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**A Moving Goalpost**

July 15, 2010

The academic benchmarks the National Collegiate Athletic Association uses to determine whether teams' athletes are progressing toward graduation no longer mean what they used to.

Before its meeting last month, the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance **acknowledged** that previous changes the association made to the way teams' Academic Progress Rates (APR) are calculated have watered down the rate's ability to predict teams' prospective graduation rate. This means that the APR benchmarks below which teams are **punished for their athletes' poor performance in the classroom** — 900 and 925 out of a possible 1000, depending on the circumstance — may be weaker than originally intended.

When the NCAA introduced the APR system in 2004, its officials estimated that a rate of 925 for a team projected a Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of about 60 percent. The GSR is the NCAA's alternative to the federal graduation rate, and unlike the federal rate, it counts transfer students and does not punish teams whose athletes leave college before graduation if they leave in good academic standing.

According to a continuing NCAA review of the APR system, the association now estimates that an APR of 925 predicts about a 50 percent Graduation Success Rate.

The change in the predictive quality of the APR appears to be tied primarily to two scoring changes that the NCAA's member institutions adopted. In 2005, the APR system was altered so that teams would no longer be punished for **players who leave college early to play professionally**, as long as those leaving did so in good academic standing. Then, in 2008, the system was changed again so that teams would no longer be punished for **players who transfer to compete for other institutions**, as long as those transferring away earned at least a 2.6 grade point average.

Before these changes were adopted, NCAA staff warned the Committee on Academic Performance that the alterations could muddle the originally intended correlation between the APR benchmarks for levying penalties and certain graduation rates, said Kevin Lennon, the association's vice president for academic and membership affairs. Still, he added that support for these changes was so strong among committee officials — who felt teams should not be punished for players in good standing going pro and for decently-performing transfers — that these cautions did not deter them.

Walt Harrison, chair of the Committee on Academic Performance and president of the University of Hartford, offered two reasons why it has taken his group so long to review the APR and work to fix it.

"Generally, we've committed ourselves to making data-driven decisions," Harrison said. "We wanted the time to look at the data, and it takes a while to compile it. Now, we have years of data to make educated changes to the system. Also, when talking to [the late NCAA president] Myles Brand ... he and I thought it was important to keep the same benchmarks for a while. We were trying to educate coaches and athletic directors about a whole new system, and we wanted them to understand that they needed to get a 900 or a 925, depending on what the penalty was. We wanted those numbers to settle in people's brains. If we changed it from 925 to 928 or 930 or something and started a new system, it wouldn't have worked out well."

Harrison said he thought the NCAA was unlikely to undo the changes adopted in 2005 and 2008 — particularly, he said, since some

coaches still think those changes did not go far enough. They argue, for instance, that any player who leaves for the pros should not affect a team's score, regardless of whether they are in good academic standing. Rather, Lennon said, it is possible that the present benchmarks may be raised so that they equate to their originally intended graduation rates.

Harrison, however, would not speculate as to a final solution, noting that his committee still has plenty of work remaining. He said that a fix was possible by the time of a series of NCAA meetings scheduled for this October.

Critics and watchdogs of the NCAA responded to the revelation that the much-lauded APR system (which many argue has forced athletics programs to concentrate more on academics) has a few kinks with a mix of frustration and understanding.

"When tweaks began to be made to the system, the formula was watered down," said Amy P. Perko, executive director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. "It may take a while to get the data, and we commend the NCAA for staying on top of this, but now changes have to be made. The APR and its implementation have been positive for accountability, but it can only be as effective as its benchmarks."

The Knight Commission believes that all teams with a GSR below 50 percent should not be allowed to compete in postseason play. In a report issued last month, the group [criticized the APR system](#), arguing that it takes too long for teams to be punished for their players' poor academic performance.

Carole Browne, co-chair of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics and a biology professor at Wake Forest University, said the NCAA should not stop at merely raising the APR benchmark so that it correlates with the original 60 percent GSR. She said that she would like the benchmark raised further over time so that teams are held to higher standards as the academic accountability system becomes a part of the culture of college athletics.

Alan J. Hauser, president of the Faculty Athletics Representatives Association and professor of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University, was appreciative of the NCAA's waiting to act until it had gathered more information about this APR shift. But he agreed that now is the time to act to repair the system.

"I want to ensure that we keep our academic feet to the fire when it comes to the APR," Hauser said. "We have to maintain the integrity of the APR. If we don't, then maybe it won't be as effective in the future as it has been so far."

Still other critics say all this discussion about such a small aspect of the APR system masks larger issues.

Jason Lanter, president of the [Drake Group](#) and professor of psychology at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, said that in order to improve the academic performance of college athletes, more information will be necessary — about their concentration in certain academic departments, for example, and their grade point averages.

"The APR puts a nice window dressing on this conversation, but we need to understand everything a bit more," Lanter said.

— **David Moltz**