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Q: Should “special admissions” be prohibited for athletes?

A: NO. Special admissions serve many laudable functions on college campuses. This mechanism is used by higher education institutions to attract students with special talents not measured by standardized tests or academic grade point averages. Special admissions are also used to provide access to higher education for underrepresented groups whose academic credentials may have been negatively impacted by economic status or whose standardized test scores have been demonstrated to discriminate against certain sub groups. The right of an educational institution to determine the composition and culture of its student body should be sacrosanct. However, adopting a position in favor of special admissions cannot justify academic exploitation of underprepared college athletes. The NCAA needs to take a much stronger position on the athletics eligibility of admitted students who are not prepared to compete in the classroom against higher qualified classmates and the obligation of member institutions to provide strong remedial programming for such individuals.

With regard to athletic eligibility and in addition to the NCAA’s current initial eligibility “qualifier” requirements, the following policies would prevent academic exploitation:

1. Require a one year residency prior to eligibility for athletic competition for all freshmen whose high school grade point average or standardized test scores are below one standard deviation from the mean academic profile of their respective entering classes.

2. Admitted athletes restricted from competition under such a one standard deviation rule should be eligible for athletics-related aid and four years of athletic eligibility and full academic support program services. (click here for a discussion of model academic program services)

3. Athletes restricted from freshman competition under the one standard deviation rule or due to academic performance should be limited to ten hours of practice per week and should be required to participate in an institutional academic improvement plan designed to build academic skills.

Most institutions are not transparent about the fact that they admit student-athletes well below their normal admissions standards. Too many of these athletes enter college with reading levels below the ninth grade, unable to compete with their peers or obtain a true education. Instead of providing strong remediation programs prior to formal college class work, coaches and advisors look for “easy” courses

and “easy” majors. The NCAA and its member institutions can change this exploitation of disadvantaged student-athletes today. The NCAA could require the following remediation elements during the 15 months prior to the sophomore year of initial athletics eligibility for these athletes who are more than one standard deviation below the average academic profile of the incoming class:

1. Requirement to participate in reading and learning disability assessments.

2. Require the institution to provide (fully fund) intensive non-college credit remediation programs with no requirement to take regular credit bearing coursework during the summer prior to their freshman year and the summer following their freshman year. Current rules that requiring coursework applicable toward the degree are dysfunctional in that they invite advisors to steer students toward easy courses instead of concentrating on improving areas of academic weakness.

3. During the freshman fall and spring semesters of athletics ineligibility, allow these student-athletes to register for no more than 6 credit hours per semester (rather than the 12-hour full-time enrollment currently required) and to spend the remaining six hours continuing to participation in intensive remedial programming.

4. Following this 15 month intensive remediation program, require a retest of reading grade level, with further required remediation if necessary.

If we are serious about offering the opportunity of a college education to these underprepared students, we must get serious about real remediation instead of pursuit of easy courses and majors. The current system is one in which college athletes are majoring in athletics eligibility rather than pursuit of usable undergraduate degree.

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