*by Michelle Brutlag Hosick and Nick Sproull*

# NCAA: Eligibility and Success

**The public service announcements during NCAA sports events use the tagline, "There are over 400,000 student-athletes in the NCAA… and almost all of them will go pro in something other than sports." The numbers behind the claim are stark and the message is clear: college graduation matters. In 2011, university presidents affirmed their commitment to academic success by increasing initial-eligibility standards beginning in 2016.**

For nearly 20 years, NCAA members have made decisions about eligibility of student-athletes based on research, with the goal of strengthening the academic success of student-athletes. NCAA members are motivated by the principle that participation in intercollegiate athletics is part of the higher education experience; student-athletes must be students first.

Much of the research in the area of academics was driven by the question of freshmen eligibility—what data from a high school career best predict academic success of students once they get to college?

The newly revised Division I initial-eligibility standards continue the NCAA's commitment to data-based decision-making:

- Freshmen student-athletes must achieve at least 10 of the required 16 core courses before the start of the senior year of high school (including seven in English, math or science).
- A minimum high school core-course grade-point average of 2.3 and an enhanced sliding-scale combination of GPA and test score are required to be immediately eligible for competition.
- Incoming freshmen who meet the current sliding scale with a 2.0 minimum high school core-course GPA will be eligible for financial aid and practice as an academic redshirt.

How did the members of the NCAA Academic Cabinet, Committee on Academic Performance and the Board of Directors arrive at those requirements? It's important to understand that these decisions were made over an extended time frame with each group relying on a rich body of research that originated in earnest in the late 1980s.

Earlier decisions, including the controversial Proposition 48 which first set minimum high school grades and standardized-test scores for incoming freshmen student-athletes, were made without the benefit of broad-based and practical research. Instead, Proposition 48, adopted at the NCAA Convention in 1983, was a reaction to a series of high-profile academic scandals within intercollegiate athletics and a national desire to improve higher education overall.

Even without the research, some members at that convention questioned what impact Proposition 48 would have on low-income and minority students. The NCAA didn't have any data to answer those questions. A special committee formed to examine the issues recommended a focused study to better understand the impact of the new academic requirements for freshmen. That effort was called the Academic Performance Study (APS), and data gleaned from member institutions that participated formed the base for the future of NCAA academic research.

Educational access for low-income and minority populations quickly became an important part of any examination of NCAA academic policy. Previous discussions of eligibility within the association had centered on three factors, as identified by Ron Smith and Jay Helman in a paper they wrote during the Proposition 48 wrangling: academic integrity, competitive equity and financial considerations. At different times, different values won the argument. For example, in the case of Proposition 48, academic scandals that uncovered illiteracy among student-athletes who had attended multiple years of college drove a need to adopt standards in the name of academic integrity. At other times, schools would be motivated by a greater focus on fielding competitive teams as inexpensively as possible, leading to a laxer academic standard.

The rich data now being analyzed and used in decision-making by the NCAA membership dovetailed with the May 1991 NCAA Presidents Commission hearings, in which the commission sought input on ways to develop stronger academic standards. In 1992, the NCAA adopted Proposition 16, which established an initial-eligibility index based on standardized test scores and GPAs. The first "sliding scale" was born.

In the following years, the data were used to drive academic decisions at various touch points: In January 2003, Division II approved an increase in core-course minimums and in GPA for continuing eligibility. In October 2002, Division I increased its minimum progress-toward-degree requirements and raised minimum GPA requirements and core-course minimums.

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When access became a part of the conversation, the tenor of the dialogue changed. Because different high schools have different resources and provide different experiences, often depending on location, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a more difficult time meeting entrance and participation standards. For many low-income and minority student-athletes, athletics grants-in-aid are the best—and perhaps only—path to receiving a college education. Implementing standards that inhibit the access to college has an impact for these students.

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Without data, the NCAA didn't know for sure.

By 1990, the APS had collected enough data for NCAA research scientists to analyze the impact of academic policies on student-athletes. Researchers could examine high school academic performance and initial eligibility, college academic performance and continuing eligibility and how they intersect.

Data collected through the APS and its successor, the Academic Performance Census were instrumental in the formation of the comprehensive academic-reform package adopted by Division I members in April 2004. This effort established the Academic Progress Rate (APR) to measure academic performance for all sports teams term-by-term; created penalties for teams that do not meet APR benchmarks; and established the Graduation Success Rate, which measures graduation rates and includes students transferring into Division I institutions in the calculation, something not accounted for in the federal graduation rate. Eight months later, Division II members adopted the Academic Success Rate, similar to Division I's Graduation Success Rate.

The data are also used to modify the APR calculation, including in July 2005 to allow an adjustment to the APR calculation for student-athletes who depart for professional opportunities while eligible. Another in January 2008 adopting permitted transfer student-athletes who achieve a 2.6 grade-point average or higher to immediately transfer to another four-year institution and not harm their first team in APR calculations.

The transfer decision was highly data-driven. Members of the Committee on Academic Performance pored over research that showed at what point transfer student-athletes are likely to achieve

the same level of academic success as those who remain at the same institution for their entire collegiate career.

The theme of finding academic profiles that predict likely academic success in some way became a key element of the membership's decision-making process. From the Academic Cabinet to the Committee on Academic Performance to the Board of Directors, each governance body tried to balance the need to make academic standards rigorous enough to ensure that student-athletes were academically prepared for college (or to transfer or to succeed in the future) with the need to allow access to higher education.

A 2012 paper from NCAA Managing Director of Research Todd Petr and consultant John McArdle of the University of Southern California (CA) listed several findings about predicting collegiate academic success from the high school record. Through their research in both the APS and later data collected through the Academic Performance Program, they found:

- High school core course grades better predict future academic success than standardized test scores.
- A combination of core GPA and test scores is a better predictor than either one used alone. The addition of test scores to the GPA variable is small but "meaningful."
- Using a GPA pulled from a specific set of courses (core curriculum) is more accurate than using overall high school GPA, which can include electives not intended to prepare a student for college.
- Demographic variables, such as income and race/ethnicity, are generally accounted for when test scores and grades are considered together.
- Individual demographic groups have unique distributions along the sliding scale, so any rules will impact specific groups differently.

The pair also found that predictions of academic success are better if the behavior on which the prediction is based is closer in time to the academic outcome desired. For that reason, much of the NCAA initial-eligibility research is couched as being predictive of first-year collegiate success, not eventual degree attainment.

Those findings were presented to the NCAA membership, which examined, evaluated and considered the data when devising the new initial-eligibility model. They were also a large part of the decision to keep the current standard for financial aid and practice and elevating the standard for competition only, thereby preserving access for everyone currently entering college through the avenue of an athletics grant-in-aid.

In addition to the NCAA members understanding that high school grades were more predictive of first-year academic success, some who served on the groups who were involved in the decision to change the initial-eligibility requirements believed individuals have much more control over their GPA day-to-day and less control over a one-time test score.

Some members were also interested in influencing the admission process through the increased standards, pointing to schools that had faced academic troubles through the APP initially but had then altered their admission standards. That approach was successful for several schools that had teams fall below Academic Progress Rate benchmarks but recovered after studying their admission practices.

Recommending a change was difficult for the members who serve on the governance bodies. Their driving goal was to help prospective student-athletes be as prepared for college as possible, but the changes raise fresh questions. What kind of support they should be providing for new freshmen who will be serving an "academic redshirt" year? Should a prospective student-athlete earn competition at some point in the first year?

Those questions, and others that are bound to arise, will be answered over the coming months.


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