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## ATHLETICS

# NCAA Eases Scholarship Restrictions, Raising Concerns Over Competitive Equity

By Brad Wolverton | MAY 17, 2016



Greg Mintel, North Carolina State U.

North Carolina State's men's soccer team is among the programs that could benefit from a new rule allowing more players to receive full scholarships during the summer. But critics worry that the change could put many programs at a recruiting disadvantage. Deborah Yow, the university's athletic director, says the benefit could cost it \$3 million more annually.

Starting this month, the wealthiest athletic departments have a new tool to help them attract and retain the best athletes — the ability to cover the full cost of summer school for students who are on any form of athletic aid.

The change, approved last month by the NCAA's Division I Council, could help many athletes save tens of thousands of dollars in college costs. It comes as the National Collegiate Athletic Association and its most-powerful conferences face legal challenges over restrictions on player pay.

It's unclear how many athletic departments will provide the additional aid, or how many players will take advantage of it. (The rule allows any Division I program to give the extra assistance, but it is not required.)

The move comes amid a national debate about reducing the demands on athletes' time. Many players say they spend more than 40 hours a week on their sport during the regular season. But according to a recent NCAA survey, athletes would prefer to devote far less time to mandatory athletics activities during the rest of the year — in some cases, as few as four hours a week.

The new rule will allow more athletes to stay on track to graduate or finish their degrees sooner. But athletic departments will also benefit, as players who stay on campus during the summer are often expected to spend extra time in the weight room or working out with teammates.

Several athletics leaders expressed reservations about providing the additional aid. They said the change could cost their departments millions of dollars a year, an expense they would have trouble paying. But some fear that if they don't make the money available, it could hurt their chances of recruiting the best players.

Doug Fullerton, commissioner of the Big Sky Conference, whose programs compete in the NCAA's Football Championship Subdivision, a lower tier of Division I, said that athletic directors at that level have mixed feelings about the change.

"You ask them, Are you in favor of it? They go, Yes and no," he said. "They absolutely want to help student-athletes in any way they can. But can they afford it? Probably not."

Still, he believes that the competition to recruit the best athletes will lead many colleges to come up with the money.

"The minute Montana gives it, Montana State has to consider giving it," he said.

"That's the business we're in, even with voluntary kinds of things."

### **'Artificial Caps'**

Under the old system, colleges could not award a higher proportion of aid to players in the summer than those students qualified for during the regular academic year. Those limits, athletics leaders say, existed mainly to help programs keep their costs in check.

Only about 100 male and 50 female athletes per campus are considered "head-count sport" athletes, guaranteeing them full athletic scholarships, according to NCAA rules. Hundreds of others — including track athletes, baseball and softball players, and swimmers — receive partial scholarships, sometimes covering as little as books. (Women qualify for more partial aid than men do, as a way of balancing the distribution between the sexes.)

Athletic departments can tap the NCAA's Student Assistance Fund, which provides institutions money based on the number of scholarships they offer, to help cover the cost of summer school. But the new rule essentially does away with grant limits during the summer.

Beginning this month, for example, a tennis player whose aid covers one-fourth of his expenses during the regular academic year can qualify for a full scholarship in the summer. (Athletes who aren't on scholarship are not eligible for summer aid.)

Erik Price, an associate commissioner of the Pac-12 Conference, which proposed the change, said the idea was to allow programs with the financial means to take care of their players more opportunities to do so.

"In this day and age," he said, "why do we have these false or artificial caps on the

ability to help a kid graduate?"

But even within the five wealthiest conferences — the Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern — not every program has the money to cover summer school for everyone, said Deborah A. Yow, athletic director at North Carolina State University.

N.C. State's scholarship budget is about \$12 million a year. If the athletic department paid for a full load of summer classes for every Wolfpack athlete who is on a partial scholarship, it would cost \$3 million more annually, she said.

Ms. Yow has not determined how much additional aid her program can provide in the summer (she plans to watch what other elite programs do first). But she said that such an increase would put her department in a difficult financial position.

Still, she understands that, with all the money flowing into college sports — and the willingness of many athletic departments to pay multimillion-dollar salaries for coaches — the decision not to direct more to players might be questioned.

"There's so much written about how wealthy we all are," she said. "People are afraid to say, I can't afford it, or we might have to drop a sport."

## **Creative Spending**

Programs just outside the power conferences are likely to feel even more of a pinch, as many have recently begun to cover the full cost of attendance for their players despite expected decreases in league television revenue.

Two athletic directors in Conference USA said they wanted to stay competitive with their elite peers, but they would not be able to help every athlete.

The University of Texas at San Antonio plans to use the new aid allowance to help students with the greatest financial need. It will also look to provide summer aid for athletes who are close to graduating, or who need classes to stay eligible.

"It would be a tremendous step forward to do this across the board, a huge expense," said Lynn Hickey, the athletic director. "There are just some things you can't chase because it's not fiscally responsible, or the resources aren't there."

Judy Rose, the athletic director at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, is giving her coaches the option of whether to provide additional summer aid. But she does not plan to put extra money in any team's budget to cover the expense.

"We don't have a stockpile of money out there" to pay for the additional aid, she said. "But that doesn't mean we won't be doing it."

Ms. Hickey said the inability to cover summer school for all scholarship athletes could put universities like hers at a competitive disadvantage. But such disparities are nothing new, she said.

"It's never been a level playing field, it is not a level playing field now, and it appears the gap's going to get greater," she said. "But at least we have an opportunity to help kids with high financial needs."

Ms. Rose said the cost-of-attendance payments are more important to players because it is cash that can be used for anything. Tuition reimbursements, she said, are not viewed as favorably.

"You can only take so many hours in summer school," she said. Besides, she added, what students really need at that time of year is a break.

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