvantage by requiring higher admissions standards for athletes than competitors do. The NCAA's virtually open admissions standards are an abdication that threatens academic integrity.

The relaxing of eligibility standards has also led to academic scandals associated with the growing number of fraudulent prep schools designed to ensure the academic eligibility of their elite athletes. News-media coverage of such scandals has encouraged the NCAA to review and disqualify several diploma mills. One disqualified "nontraditional" school, God's Academy, run from a recreation center in Irving, Tex., by a basketball coach, sent several prospects to play for big-time college sports programs.

Student-athletes have also increasingly been admitted to competitive universities on the strength of what many admissions officers fear are inflated grades. As Mike Knobler [reported](#) last December in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, in "Many Athletes Lag Far Behind on SAT Scores," many at-risk student-athletes, admitted under the current relaxed standards, find their most intimidating experiences not on the athletics fields or hardwood floors, but in the classroom, competing against students who are far better prepared for college.

The NCAA should re-establish minimum standardized-test scores of 17 composite for the ACT and 820 combined verbal and math for the SAT. While those standards are low, they would improve the likelihood that student-athletes will have at least rudimentary academic skills. Further, the association should adjust grade-point averages to a sliding scale to account for high-school grade inflation.

Stop clustering academic majors. An essay in *USA Today* last November by Jill Lieber Steeg, Jodi Upton, Patrick Bohn, and Steve Berkowitz, "College Athletes' Studies Guided Toward 'Major in

Eligibility," demonstrated the way sports programs at prestigious universities steer their at-risk student-athletes into less challenging academic programs designed to protect their eligibility. The authors found that 118 of the 142 Division I institutions they studied used that strategy to ensure high eligibility rates and avoid NCAA penalties. Athletics departments fear the public embarrassment of those penalties, a fear that places an imperative on maintaining acceptable eligibility and retention rates at whatever cost.

Faculty members should take an active role in monitoring student-athletes' selection of majors. But more important, the clustering of athletes in undemanding academic programs must be faced by examining the culture created by the large proportions of marginal students on many elite teams.

Raising admissions standards, in tandem with reducing the number of at-risk student-athletes on individual teams, offers the best opportunity to provide them with better experiences in higher education. Those who value educational opportunities, take advantage of campus life, and aspire to high academic goals may positively influence their at-risk teammates. The NCAA should strongly consider limiting the percentage of high-risk student-athletes admitted per team each year.

Make penalties consistent, transparent, and meaningful. Many NCAA member institutions and coaches' organizations are concerned that the threat of academic penalties will affect postseason championship and bowl-game eligibility and financial aid allotted to student-athletes. They have successfully lobbied the association to water down the APR formula to such an extent that it does not predict graduation values, as it was intended to do.

For example, since the inauguration of the academic-reform program, adjustments to the APR formula may now be made for student-athletes who pursue professional-sports opportunities. Colleges also receive APR adjustments for transfer students as well as graduation bonus points for former student-athletes who return to finish their degrees. The threshold scores for penalties were created to predict a minimum graduation rate, as required by the Student Right to Know Act. But the myriad adjustments and waivers have left the public wondering what those measures of retention and athletics eligibility now have to do with graduation.

Last May much fanfare accompanied the release of colleges' APR scores and the first levying of postseason penalties against programs at a few hapless, underfinanced institutions, including men's basketball at Centenary College and football at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Jacksonville State University, in Alabama. The public questioned what seemed to be the disproportionate impact of the penalties imposed on institutions with limited resources for academic-support programs. Some other colleges with scores under NCAA penalty thresholds were

from Bowl Championship Series conferences and were granted waivers in exchange for promises to improve—further eroding public confidence in the NCAA academic-reform movement.

The statistics used to develop APR scores should be made publicly transparent. Waivers should be acknowledged and explained. Before institutions and coaches are penalized or rewarded by the NCAA, the public as well as college officials must be able to trust that the APR measurement is meaningful in terms of the graduation rates of student-athletes.

Reforming NCAA academic reform must begin with setting academic standards that ensure minimal competencies in reading and math for all student-athletes. Without that foundation, big-time college sports will continue to be mired in scandal. All roads to reform lead through the development of standards for students who value a college education and are able to compete in the classroom as well as on the field.

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