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Dec. 1

College Sports' New Problem

For as long as there have been National Collegiate Athletic Association rules, there have been athletes desperate enough to compete, and colleges desperate enough to win, hunting for ways around the regulations. In no realm is the rule breaking more damaging to the integrity of higher education than in the association's academic rules, which now find themselves susceptible again.

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A *New York Times* [investigative report](#) on Sunday (free registration required) explored Miami's University High School, which, apparently offering no in-person classes, has allowed more than a dozen football players to remake their academic records to qualify under the NCAA's eligibility standards for freshmen.

The NCAA's president, Myles Brand, said he would form a panel to review the use of correspondence courses and other "nontraditional" programs to meet the association's academic standards. Brand acted partly in response to [a letter sent](#) to him by the Southeastern Conference, several of whose member universities admitted athletes who had been through University High.

The league's presidents have grown "increasingly concerned" about freshman athletes' ability to become eligible through "nontraditional schools and courses," Michael L. Slive, the conference's commissioner, and Michael F. Adams, president of the University of Georgia, wrote in their letter to Brand. "If a large number of high-profile student-athletes establish their initial eligibility through questionable means, the potential impact on NCAA academic reform efforts will be significant."

Exactly how big and widespread a problem this suggests is unclear, because it's impossible to know how many institutions that offer dubious high school academic credentials are operating in the shadows.

But the situation raises significant questions about how colleges and the NCAA fulfill their respective roles in deciding which athletes are academically qualified to compete, and about how changes in NCAA rules can result in new sorts of manipulation and deviousness for those intent on cheating the system.

"You can make a certain rule and as soon as you see it, there are people out there trying to find some way around it," said Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford and chairman of the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance, which has helped to reshape the association's academic rules in recent years. "It's especially perfidious when you're talking about eligibility rules and fooling around with young people's lives.... If University High is what it was described as being, and you as a university have accepted these young people,

you've played a role in what amounts to a sham.”

In quick outline, the *Times* article examined how several dozen athletes who had struggled academically at traditional high schools transferred, sometimes late in their senior years, to University High, which the article describes as being an unaccredited “high school” in an office building that offers diplomas for \$399 in four to six weeks, “with open-book exams, no classes and no timed tests.” The athletes, acknowledging that they did little or no work, rather magically gained the credentials they needed to meet the NCAA’s eligibility standards for freshmen, which require athletes to attain a minimum grade point average in a rising number of high school core courses, but no longer demand that they achieve a minimum score on the SAT or ACT.

The *Times* listed 11 colleges with Division I football programs that had signed athletes who went through University High: Auburn, Colorado State, Florida International, Florida State, Rutgers, South Carolina State, and Temple Universities, and the Universities of Central Florida, Florida, South Florida and Tennessee (though not all of the athletes enrolled). Officials at the Southeastern Conference raised the issue with the NCAA because Auburn, Florida and Tennessee are all members.

Changes adopted by the NCAA in 2000 may have helped make places like University High possible. In the mid-1990s, when the NCAA created a clearinghouse to centralize the process for its members of deciding which athletes were academically eligible to participate under association rules, it took on the job of deciding which of a high school’s classes should count as core courses.

But high school officials “got uneasy about us making that decision,” said Alan J. Hauser, a professor of religion and philosophy who, as Appalachian State University’s faculty representative to the NCAA, has been active in the association’s academic policy committees. In response, the NCAA decided in 2000 to leave the approval of core courses up to the high schools themselves.

The association also, at that time, allowed athletes to use correspondence courses and other “nontraditional” programs to meet some of their academic requirements — a rule adopted partly to help Olympians and other elite athletes who might leave their homes (and their original high schools) to train, but mostly to recognize how technology and home schooling were changing the nature of secondary education, said Kevin Lennon, vice president for membership services at the NCAA.

Those changes, taken together, may have helped lay the groundwork for what’s unfolding now.

David Goldfield, Robert Lee Bailey Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, was on a temporary committee in the mid-1990s aimed at getting the NCAA Clearinghouse up and running. He recalls an NCAA official showing the panel a half dozen transcripts of high school students who had left their high schools for “academies” that specialize in helping academically struggling youngsters (who often happened to be athletes). One such athlete had a core course GPA at his regular high school of well under 2.0, which was then the NCAA’s minimum requirement, but when he switched to the academy, he took geometry, trigonometry and precalculus in the same semester, and managed A’s and B’s in all three.

“There were places that kept appearing and reappearing,” said Goldfield. He estimates that back then, the committee was aware of “12 to 15 institutions where, if you put a transcript in front of any reasonable person, the change from the regular high school to the other would be so manifest that it would just leap off the page.”

The clearinghouse committee, Goldfield said, crafted a plan to send letters to Division I colleges warning them about what he calls these “renegade high schools” and urging them to review transcripts from the schools with extra scrutiny, and to send letters encouraging officials in the schools’ home states to investigate them. But the panel disbanded before it was able to carry out the plan, he said.

Goldfield believes the problem is likely only to have gotten worse in the intervening half-decade, especially as the NCAA has changed its freshman academic rules again to raise the number of high school core courses athletes must complete (to 14 this year, and to 16 by 2007) but to stop disqualifying those with extremely low standardized test scores.

The association has significantly toughened the standards athletes must meet to remain academically eligible to compete in subsequent years, and will begin penalizing colleges whose athletes don’t progress toward a degree. (Some sports officials interviewed for this article said they were heartened by the likelihood that any athletes who cheat their way past the NCAA’s freshman eligibility standards — and any colleges that admit them — will eventually get pay a price when the players can’t meet the tougher rules for staying eligible.)

"The NCAA has pretty much given up on initial eligibility standards, and we're admitting less academically qualified student-athletes," Goldfield said. Most universities that play big-time sports have "more than one student-athlete on their football and basketball teams who've gone through these diploma mills," he said. "If you want to call that pervasive and widespread, go ahead and do that. This is not an isolated phenomenon."

Lennon of the NCAA believes the problem is somewhat less severe, though he says the NCAA has been tracking it for nearly a year and takes it seriously. He notes that the NCAA has several checks in place for nontraditional high schools, and that while the number of those programs has increased, "our belief is that the vast majority of those are high quality programs. Are there some that appear to be diploma mills? Absolutely. And our job is to ferret out those that appear to be legitimate from those that aren't."

One of the first tasks for the new NCAA panel, Lennon said, will be to "evaluate whether we are asking the right questions" about nontraditional schools and programs, to better identify those that aren't legitimate. He hopes for help from state officials and educators: "There's a role for the NCAA to play, but this is not an 'athletics problem,'" Lennon said. "This is about young people getting degrees that are meaningless, and we would hope that others would recognize that as a problem."

Officials at the universities involved in the University High situation look to the association for help. Anne Mayhew, vice chancellor for academic affairs at Tennessee, who sits on its committee that reviews athletes seeking admission outside the standard process, said that the emergence of nontraditional schools have made it harder for colleges to verify the academic credentials of athletes — especially as the NCAA has emphasized core courses over standardized test scores.

"We've long had a system in place for challenging suspect standardized test scores," Mayhew said, with the help of ACT and the Educational Testing Service. But "we need a clear way of validating high school academic records, and that's made much more complex by the growth of alternative schooling and home schooling."

While Tennessee scrutinized the record of the University High athlete it wound up admitting — going so far as to send its athletics compliance director to Miami to investigate, "it's very hard for one institution to do on its own — we didn't have the time and the resources of *The New York Times*," Mayhew said.

"But I can assure you that we'll be looking much more carefully in the future."

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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