



March 14, 2005

Reality Check

Preserving the Audience: The NCAA and the APR

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The NCAA has received much good press for its newest definition of academic progress for students who play competitive intercollegiate sports. Called the APR, for Academic Performance Rate, this complex system measures whether, on a semester-to-semester basis and eventually on a four-year average basis, players on individual sports teams make academic progress sufficient to guarantee a minimum 50 percent graduation rate. This surely sounds like a good thing, but the principal beneficiaries of this change will be rich programs and the continued revenue growth of the NCAA college sports franchise, with minimal impact on the academic strength of many college sports teams.

To remind us all, the NCAA is a national franchising organization that regulates and awards franchises to individual colleges for their intercollegiate sports programs. In return, the franchisees, the colleges and universities, make handsome payments to the NCAA and agree to abide by the rules that apply to all institutional franchisees. These sports franchises have high value to almost all higher education institutions, even though most of them operate at a significant deficit, and the NCAA has a multiplicity of franchise levels it sells to its members. The key to the success of NCAA franchising, which has been in operation in one form or another for almost a century, is commercial product quality control. (For a discussion of this phenomenon see [The Sports Imperative in America?s Research Universities](#), 2004.)

Production quality means the same thing to intercollegiate sports as it does to all franchise operations: uniform operations, uniform rules, uniform products and controlled competition. The NCAA ensures the entertainment quality of its product by enforcing rules of play and competition, which it continually revises and reforms to improve the popularity of the games. Everyone in the business recognizes that college sports is a consumer entertainment product that generates very large profits for the NCAA executives and staff, as well as significant revenue to partially offset the costs of these franchised programs to participating schools.

This franchising business has succeeded for about a century because the institutions, through their organization of the NCAA, have consistently attempted to sustain a charming but almost impossible to deliver illusion: *College sports display athletic competition between teams composed of students from comparable athletic programs who play for the glory of their institution and the joy of the sport.*

The NCAA, in relentless defense of this idealized dream, tinkers with the competitive rules so the games are as entertaining as possible to watch, eliminates as much cheating as possible so the games are reasonably fair, and regulates the athletes as precisely and completely as it can to keep them looking like amateur students. Throughout its history, however, the NCAA has often had to revise the rules its franchisees must follow to prevent college sports from appearing too much like their professional counterparts.

College sports succeed as entertainment products because they are a different sort of entertainment from the professional versions. The media and producers of sports contests lead us to imagine that the critical difference comes from the players. These athletes, we hear, are real students because the colleges don't pay them a direct, market rate salary, and because the athletes have only a short period of eligibility to play for a college team. The NCAA's success in maintaining these illusions among the sports-consuming public and press is remarkable, and

the appearance of supporting academic standards plays a significant role in the franchise rules.

Academics are a critical issue because some young athletes become college students simply to hone their athletic skills within a college sports franchise prior to turning professional at the earliest and most profitable opportunity. This isn't new, but the current visibility, frequency and overtly commercial nature of these athlete transits through college to the pros with minimal to almost no involvement in academic life made the NCAA worry about the amateur, academic appearance of its franchises, a principal component of their entertainment value.

To eliminate the worst and most offensive of these abuses, the franchisees must now comply with a new academic rule: the APR. This mechanism creates a small incentive for coaches to reduce the number of transitory semi-pro players they recruit and use for a season or two by reducing the number of scholarships offending coaches can offer the next group of recruits. Since scholarships buy athletic talent, this will probably affect a few very badly behaved coaches in some sports and provide much needed academic cover for the entire college sports franchising business.

Who will benefit? Institutions with high academic prestige and significant wealth will continue to recruit first class athletes who also have the ability to survive some form of academic program. They tend to do this now, and will just do it even better. Institutions with low academic prestige and minimal wealth, who now admit almost anyone who applies, will no longer be able to admit and play a few first class athletes who have no interest or preparation for collegiate academic progress, reducing further their ability to compete against the rich and powerful schools.

As always happens when the NCAA improves the quality of the entertainment product it sells through its college franchisees, the rich and powerful get an even greater advantage over the struggling marginal programs. Those in the middle will need to spend more on academic advisers, more on study halls and monitoring, and more on remedial work for underprepared athletes. This will increase the losses they sustain on their intercollegiate athletic programs, but the value of the franchise to their trustees, alumni, legislators and friends will overcome any objections.

We should perhaps celebrate any change in popular culture that appears to support academic success, even if the motives of the NCAA focus more on commercial viability than academic integrity. At the same time, we should always recognize the fundamental conflict that exists between the all-too-human demand for competitive sports excellence that drives the NCAA and the less visible and less intense requirement that our students be students, even when they serve athletics, a concern of faculty and many other observers. Some institutions, more interested in the competition than the student, will likely find ways to evade much of this legislation through soft courses and majors, overly zealous academic advising and similar maneuvers. At the same time, a few of the semi-pro players in high school may decide that they should skip the collegiate experience altogether.

One thing is for sure, the NCAA franchising operation will continue its highly compensated, cautious and commercially successful management of the entertainment quality of the college sports enterprise, and the academics will find a way to adjust.

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