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Intercollegiate Athletics: A Preliminary Study Examining the Opinions on the Impact of the Academic Performance Rate (APR)

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The purpose of this preliminary study was to examine the opinions of athletic directors, faculty athletic representatives, senior women administrators, and head coaches regarding the impact of the academic performance rate (APR) in intercollegiate athletics. The participants of the study returned a total of 127 questionnaires, but only 75 were used due to non-responsive or incomplete answers to questions. The participants were asked one open-ended question about the impact of the APR in intercollegiate athletics. The data was analyzed for common themes and results found that overall, 64% of the participants felt the APR will have a positive impact on college athletics. The respondents felt the APR will help improve the graduation rates of student-athletes as well as make head coaches more accountable for the type of student-athlete being recruited. On the other hand, 32% of the respondents felt the APR will have little or no impact on intercollegiate athletics and were very critical of athletic reform as a whole. This inquiry was pursued in an effort to understand how these views may influence the implementation of the APR and, in the broader sense, future athletic reform.

Keywords: Academic Performance Rate

In “big-time” Division I athletics the struggle between academics and athletics continues to be a problem. In a 2002 study, McMillan reported many student-athletes have a difficult time keeping up in the classroom where graduation is the exception rather than the rule for the majority of football and basketball players. This can be seen in the 2005 NCAA men’s basketball tournament, where 42 of the 64 teams failed to graduate 50% of their players within six years of

enrollment, and teams such as the University of Minnesota and Louisiana State University did not graduate a single player (Most men's team, 2005).

The literature also shows a continuing disparity between graduation rates of Caucasian and African American student-athletes (Cohen, 2006). For instance, of the 64 teams who participated in the 2006 men's NCAA basketball tournament, 38 schools graduated 70% of the white athletes within six years of enrollment, compared to 21 schools which graduated 70% of the black athletes during the same time period (Women's NCAA Tourney, 2006). Richard Lapchick, Director of the Center for Diversity in Ethics in Sport and Vice President of the Black Coaches Association, summed up the disparity of graduation rates between Caucasian and African American student-athletes stating "with the results we're getting, the system is either terribly flawed or overtly racist" (Cohen, 2006, p. D08).

Academic Performance Rate

To help combat the problem of low graduation rates by student-athletes, specifically football and men's basketball athletes, in 2004 the NCAA developed an academic reform package called the Academic Performance Rate (APR). The APR is based on a team's ability to measure and retain eligible athletes' semester by semester (Lancaster, 2005a). NCAA President Myles Brand stated that this is a strong package of reform that will hold teams accountable and lead to increased academic success for student-athletes (Lancaster). He also insisted this new method was timely because graduation rates were computed over six years while the APR gives a year-by-year account of a team's academic performance (Clarke, 2005). The NCAA believed this new approach would be a more meaningful and accurate barometer of whether athletes are making progress toward degrees.

The APR is calculated by measuring the academic eligibility and retention of student-athletes by team for each term. The NCAA determined teams would be required to reach a score of 925, which is equivalent to a 50% graduation rate, or various penalties would be assessed such as loss of money and scholarships (Christianson, 2006; Lancaster, 2005a). According to the NCAA, in 2004 approximately 51.2% of Division I colleges and universities would have had at least one team below the 925 score. The sports that would have been most affected were baseball with 23% of teams below 925, basketball with 20.1% of teams below 925, and football with 30.7% below 925 (Lancaster, 2005b). In addition, if this standard would have been implemented in 2004, the national champions in football (University of Southern California) and basketball (University of Connecticut) would not have met the minimal requirements set by the NCAA (Clarke, 2005).

Furthermore, the new standards raised requirements for progress toward a degree; after two years, an athlete must have completed 40% of the school's requirements for graduation (as opposed to 25% under the old system); at the end of three years, an athlete must have completed 60%; and after four years 80% of the school's requirements for graduation must be completed. Programs shall face penalties (including scholarship loss, stricter limits on the recruitment of potential athletes, and bans from championship competition) if they do not meet these standards proposed by the NCAA (Beland, 2004).

After two years, the APR has provided some positive data in terms of the academic success of student-athletes. The second year APR data in 2006 found that 99 Division I sports teams at 65 colleges and universities lost scholarships for poor academic performance. This computes to less than 2% of the 6,112 Division I sports teams in the NCAA (Christianson, 2006). This was an improvement over data found in 2005, when over 350 Division I programs (6%) could have lost scholarships. Of the 99 teams that lost scholarships in 2006, only nine were women's teams with 90 being from the men's teams. Furthermore, the majority of the men's teams came from three sports: football (23), baseball (21), and men's basketball (17) (Christianson, 2006). Sacramento State in California had the most teams affected (6) while Prairie View A&M in Texas was one of the hardest sanctioned schools having lost ten athletes in five sports (NCAA penalizes 99 teams, 2006).

The APR is not without its detractors. Two of the more vocal of which have been the historically black colleges and universities and mid-major schools from the non-Bowl Championship Series (BCS) schools. These two classes of colleges and universities have been disproportionately affected by the APR, and have, therefore, been vocal in their criticism of the system (Forde, 2006; NCAA penalizes 99 teams, 2006). For instance, in the 2006 APR data, the football teams affected the most by the APR were predominately lower tier programs such as University of Toledo, Temple University, Middle Tennessee State University, Western Michigan University, New Mexico State, Northern Illinois University, and Hawaii. In addition, basketball programs were affected at institutions such as California Polytechnic State University, East Carolina, Hampton, Jacksonville, Kent State, Texas State, and Prairie View (Forde).

One example of the disproportionate effect the APR has had on a mid-major program—and the resulting criticism of the APR from the program's coach—can be seen in the example of Western Michigan University's football program. The head football coach of Western Michigan University, a non-BCS institution, believed that the intent of the APR was different than how it was applied to his football team. In 2006, his program fell below the 925 score which is equivalent to a 50% graduation rate, and was docked two scholarships (Couch, 2007). He stated that during this same time period his team had a program best 2.81 grade point average and graduated most of its athletes - yet was still penalized. He went on to note the program he took over was in bad shape and he had made drastic improvements in the situation, but was penalized for doing the right things. He voiced concern that the implementation of the APR was not consistent with the intent of the APR, and that he would like to see it altered so other programs are not penalized in the same way (Couch).

Such comments led to considering since athletics directors, faculty athletic representatives, senior women administrators, and head coaches have had two years to live with the expectations and consequences of the APR, what are their comments concerning the impact of the APR in intercollegiate athletics? The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions regarding the impact of the APR on college sports in an effort to understand how these views might influence the implementation of the APR and, in the broader sense, future athletic reform.

Method

Data Collection

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Data was collected online using a web-based package called SelectSurveyASP (SelectSurveyASP Advanced, 2008). For this study a modified version (four contacts) of the Dillman “Tailored Design Method” was used to increase participant response rate (Dillman, 2000). The first contact was a pre-notification email to the participants who were selected for the study. The pre-notification email discussed the purpose of the study and explained they would receive an email in the next few days with the link to the questionnaire. Two to three days after the respondents received the pre-notification email they received an email discussing the study, a link to the survey, and a timeframe in which the study should be completed. A week after the first email with the survey link was sent, a second email with the survey link was sent to those participants who did not complete the online survey. Like the second email, this contact asked for their help in completing the study and a link to the survey was provided. Lastly, a third email containing the link to the survey was sent to any participants who did not respond to the previous two emails ten days after the last email.

The participants for this study were athletic directors, faculty athletic representatives, senior women administrators, and head coaches of the six Bowl Championship Series (BCS) which include the Big East, Big Ten, PAC Ten, SEC, ACC, and Big Twelve. The BCS conferences were chosen for this study because they are considered the “power” conferences in the NCAA in terms of money and influence. These six conferences continue to generate the most money from post-season play, such as the NCAA men’s and women’s basketball tournament and football bowl games. In addition, the institutions in the six BCS conferences are considered the “elite” institutions within intercollegiate athletics and traditionally have academic and graduation problems pertaining to student-athletes (Wolverton & Lipka, 2007).

The athletic director was chosen because this position is the highest-ranking position within the athletic department in intercollegiate athletics and the athletic director’s opinion could provide important insight into perceptions of the APR within an athletic department. Faculty athletic representatives (FAR) were chosen because of the important role a FAR can play in the academic success of student-athletes. In addition, the faculty athletic representative is the individual who helps promote the flow of communication and information between the faculty and athletic department. Like athletic directors, senior woman administrators were chosen because this position could provide important insight in terms of opinions of the APR in intercollegiate athletics.

The head coaches were chosen for this study because they work most closely with the student-athlete. In addition, head coaches may be the group, other than athletes, who are most affected by the APR. Specifically, the head coaches selected for this study included three revenue producing sports, defined as football, men’s basketball and women’s basketball, and three non-revenue producing sports, defined as men’s and women’s track and field, and women’s volleyball.

This study was a part of a larger study examining the opinions on various aspects of intercollegiate athletic reform. For this study, the participants were asked to respond to one open-ended question asking their opinion on the impact of the APR in intercollegiate athletics. A total of 559 participants were sent an email and 127 surveys were completed and returned. Of the 127 returned surveys only 75 answered the open-ended question. The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts as well as pilot and field tested. Ten individuals were asked to participate on the

panel for this study and included four Sport Management faculty members, four Sport Humanities faculty members and two athletic administrators. Each member of the panel had prior experience in the sport world. Four individuals were former coaches, two were former athletic administrators, two current athletic administrators and all ten have participated in athletics either in high school or college. For this study, the panel examined the open-ended question for clarity, ease of use and language. All ten members of the panel agreed on the usefulness of the questions. IRB was approved prior to administering the survey and the data was examined for common themes and responses by four current sport management faculty members.

Results/Discussion

Of the 75 usable data, the majority of the respondents were men (54.6%) and Caucasian (94.6%) with an average age of 53.2 years. Athletic directors, faculty athletic representatives, and senior women administrators accounted for 47 or 62.6% of the reported responses, while head coaches accounted for 28 or 37.3% of the reported respondents. It is worth noting the majority of the head coaches, 23 of 28 or 82%, were from non-revenue producing sports. A complete list of the demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic Information*

Population	Number (75)	Percentage
Male	41	54.6
Female	34	46.4
Caucasian	71	94.6
African American	2	2.6
Asian American	2	2.6
Athletic Director	9	12
FAR	18	24
SWA	20	26.6
Total	47	62.6
Football	1	1.3
Men's Basketball	2	2.6
Women's Basketball	2	2.6
Men's Track	5	6.6
Women's Track	4	5.3
Women's Volleyball	14	18.6
Head Coaches	28	37.3

Overall, the majority of the respondents, 64% or 48 out of 75, believed the APR will have a positive impact on intercollegiate athletics. One theme which emerged was that many of the respondents felt the APR would cause head coaches and athletic departments to take a closer look at the type of student-athlete being admitted. This could lead to higher caliber student-athletes with better opportunities for academic success. For instance, one faculty athletic representative felt the APR will have a positive impact on the academic caliber of the student-athlete because when coaches and universities are held to a measure of success, they will recruit to that level of success. He believed the level of student-athlete academic success will increase due to coaches recruiting better individuals. Similarly, three head coaches of non-revenue sports had the following to say about the positive impact of the APR and how it will force head coaches to recruit better qualified student-athletes:

It is causing athletic departments to look at the type of students they recruit. The University Admissions offices, and faculty, departments in the Universities should be held to the same standards. If they are unable to retain their student athletes or have them perform at the level that is acceptable, they should be judged accordingly as well.

I believe this legislation will have a positive impact on the academic caliber of the student-athletes who are being recruited. It has already changed the behavior of coaches. They are much more concerned about a student-athlete's academic status because of possible competitive penalties (i.e., loss of scholarships).

Universities will be held accountable publicly for the academic success of their athletes. More money for academic services for student/athletes will be needed to help athletes stay on task to graduate on time. Having the academic unit report to the university vice-president or president will assure that athlete's are being successful.

One faculty athletic representative stated "I think it has made coaches more aware of the immediate impact of their actions or lack thereof when it comes to academics... It's been positive." In addition, one senior woman administrator believed "coaches have begun to "get it" and are basing scholarship decisions on academic potential and proven performance in many cases." This belief is shared by Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford and chair of the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance. He stated the message of academic reform is clear, saying "recruit student-athletes who are capable of doing college-level work and help them make progress toward a degree" (Christianson, 2006). If these beliefs prove to be true and head coaches become more aware of recruiting "academically qualified" student-athletes, then the impact of recruiting could change the face of big-time college athletics. No longer will the athlete with a 1.8 grade point average be recruited by the top athletic programs due to the fear by the head coach there could be future penalties against the program.

Another theme which emerged from the data is that many respondents believed head coaches will be held more accountable for the academic success of student-athletes and this, in turn, will have a positive impact on graduation rates.

This belief that the APR will improve graduation rates was not shared by all respondents. One men's track and field head coach stated that most athletic teams have a graduation rate and grade point average that is higher than the total rates for the university; therefore he is not sure if the APR will have much of an impact. Of the 75 responses, 24 (32%) believed the APR would have little or no impact on college athletics. Most of the negative responses were very critical of athletic reform as a whole. For instance, a few of the comments made by the reported respondents follow (all three comments were from head coaches of non-revenue sports):

APR again is an example of what happens when business types try to solve real problems and do not have the background. What difference does it make if an athlete stays at one institution for four years and graduates or if they continue on elsewhere and still graduate? Graduation is what is important. Even in our sport of track and field there are students who just may not fit in somewhere and transferring to another school is good for all concerned. They still succeed and that is what we as educators have as our primary mission isn't it?

We will see. I am skeptical of any new legislation because it has been my experience that good intentions don't always translate to good results. We had a partial qualifier (international student) who was in a 5 year accounting program which would give her a Master's Degree upon graduation. She was a 3.8 student in a nationally recognized program. When we petitioned to get her fourth year of competition reinstated, she was denied! No exception was made to a rule designed to give marginal students an incentive to do well in school. As a result, we had to take an outstanding student out of her preferred degree program and put her into something else so she could get her fourth year of play. Needless to say, the folks in our Business School were mystified. As a result of a number of these kinds of experiences over the years, I am sorry to say that I don't have a lot of faith in the "reform efforts" undertaken by people who often have zero experience in athletics at the collegiate level.

The APR is an extension of the Knight Commission who come (*sic*) across to me as an elitist group that doesn't want "them" in our school. Them being people who don't have an ACT of over 30 (*sic*). They have taken some good ideas and used the premise that if 5 is good, 10 is twice as good. You will now see people getting rid of a kid who is at risk after a semester or year instead of staying with them and trying to help them get their degree. Better to take a hit on one point for not returning rather than have them come back and become ineligible.

The above comments represent an overall frustration in academic reform. It also shows the lack of support academic reform might receive from those within intercollegiate athletics which was the case for one senior woman administrator who believed the APR is merely a "PR tool." She believed there is already enough academic checks and balances in the annual graduation rates and the satisfactory progress requirements. Measuring term by term micromanages students and creates some false impressions of academic difficulty. In addition,

one SEC athletic director believed that in time, colleges will find a way around the APR just like with other academic reform. One Big Ten athletic director stated the APR, while a good step in the right direction, will ultimately fall woefully short of its goals because of a flawed methodology, stating, “the sad thing is no one cares to correct it.”

Another theme which emerged from the data is a concern the APR will increase the amount of pressure on coaches for their teams to succeed academically thus, leading to an increase in “academic fraud” and “gaming.” This concern is warranted because history has shown that intercollegiate athletics is saturated with numerous counts of academic scandals. For instance, at Fresno State University, a former team statistician claimed to have written term papers for three basketball players (Cohen, 2004), and the University of Minnesota faced intense investigation when a former tutor claimed to have completed more than 400 pieces of course work for at least 20 basketball players spanning the years 1993 to 1998 (The University of Minnesota, 1999). Similar acts of academic dishonesty may increase if head coaches are under more pressure to see student-athletes succeed in the classroom.

Some respondents felt that a by-product of increased pressure on coaches to ensure the academic success of their student-athlete may create an environment of “watered down” curriculum so the student-athlete will be able to “succeed” in the classroom. A majority of the head coaches expressed concern the APR will limit student-athletes’ flexibility to engage in their academic interests because athletes will be encouraged to take “easier” academic courses to ensure APR success. This belief is shared by Forde (2006) who stated athletic departments will have even more incentive to do work for athletes, guide them to “bunny” classes, and pressure professors to help athletes get by.

In addition, one head coach believed the APR will have a negative affect on intercollegiate athletics because too many schools have high turnover. Also, the APR may impact both the incoming coaches’ success rate and enforces limitations. A non-revenue women’s coach believed the APR is one of those rules which appear great “on paper” but are not always fair. She states “is there any doubt that the elitist academic institutions love this rule whereas state schools, especially those in big cities or those in rural areas will be at a disadvantage because they tend to serve a different population? Aren’t we heading down the road of elitism last seen by the “amateur rules of Olympic sport” championed by the British elite?”

Similarly, one head coach of a non-revenue sport believed not only the APR but most of the academic reform is irrelevant stating “the students do not want it; the coaches do not want it. It will affect some sports such as football and basketball and their decisions to go professional sooner. More will leave school if this reform happens. Also, there are many completely different issues with Olympic Sports compared to Football/Basketball. The rules, policies put everyone together and it is hurting Olympic Sports, the student-athletes, and coaches.” This is a legitimate argument in that the literature shows men’s football, basketball and baseball are the three main sports that continuously have poor graduations rates whereas, Olympic Sports such as men’s and women’s track and field, women’s volleyball, and men’s and women’s soccer traditionally have very good graduation rates (Lancaster, 2005; Wolverton, 2006). So should there be a separate set of reform acts that are intended only for those who need it such as football, basketball, and baseball? One Big Ten head coach believed there should be a separate set of rules. She stated the APR will increase graduation rates for men’s football, basketball and baseball, but all the other

sports at her university are doing well because graduation is an expectation, not a wish or hope. These “other” programs have outstanding student-athletes who are committed to academic and athletic goals - the APR will have little impact on those.

Another theme which emerged is that many respondents felt the APR was “unfair” or “unrealistic” for most sports. For instance, a Pac Ten men’s basketball coach felt student-athletes are being discriminated against. He wondered how student-athletes can be expected to graduate in four years when the average student nationally graduates in approximately 5 years and 3 months. Furthermore, a head coach from UCLA stated that regular students enter UCLA with a 1330 SAT and athletic teams cannot match this if they want to be nationally competitive. He believes the student-athletes at UCLA can never achieve the same level of success in the classroom that the regular student can.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this preliminary study was to examine the opinions of specific university athletic individuals in an effort to understand how these views might influence the implementation of the APR and, in the broader sense, future athletic reform. The answers to this inquiry may influence the lives of many college age student-athletes. Further research is needed to gain insight on the lasting impact such reforms have on student-athletes.

One area of future research would be to examine the attitudes of Division I non-BCS administrators and head coaches. As mentioned previously, many coaches and administrators in the historically black colleges and universities as well as the mid-major universities feel unfairly punished by the APR. Bill Cubit, head football coach at Western Michigan University, believes the APR favors the BCS Conferences because they have the biggest budgets (Couch, 2007). Similarly, Forde (2006) stated there is already an obvious gap between the academic success and support between the high end and low end of Division I. The APR will only extend this gap by taking away scholarships and punishing the “little schools.” Therefore, examining the opinions of the non-BCS universities would be an important addition to the APR literature.

A second area of future research would be a more in-depth, quantitative analysis into the perceptions of the APR. This may provide further data as to why athletic directors, faculty athletic representatives, senior women administrators, and head coaches feel the APR will impact intercollegiate athletics.

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