

THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF COLLEGE ATHLETES: No Doubt Worse Than Reported

by Frank G. Splitt

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BACKGROUND

Like a new rite of spring, the academic performance of college athletes participating in the NCAA "March Madness" basketball tournament has come up for discussion on the *PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. The *NewsHour* segments, timed to coincide with the tournament finals, have focused on academic performance measures such as Graduation Rates (GRs) and Academic Progress Rates (APRs).¹⁻³

The March 30, 2007, *NewsHour* segment "Colleges Need to Improve Academic Success of Athletes, Studies Show," was hosted by Jeffrey Brown.¹ Brown's guests were Sportswriter Kevin Blackstone and Dr. Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute of Diversity and Ethics in Sports (IDES) at the University of Central Florida (UCF). The discussion centered on the 2007 IDES study and analysis of the GRs and APRs for the tournament teams, as reported by the NCAA.⁴ The theme-setting lead-in to the online version of the segment stated: "Recent studies of NCAA programs suggest that colleges need to do more to ensure their student-athletes graduate, rather than simply generate revenue and attention for their schools."

This year's *NewsHour* segment was complemented by Noah Buhayar's *Online NewsHour Extra*, "College Players Struggle to Make the Grade: Colleges' Record Mixed When It Comes to Graduation Rates Among Basketball Players."⁵ The corresponding lead-in to the *Extra* read: "Despite excelling on the court, student athletes on many of the best college basketball teams in the nation have an alarmingly low graduation rate, according to a new study."

THE NEWSHOUR SEGMENT

Several excellent questions were posed by Jeffrey Brown, and, for the most part, he received informed responses from his guests. However, two exchanges were troubling, but not surprising.⁴ Avoided, were issues relative to reform measures that have been launched to curb academic corruption in big-time intercollegiate athletics ... reform that has been adamantly resisted by the NCAA.

Though well intended, the *NewsHour* segment inadvertently left the impression that the solution to the poor academic performance problem of college athletes is well in hand – the NCAA's APR process and loss-of-scholarship penalties coupled with NCAA President Myles Brand's leadership are wholly adequate to the task of improving the situation.

This was the same impression that was given by the *NewsHour's* "March Madness" segment in past years.^{2,3} The bottom-line message to viewers: There are problems, but there is no need for concern, Brand and the NCAA prescribed APR will provide the needed remedy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

THE REALITY

Given the enormous broadcasting revenues at stake, the NCAA faces a conflict between its sometimes-contradictory roles as promoter and governor of intercollegiate athletics. Consequently, the NCAA cartel is incapable of reforming itself. However, backed by its enormous financial resources, the NCAA is more than capable of creating the illusion of reform to cloak its phony "student-athlete" ruse.⁷ Why? Simply put, the answer is to protect its tax-

exempt status as an institution of higher education.

According to syndicated sport columnist Bob Gilbert, the Final Four in this year's "March Madness" "is the most convincing evidence yet that big-time college football and basketball teams that achieve lofty national ranking take priority over academics at those universities. To be sure, NCAA president Myles Brand and the NCAA's corporate sponsors will find ways to spin a positive story out of the 2007 Final Four's dismal performance in the classroom. But it'll all be a lie."⁸

THE NCAA'S ACADEMIC PROGRESS RATE (APR)

The NCAA's highly touted APR was put in place to provide the illusion of reform for the general public, the media, and the Congress.⁹ As a former university president, Myles Brand is now highly compensated to provide the NCAA with an academic front for this and other window-dressing types of reform initiatives.

In a nutshell, like graduation rates, the NCAA's member institutions self assess and report GRs and APRs without independent oversight. As Walter Byers, who served as NCAA executive director from 1951 to 1987, said when speaking of a college's reporting on the necessary progress that has been made on the rehabilitation of at-risk high school graduates: "Believe me, there is a course, a grade, and a degree out there for everyone."

Thus, the integrity and quality of the data IDSE receives from the NCAA for its study is suspect to say the very least. Why? Because the huge amount of money involved with winning at the NCAA D-1 level provides ample motivation for schools to cheat by not only keeping academically unqualified blue-chip athletes eligible by any means necessary, but graduating them as well. The latter is a real-life 'twofer' – providing an increase in the institution's GR as well as a payment-in-kind salve for the consciences of guilt-prone presidents and governing boards who choose to look the other way in the face of the academic corruption that enables their schools to recruit and maintain the eligibility of teams likely to be among the NCAA tournament's chosen few.

As Richard Southall, associate professor of Sport and Leisure Management at the University of Memphis, said in the *NewsHour Extra*, teams often recruit students who are under-prepared for college-level academics, then force them to miss classes for games and devote huge amounts of time to training and practice. "We're setting the kids up for failure, and then we blame them," Southall said. "That, to me, is the height of exploitation."

Under the present circumstances, like the Congress and the Department of Education, the IDSE has no choice but to trust the data provided by the NCAA and, by extension, its member academic institutions, notwithstanding the questionable integrity and quality of these data.

Put another way, potentially untrustworthy data must be taken at face value by IDSE as a prerequisite for their study. These data are then meticulously analyzed and reported upon – giving them an unwarranted patina of 'official' credibility, but little sense as to the quality of the degrees that make up the data, much less a sense of what is really going on behind the scenes at the institutions providing the data. But, being exploited and not getting the education they deserve doesn't mean college athlete entertainers won't be kept eligible to compete and be given a degree as well.

THE PROPAGANDA OF NUMBERS

The GRs and APRs are basically educational statistics. As mentioned previously, the GR data comes from schools that have every reason to cheat – more to avoid bad publicity than to avoid the pitifully weak penalties imposed by the NCAA. This, notwithstanding what Dr. Lapchick told

the *NewsHour* on March 30, "scholarships are [teams'] bread and butter. ... How they stay in contention to get in the tournament;" and the *NewsHour Extra* statement by Britt Kirwan, current Chancellor of the University of Maryland and a member of the NCAA co-opted Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.¹⁰ Kirwan said, "When some high-profile teams start losing scholarships, you're going to see some pushback."

When it comes to educational statistics, spin is in and due diligence is crucial, wrote Clifford Adelman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy.¹¹ Adelman concluded his remarks by saying: "The point, then and now, is that descriptions of reality matter. Whether the statistics presented to you about higher education are official, derived from official data, or unofficial, make sure you know how they were produced, check them against other numbers whenever possible, and challenge whenever justifiable. Make that a matter of breathing in and breathing out." The IDES report on GRs and the NCAA's APR reports are two cases in point.¹²

AN OPTIMISTIC TREND?

Dr. Lapchick has said the IDES study indicates that while graduation rates have gone up in recent years, "the lingering bad news is the continuing disparity in the academic success between African-American and white men's basketball student-athletes."^{1,4} Here, the takeaway is that the IDSE study indicated an improvement in graduation rates. Nevertheless, it is contended that there is no way of knowing whether or not these improved rates reflect real improvement in educational outcomes for college athletes. Put another way, there is no basis for knowing how much of this reported improvement is verifiable – in the sense that the degrees were earned in accredited majors – and how much of the improvement is attributable to academic corruption.

No doubt, the poor academic performance reported by IDSE is much better than it would be in a transparent system with independent oversight. The results of the IDSE study are still troubling – given the millions of dollars some schools earn from their basketball programs and the millions of dollars these schools spend on elaborate academic eligibility centers to provide an alternative education for their athletes.

In the *NewsHour Extra*, Buhayar reported that some leaders in higher education see rising graduation rates and the NCAA's commitment to tracking academic progress as a good sign. Maryland's Kirwan, seems optimistic about the NCAA's new guidelines, saying: "I would concur that graduation rates don't necessarily measure what students are learning, but that doesn't mean that this measure is not a good one to have."³ According to Buhayar, Kirwan believes that holding schools accountable for their players' progress toward degrees will force athletic programs to start addressing a long-standing problem. This raises a crucial question: Just who will be holding the schools accountable?

WHAT'S REALLY NEEDED

Without an independent outcomes assessment of student learning, IDES and the government have to take a school's word on GRs and APRs for their athletes. If colleges and universities are ever going to produce, collect and publish meaningful and trustworthy information about student outcomes, accreditors need to force them to do so. Why? Because the NCAA will not require their member schools to do it. Disclosure of even aggregated outcome assessments on the athletes in their football and basketball programs – compliant with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act – would expose the NCAA's phony student-athlete scheme to the light of day.

In the future, transparency/disclosure could enable the provision of more trustworthy GR and APR data from the schools as well as tangible evidence justifying the NCAA's tax-exempt status. But that won't even begin to happen until schools require their athletes to perform as real students – maintaining them as an integral part of their student bodies where academic standards of

performance for athletes are the same as for the general student body. And that won't happen unless and until transparency/disclosure is mandated by the Congress

CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRY

What really stood out on the *NewsHour* segment was that no mention was made of the pressure exerted on the NCAA cartel by the continuing congressional inquiry into the justification of the NCAA's tax-exempt status as an institution of higher education.

The Drake Group worked with staff members of the Oversight Subcommittee of the House Committee on Ways & Means during the past year to illuminate the true professional nature of big-time college sports, its tight connection to the entertainment business, and its marginal relevance to the educational, tax-exempt mission of its member institutions, as well as its negative impact on America's K-16 education system. The Drake Group has advocated for government intervention – contending that academic integrity can only be assured by means of transparency (with related academic disclosure), accountability, and oversight. Nor, was mention made of media pressure on the NCAA such as expressed by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and, most recently by the *National Catholic Reporter*.

TRUTH TELLING

In the words of Barbara Tuchman: "Telling the truth about a given condition is absolutely requisite to any possibility of reforming it." But who wants to hear the truth? Sadly, the following sentiments appear to be widely held by those who benefit from participation in the highly commercialized college sports entertainment business, including rabid fans and alumni who hold reform-minded faculty in various levels of contempt:

"You weep for the student-athlete and you curse the money in sports. You have the luxury of not knowing what we know: that the student-athlete's death, while tragic, probably saved colleges. And our existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves colleges. You don't want the truth because deep down in places you don't talk about at parties, you want us on TV, you need it on TV.... We have neither the time nor the inclination to explain ourselves to people who rise and sleep under the blanket of the very entertainment that we provide and then question the manner in which we provide it. We would rather you just said thank you and went on your way...." ¹³

The truth will likely cause no public explosion of shock, horror, and disbelief. Nevertheless, here are some additional actions aimed at getting the truth out to the public and to the Congress:

- The Drake Group's March 28-29, Conference, "Academic Integrity and College Athletics in the 21st Century: On the Road to Disclosure?," emphasized the need for disclosure while honoring Dr. Linda Bensen-Meyers for her courageous defense of academic integrity.⁸
- The Drake Group directors approved "A Commentary on NCAA President Myles Brand's November 13, 2006, Reply to the Honorable William Thomas's Letter of October 2, 2006." The press release of this document is scheduled for April 10, 2007.¹⁴
- The essay, "The Congressional Challenge to the NCAA Cartel's Tax-Exempt Status," with its appended "March Madness" cover story from the *National Catholic Reporter*,¹⁵ has been widely distributed within the Congress as will the Spring 2007 issue of the *IEEE/ASEE Interface* that carries a piece titled: "THE U. S. CONGRESS, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND COLLEGE SPORTS REFORM: Signs of Progress, Truth, and Consequences."¹⁶
- The essay, "THE U. S. CONGRESS: New Hope for Constructive Engagement with the NCAA and Intercollegiate Athletics," has been published in the Spring 2007 issue of *The Montana Professor*.¹⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The *NewsHour* has been providing a valuable public service by airing segments dedicated to the illumination of the problems in college sports such as the continuing poor academic performance of college athletes. Unfortunately, by accepting and reporting on data from the NCAA and schools without due diligence, it appears that the IDES and the *NewsHour* have become unwitting members of the NCAA cartel's PR propaganda machine.

To help clean up NCAA/school provided data and the academic corruption behind it, The Drake Group has advocated for government intervention -- contending that academic integrity can only be assured by means of transparency (with related academic disclosure), accountability, and oversight.

Hopefully, future coverage of the subject by the *NewsHour* and others in the media will reflect this compelling need for truth telling about the hypocrisy in big-time college sports.

Frank G. Splitt, a Life Fellow of the IEEE and a Fellow of the International Engineering Consortium, is a former McCormick Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University, a Vice President Emeritus of Nortel Networks, and a member of The Drake Group. He was the recipient of the 2006 *Robert Maynard Hutchins Award*. His essays and commentaries on college sports reform are available on the Web.¹⁴

NOTES

1. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/sports/jan-june07/ncaa_03-30.html

2. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/sports/jan-june06/ncaa_3-31.html

3. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june05/ncaa_3-14.htm

4. Lapchick, Richard, "Keeping Score When It Counts: Graduation Rates for 2007 NCAA Division 1 Tournament Teams," <http://www.bus.ucf.edu/sport/cgi-bin/site/sitew.cgi?page=/ides/index.htm>

5. Buhayar, Noah, "College Players Struggle to Make the Grade: Colleges' Record Mixed When It Comes to Graduation Rates Among Basketball Players," *Online NewsHour Extra*, April 2, 2007, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june07/ncaa_4-02.html

6. The following relevant exchanges are excerpts from the Transcript of the March 30, 2007 *NewsHour* Segment:

JEFFREY BROWN: Are they feeling that pressure, do you think, Richard Lapchick? Is that why you see a positive sign here of improvement?

RICHARD LAPCHICK: I think the passage of something called the academic progress rates, which if they fall below a certain standard, starting next year, in terms of their graduation rates, they'll start to lose scholarships.

I speak on college campuses pretty regularly, and people in the athletics department tell me all the time that now they've started to recruit athletes that they are confident will be able to graduate because the coaches do not want to lose those scholarships. Those scholarships are their bread and butter of how they stay in contention to get in the tournament and to get to this weekend in general.

JEFFREY BROWN: Mr. Lapchick, we just have a minute here, but I wanted to ask you, for those schools that continue to do poorly, how much of an oversight regime is there? Is there anybody really pushing them with some, you know, real hard sanctions?

RICHARD LAPCHICK: Well, this is going to be the first time, starting next year, that the NCAA will be able to penalize them with a loss of scholarships. You know, we've gone for 50 or 60 years with poor graduation rates that have really very recently, under Miles Brand leadership, started to change.

And I think the fact that they are able to put in those sanctions is the primary difference-maker. But I want to point out that, on many of our college campuses, those basketball student-athletes who are African-Americans graduated at a higher rate than African-American students in general.

7. Splitt, Frank G., "The Student-Athlete: An NCAA False Claim?"

http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_The_Student_Athlete.pdf

8. Gilbert, Bob, "A Report on Academic Failure of NCAA's Final Four," *CollegeAthleticsClips.com*, March 30, 2007. For ease of access, this reference has been appended to this essay with permission.

9. Splitt, Frank G., "Why the NCAA's latest reform measures won't work," Item 4, page 7 at URL http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Essays.pdf.

10. _____, "College Sports Reform: Beyond the Knight Commission," Item 14, page 28 at URL http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Essays.pdf.

11. Adelman, Clifford, "The Propaganda of Numbers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Chronicle Review*, Oct. 13, 2006. Note that the NCAA has a penchant for quoting statistics characterizing all sports programs rather than the far more alarming results of the large revenue sports of football and men's basketball.

12. Another good example is the NCAA's penchant for quoting statistics characterizing all sports programs rather than the far more alarming results of the large revenue sports of football and men's basketball.

13. Schaeffer, John H., "Handling the Truth," *Sports Illustrated*, March 12, 2007. Note, this is an excerpt from a letter in response to the L. Jon Wertheim's "THE PROGRAM," the March 5, 2007 *Sports Illustrated* portrait of Ohio State athletics. The letter paraphrased the courtroom outburst by Colonel Nathan Jessup in *A Few Good Men*.

14. <http://thedrakegroup.org/splittessays.html>

15. http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Congressional_Challenge.pdf

16. <http://www.ewh.ieee.org/soc/es/Interface-Apr-07.pdf>, see pages 3-5.

17. A prepublication version can be accessed at http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Montana_Professor.pdf

APPENDIX – A Report on Academic Failure of NCAA's Final Four

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

Our guest author – in step with The Drake Group - has plenty to say about low standards and academic fraud as related to big-time college athletics.

by Bob Gilbert

THE NCAA MEN'S Final Four is the most convincing evidence yet that big-time college football and basketball teams that achieve lofty national ranking take priority over academics at those universities.

To be sure, NCAA president Myles Brand and the NCAA's corporate sponsors will find ways to spin a positive story out of the 2007 Final Four's dismal performance in the classroom. But it'll all be a lie.

Ohio State, notorious for its teams' academic performances, plays Georgetown, and Florida faces UCLA in the semifinals Saturday in Atlanta.

Using the NCAA's latest Academic Progress Rate, which measures how well a team is doing in a given semester, UCLA, Ohio State and Florida have failing grades. An APR passing grade is 925 (out of 1,000). UCLA's APR is 915, Ohio State's 911 and Florida's 903. Georgetown's 963 is the only passing APR.

But to show you how disingenuous the NCAA can be in extolling the academic virtues of its most successful on-court or on-field teams, look at the conflicting data the NCAA relies upon.

The Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), which penalizes teams which have had members fail academically and leave school in bad academic standing, shows defending national champion Florida (33-5) leads the Final Four with a 67 FGR, but Georgetown (30-6) graduates only 47 percent, UCLA (30-5) 38 percent and Ohio State (34-3) 10 percent.

The NCAA insists the FGR is unfair, so it came up with a Graduation Success Rate which does not penalize a team which has had players in good academic standing turn pro early or leave school early for some reason.

Florida's FGR is 100 percent, followed by Georgetown 64, UCLA 44 and Ohio State 38. If academics have any standing at all with the NCAA, which they don't, Ohio State and UCLA have absolutely no business being in the Final Four.

The NCAA says it's already taking scholarships away from teams performing poorly academically and that it'll begin denying schools post-season competition beginning next year if their APRs are persistently below 925 or their graduation rates below 50 percent

A growing number of faculty across the nation believes universities, with the blessings of their presidents and trustees, have allowed big-time football and men's basketball to become more important than academics on their campuses. The reformers want to reverse that and make academics the schools' number one priority.

The NCAA is resisting that movement with every fiber of its being because the NCAA, like the presidents, trustees and athletics directors, know how many millions of dollars are awaiting the teams that rank the highest and advance to the Final Four or play in BCS bowls.

It's an issue of runaway commercialism. Dr. James Duderstadt, president emeritus at Michigan, calls it the "arms race" in college sports.

Jon Ericson, provost emeritus at Drake University, and Bruce Svare, founder of the National Institute for Sports Reform, believe the only way to correct the problem associated with big-time sports is to disclose how universities keep academically unqualified athletes eligible for varsity competition.

Ericson and Svare call it "disclosure." They say the faculty must take the lead in exposing how administrations and some faculty cheat to keep players eligible. That means revealing the soft courses they take, the bogus degrees they pursue, the failing grades that are changed to passing, and the many other nefarious frauds perpetrated on the student and the public.

By using the term "student-athlete," the NCAA implies a truth that in reality is a lie. As you can see by the various measurements -- the APR, FGA and GSR -- the students are athletes first, then maybe a few are also students.

When schools report the graduation of their athletes each semester, they include non-scholarship walk-ons who usually outnumber scholarship players in large numbers. Some coaches have admitted giving walk-ons with high grade-point averages a scholarship their senior year in order to raise the APR and GSR. That is an act of fraud.

When she blew the whistle on the University of Tennessee's academic fraud in 1999, English professor Linda Bensel-Meyers said players are being cheated by a system that discourages academic achievement. Most of those players, after their four years of eligibility are used up, are cut loose without a degree, she said.

The Southeastern Conference and the NCAA denied her allegations that Tennessee has orchestrated a scheme to keep players eligible. But she had the data to back up her charge. The NCAA refused to look at the data, saying only that it leaves such investigations to the individual schools. That's tantamount to a judge asking the bank robber if he robbed the bank.

Bensel-Meyers this week in Cleveland, Ohio, received the 2007 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award, given annually by the Drake Group, to someone who has shown courage in standing up for academic integrity in the face of commercialized college sports. Previous winners were Northwestern University's Frank Splitt (2006), one of the reform leaders; Tiffany Mayne (2005) who revealed academic fraud at LSU; and Jan Kemp (2004) who won a jury award of \$2.58 million after disclosing a grades scandal involving Georgia football players.

The faculty reformers, led by Duderstadt and Splitt, have sent a steady stream of incriminating information to various congressional committees with oversight of government agencies, appropriations and tax exemption issues.

All Congress needs to do, to understand the corruption that exists in big-time college sports, is to hold hearings, place the presidents, trustees and athletics directors under oath, and ask the tough, probing questions about how they operate.

The incriminating evidence is there. As Ericson and Svare say, the problems in big-time college sports can be corrected only if they are disclosed by faculty and Congress.

Of course, some of these congressmen are the ones who benefit from the "freebie" tickets and other perks handed out by the universities they'll be investigating.

That's why the news media need to ride close herd on such hearings as well as independently asking the tough questions of the universities themselves.

National sports writer Robert Lipsyte, in a recent essay, described how the NCAA taints athletes and the schools for which they play. "This is the mudseason of the sports calendar," Lipsyte said. "...Here comes the (NCAA's) men's Division I basketball championship--the Big Dance for sports writers, the Bracket Racket for gamblers, a frat-rat party, a racist entertainment, and a subversion of higher education..."

"Calling it March Madness slaps lipstick on a pig. But we'll call it March Madness, too, and get down in the mud."

Columnist Bob Gilbert, former Associated Press writer and retired University of Tennessee director of news operations, wrote this commentary on 3-30-07, and it has been reprinted on Clips with the author's permission.

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