Published on Sports Management Resources

Q: Are There Unintended Consequences of the NCAA Academic Progress Rate Requirement?

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As academic progress rate (APR) and graduation success rate (GSR) pressures increase on NCAA Division I institutions required to adhere to these rules, we may very well see an increase in unintended consequences on student-athletes and academic support staffs. History shows that it is impossible to legislate moral integrity. Make a rule and there are always unanticipated impacts, those who will figure a way around it or live by walking on its gray and hazy edges.

The NCAA released its initial four-year data on its Academic Performance Program applicable to all Division I programs in May of 2008. Therefore, it is still too early to assess the full impact of this legislation. The theory is simple. If a sufficient number of student-athletes fail to make normal academic progress and/or fail to graduate, the institution will be penalized by taking away some of its scholarships and/or limiting playing or practice seasons or recruiting. If failure is persistent, the team can lose eligibility for NCAA championship play or the institution can lose its NCAA membership.

How did schools do over the first four-year period? While the four-year results revealed slight improvement over year three, more than 700 or the 6272 teams at 329 institutions scored below the 925 APR benchmark. Of these 700, 218 teams from 123 institutions face sanctions ranging from loss of scholarships (174 teams) to “public warnings” (44 teams). While this discussion could be about whether too many teams are not getting penalized, that topic is for another day. Rather, let’s examine some of the potential unintended consequences of the NCAA Academic Support Program rules:

Pressure on Academic Support/Tutoring Programs. Most Division I athletics departments run their own academic support programs. Will the interface between coaches and tutors begin to crack under the stress of public warnings, loss of scholarships and other program-damaging penalties as a result of APR deficiencies? The pressure to make sure athletes remain eligible has always been there, but now the NCAA is ratcheting that pressure up a few notches. Actually a great many notches. Athletics department controlled academic support programs have always lived in the shadow of “conflict of interest”. Will APR pressure force an NCAA version of Sarbanes-Oxley on collegiate athletics

departments as the next inevitable rules step?

Pressure on Academic Counselors. Academic counselors will tell you that the real problem is not the APR but rather the fact that D-I schools admit high risk students at well below normal admissions standards. Such 'talent' exceptions or 'admissions waivers' are the rule rather than the exception. APR and GSR may increase the tension between academic counselors and coaches as academic counselors urge coaches to avoid unqualified recruiting prospects or to really stay on top of and help struggling student-athletes.

Costs of Academic Support Programs. One response to APR trouble is to increase the staffing, computer equipment and other support program elements, thereby accentuating the already significant budget gap between the 'haves and have-nots' in D-I. Staying on top of APR must be a current and ongoing focus because the NCAA is reporting last year's data. Schools with small academic support staffs and large numbers of at-risk students may be hardest hit.

Search for Easy Academic Majors. So what happens to a student-athlete who enters at a huge competitive disadvantage in the classroom? When will he or she realize that it might not be possible to pursue a normal range of academic majors because of a fear or the reality that they are too tough. APR accentuates this pressure. Coaches and academic counselors may be less likely to let a student try a difficult major because the consequences for failure are now more extreme.

Breaking Recruiting Promises. The coach's promise that his or her school has a great academic program in the area in which the student-athlete is interested is key to many successful recruiting efforts. What happens when academically at-risk students are not be able to qualify for academically rigorous courses of study, or, if allowed to pursue those majors, fail? APR may accentuate pressures to redirect students away from their areas of academic interest and put coaches in the position of being tempted to knowingly mislead students during the recruiting process.

Identification of Easy Classes. In the history of higher education, students have selected so-called 'easy classes" to increase their GPAs or get off of academic probation. The task becomes harder for athletes who may not have room for an "easy class" break when they have a 128 credit major with mostly required classes and need to demonstrate completion of 40% of such coursework by their 5th semester. Again, there may be increased pressure to steer students to easier majors or, like the University of Michigan scandal reported earlier this year, find the college professor who will give the easy "A" for an independent study or other required class in return for athletics department perquisites.

Smaller Teams at Higher Risk. Because of the sheer numbers of football players, football has a mathematical advantage compared to basketball in the APR game. Don't be surprised to see basketball get the hardest and earliest hits.

All of these unintended consequences are depressing. But what if APR and GSR penalties end up forcing coaches and institutions to tackle the 800 lb. gorilla in the room – the admission of severely academically under-qualified student-athletes? Might we see coaches trying to recruit only those athletes who have a realistic chance of academic success.

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