

ATHLETICS

# Disparities in Coaches' Academic Incentives Raise Concerns Over Gender Equity

By Brad Wolverton | MARCH 17, 2016



Chris Coduto, Getty Images

As head men's coach of the Arizona Wildcats, Sean Miller gets a \$200,000 bonus if his team collectively earns a grade-point average of at least 3.0. The bonus for the women's coach was \$7,500 for a 3.1 GPA.

**T**he first rounds of the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments are set to begin on Thursday and Friday, with hundreds of thousands of dollars in performance bonuses at stake for the coaches whose teams advance.

Many of those coaches' contracts also contain incentives to prioritize academics and help their players perform well in the classroom. Men's coaches have the potential to earn far bigger academic bonuses than do women's coaches in

dozens of Division I programs, a discrepancy that legal experts say could expose colleges to employment-discrimination claims.

Nearly 80 percent of big-time athletic departments that include academic incentives in the contracts of their men's and women's basketball coaches offer the men's coaches more money than the women, according to a review of coaching contracts at 130 Division I institutions.

On many campuses, those gaps are growing, says Matt Wilson, an associate professor of

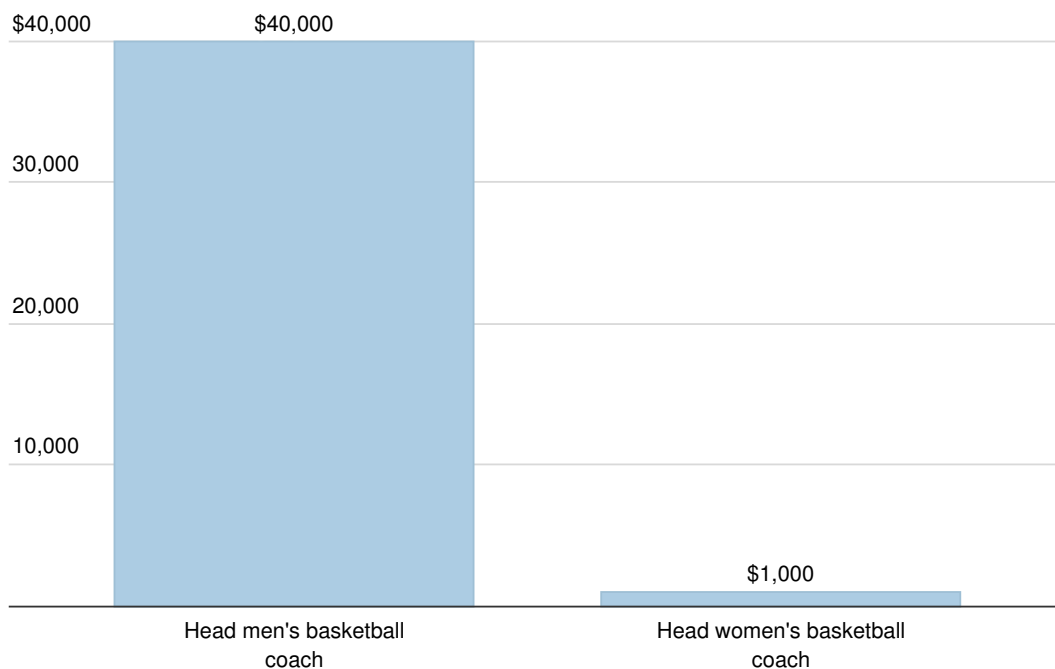
sport business at Stetson University, who has studied coaches' compensation for more than a decade. He and Kevin L. Burke, a professor of sport psychology at Queens University of Charlotte, helped analyze the contracts for *The Chronicle*, which were obtained through public-records requests.

The disparities in academic incentives are often substantial. At the University of Cincinnati, the men's basketball head coach, Mick Cronin, can earn a \$40,000 bonus if his team collectively maintains at least a 3.0 grade-point average. If the women's team gets at least a 3.0 GPA, its head coach, Jamelle Elliott, collects just \$1,000.

And that gap has grown. Mr. Cronin's bonus grew by \$30,000 from his previous contract, while Ms. Elliott's academic incentives did not change when her contract was renegotiated four years ago.

### At Cincinnati, a Big Gap in Bonuses for Identical GPAs

If the men's and women's basketball teams at the University of Cincinnati earn at least a 3.0 grade-point average, their head coaches receive an academic bonus. But the payout for Mick Cronin, the men's head coach, is far more than that for Jamelle Elliott, head coach of the women.



Source: [Chronicle reporting](#) [Get the data](#)

Bruce Weber, the men's basketball head coach at Kansas State University, has the potential to earn \$100,000 in academic bonuses if his team's four-year graduation rate

exceeds that of the student body's, and if its multiyear NCAA Academic Progress Rate, which measures players' academic progress and retention, is above 980. (The National Collegiate Athletic Association requires teams to have a multiyear Academic Progress Rate of 930, which equates to about a 50-percent graduation rate, to be eligible for its postseason tournaments.)

The contract for Jeff Mittie, Kansas State's women's basketball head coach, does not include any academic incentives.

The university does not offer academic bonuses for any head coach besides men's basketball, says John Currie, the Wildcats' athletic director. He says the incentives in Mr. Weber's contract reflect historic academic challenges in men's basketball, a problem that is not unique to Kansas State.

### **Shoring Up a Trouble Spot**

The graduation rates of men's Division I basketball players have improved in recent years, climbing to a high of 77 percent in the most-recent period, which measured students who started college in 2008 and finished within six years, according to the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate. But the men's rates are not as high as those in women's basketball, where nearly 90 percent of players are finishing their degrees.

Many athletic directors say that the discrepancies in academic bonuses reflect the increasing academic challenges in men's basketball, as more and more players arrive unprepared for college-level work.

"You look at where your trouble spots are, and you try to shore them up," says Deborah A. Yow, athletic director at North Carolina State University. Her men's basketball head coach, Mark Gottfried, has eight academic incentives in his contract.

If he meets them all, he is eligible for \$250,000 in bonuses. N.C. State's women's coach, Wes Moore, has four academic incentives in his contract, with the potential for \$100,000 in extra pay.

Before offering a men's coach bigger academic incentives than a women's coach, a college should make sure it can justify the difference, says Daniel A. Cohen, head of the

higher-education practice at Baker Donelson, a law firm with offices in 20 U.S. cities. Such disparities could be acceptable, he says, if one program has a history of poor academic achievement and the other does not, and if leaders believe that an increase in incentives for the coach of the academically weaker team could help overcome that gap.

Several legal experts said that if colleges provide incentives for academic success, they should do it regardless of the gender of the coach or the gender of the athlete, and they should be as equitable as possible. Those experts also noted that big disparities in bonuses could raise concerns under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of sex.

"It can be completely legal for a men's basketball coach to get more compensation than a women's basketball coach, but there has to be some legitimate justification based on job responsibilities," says Stu Brown, a lawyer who has represented colleges and coaches on athletics-compliance issues and has negotiated contracts for many Division I basketball coaches.

When it comes to academics, he says, men's and women's coaches face similar limitations. They are often not allowed to talk to faculty members or have much influence over academics. Men's and women's coaches are also governed by the same standards, meaning their recruits must meet the NCAA's eligibility requirements.

"Whether it's in women's basketball or men's, the coach's role is pretty similar," Mr. Brown says. "It certainly raises the question: What's the justification for a notable discrepancy in the bonus payments?"

### **Where the Women's Coach Can Earn More**

It's not always the men's teams that have the bigger incentives. If the women's basketball team at Clemson University earns an Academic Progress Rate of 975, the team's head coach, Audra Smith, receives a \$25,000 bonus. The most that Brad Brownell, Clemson's men's basketball head coach, can receive is \$10,000.

When those coaches were hired, their programs were in different places, says Joe Galbraith, a Clemson athletics spokesman. The women's team had just posted a

single-year Academic Progress Rate of 917. The men's team had a perfect 1,000.

"From a men's basketball standpoint, since Brad has been here we've had excellent APR scores," Mr. Galbraith says. "Not that it's not an emphasis, but it's not something that needs to be addressed through incentives."

On the women's side, he says, the incentives have worked, as the team's Academic Progress Rate recently surpassed 975.

Athletic departments have other reasons for creating disparate incentives. The University of Kentucky had for years included hundreds of thousands of dollars of performance incentives in the contract of John Calipari, its men's basketball head coach. Last year, at the coach's urging, the university removed all but one incentive — a bonus for academics.

Mr. Calipari, who earns more than \$7 million a year, is eligible for an extra \$50,000 if his team's Academic Progress Rate is above 950.

The women's coach, Matthew Mitchell, is eligible for a \$15,000 academic bonus, and his team must hit a higher academic mark for him to qualify: His team's grade-point average must be over a 3.0, and its Academic Progress Rate must be 950 or higher.

The university defends the different bonus amounts by saying that the coaches have different mandates, says Tony Neely, a Kentucky athletics spokesman.

Many of Mr. Calipari's players have traditionally left after one season for the National Basketball Association. It is the coach's job, Mr. Neely says, to make sure that those players complete their spring semester; otherwise, they could jeopardize the team's chances of qualifying for the NCAA tournament in a subsequent year. (In Mr. Calipari's six years, only one player out of 24 who left early for the NBA did not successfully complete his spring semester.)

The women's basketball coach does not have the same pressures, Mr. Neely says. The women's coach also has the opportunity to earn bonuses for his team's performance on the court, he adds, making his potential bonus pay larger than Mr. Calipari's.

## **The Full Picture**

Athletic directors say they determine incentives by looking at the entirety of a contract and assessing how coaches compare with their peers. Greg Byrne, vice president for athletics at the University of Arizona, says that each contract is the result of a separate negotiation and that its terms reflect the pay and incentives that were fair at the time the contract was written.

Those factors have contributed to large differences in incentive pay for Arizona's men's and women's basketball coaches, he says. Sean Miller, the men's basketball head coach, whose contract has been revised multiple times since he was hired, in 2009, is eligible for a number of academic incentives, including a \$200,000 bonus if his team earns at least a 3.0 grade-point average.

Niya Butts, who was recently dismissed as the Wildcats' women's basketball head coach, was eligible for a \$7,500 bonus if her team earned at least a 3.1 GPA. Mr. Byrne says the gap in those potential bonuses may have derived from the fewer revisions he made in Ms. Butts's contract. He changed her agreement just once in her seven seasons, and he did not adjust her incentives.

As he looks for a new women's coach, he says, he plans to take a close look at the bonus structure to make sure it aligns with the program's priorities.

"We try to be as competitive as we can with our coaches' contracts," he says, "and that includes how you structure your bonuses."

The timing of contracts may also have played a role in bonus disparities at Oregon State University, says Todd Stansbury, who took over as athletic director last summer.

Wayne Tinkle, the men's basketball head coach, is in the second year of his contract, while Scott Rueck, the women's basketball head coach, is in the sixth year of a 10-year deal.

Mr. Tinkle has the potential to earn a \$40,000 bonus for himself or his staff if his team earns an Academic Progress Rate of 960. Mr. Rueck would bring in just \$3,000 if his team earns a slightly higher rate.

"Obviously I think it's something we do need to look at," says Mr. Stansbury, referring to the varied incentives. He says he is currently reviewing all of his coaches' contracts and considering ways of standardizing his bonus structure.

"But at the end of the day," he says, "the most important thing is, What are the results, and are we graduating our student-athletes?"

*Brad Wolverton is a senior writer who covers college sports. Follow him on Facebook and Twitter @bradwolverton, or email him at [brad.wolverton@chronicle.com](mailto:brad.wolverton@chronicle.com).*

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education