

A Common Sense Approach to Recruiting Academically Disadvantaged Athletes

By Frank G. Splitt

In a recent essay, Allen Sack makes a well thought out case for freshman ineligibility, a 2.0 GPA for eligibility, and five year scholarships – all in a way that might be appealing to teams trying to get a leg up on competing for a national championship.¹ He not only suggests a new, common-sense approach for academically competitive universities to play big-time football without compromising themselves, but an approach that would also demonstrate the adopting school's educational commitment to academically disadvantaged recruits.

Sack proposes that schools with high academic standards use NCAA minimum standards to offer two types of scholarships to athletes who are academically at risk:

Type 1 -- Moderate risk recruits that score at least a 900 on the SATs (or an equivalent ACT score) and graduate from high school with a 3.0 grade point average enter the school's regular program for athletes.

Type 2 -- Greater than moderate risk recruits that fall below the Type-1 academic threshold would be prohibited from participating in football program related activities during their first semester in college and thereafter if they do not achieve at least a 2.0 grade point average.

Sack's approach would allow each university (or conference) to raise the NCAA's freshman eligibility requirement to fit its academic mission and student profile.² If Notre Dame is the first adopter, it could make it a national leader in intercollegiate athletics reform.

Why does Sack make sense?

Increased television exposure allows previously lower-level competitors to recruit against traditional football powers. Also, NCAA limits on the number of football scholarships have created greater parity among the big-time football programs each of which is competing for 'food' in the form of talented recruits as they strive to swim in the ocean of money generated by the college sports entertainment businesses. Consequently, there is ever growing pressure to recruit athletically talented students.³

A recent *Time Magazine* article provides a troubling sketch of today's college sports programs and their effort to get commitments from ever younger athletes – even down to the 6th grade.⁴ It's a shady recruiting game driven by the pressure on coaches and schools to win at any cost in the college sports entertainment business where fame, glory and big money apparently go to the best cheaters (those that cheat, get results, and don't get caught).⁵

In the process of early age recruiting, the importance of studying and learning is easily lost not only among those seeking to cement an athletic path to college at an early age, but also, and worse yet, on their admiring peers – the recipients of a grossly distorted message that puts athletics way above academics on their hierarchy of values.

Also, the pressure to recruit athletically talented but academically disadvantaged students and then deny them a legitimate college education grows by the day as does academic corruption that enables the process. There is a related concern as well – the really dark side of college athletics – recruiting talented but troubled out-of-state athletes that can put campuses and communities at risk.⁶

Although all schools supporting big-time football programs lower their admissions standards for athletes, institutions with relatively high academic standards suffer a competitive disadvantage in that their admissions standards usually far exceed the NCAA's weak freshman eligibility requirements. The NCAA minimalist requirements help promote professional level play by maximizing the talent pool as they simply aim to deny functionally illiterate recruits from competing and receiving athletic aid as freshmen.

Sack's approach would certainly ensure that athletes not only meet the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate (APR) requirements, but get a real education as well. However, there looms a key question: Would Notre Dame or any of the other traditional football powers willfully concede a competitive edge to future opponents in what amounts to a step back from the intercollegiate athletics arms race and the likely forfeiture of lucrative media contracts?

The athletics arms race shows itself not in marked improvement in athletic performance (relative to competitors) but in increased shifting of economic investment from academics and research into servicing the arms race itself via building and support programs for athletics facilities including Athletic Eligibility Centers. However, wasteful though it may be, even a partial withdrawal from the race could lead to losing an opportunity to cash in, or keep cashing in on really big money.

Sack's proposal would make eminently good sense to a rational audience. Unfortunately, the world of big-time college sports is anything but rational. It's a world where money is everything. Who besides NCAA officials, school officials, and other diehard defenders of the status quo, would ever claim that teams of real students are playing big-time college football or men's basketball, let alone taking the field in BCS championship games, or, to the court during March Madness' Final Four?

Perhaps the presidents of colleges and universities who want to gain and maintain high academic standards could be moved to solicit advice from their faculty and others on the place of the value-distorting, sports entertainment business in their schools. They might even go so far as to provide independently verifiable evidence that their recruited athletes are bona fide, degree seeking students. For example, they could publish

aggregated (Buckley-compliant) academic data from cohorts of football and basketball team athletes – providing the names of the faculty (along with the title of the courses and course GPA) who are providing university-level courses for many academically unprepared athletes who have a full-time (athletic) job, miss numerous classes, and come dead tired to others.⁷

This would be a breakthrough of historic proportions since getting institutions of higher education to tell the truth – making public information on how they do, or don't, educate athletes has been a long and arduous battle. Since Sack's approach would require courageous and visionary leadership, it is likely to be ignored at most, if not all, schools supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs – most certainly if transparency, accountability, and independent oversight are part and parcel of the program.

However, you never know. Stranger things have happened, but just don't bet on it happening without government intervention.

NOTES

1. Sack, Allen, "A CROSSROADS FOR THE FIGHTING IRISH (AND THEIR PEERS)," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 4, 2008, <<http://insidehighered.com/views/2008/01/04/sack>>. This essay is based on the author's comment, "A Common Sense Approach to Recruiting," posted January 8, 2008 at the foregoing URL.
2. According to the NCAA, an athlete with a combined SAT score of 400 — the lowest score possible — can compete and receive athletic aid as a freshman if a high grade point average in high school offsets the low test score.
3. Splitt, Frank G., "Employing Academically Unqualified Athletes," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Unqualified_College_Athletes.pdf
4. Gregory/Aurora, Sean, "Courting Eighth Graders," *Time Magazine*, Oct. 8, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1666283,00.html>
5. Splitt, Frank G., "Going Beyond the Mitchell Report: Cheating in College Sports via Performance Enhancing Drugs and Academic Corruption, http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Mitchell_Beyond.pdf
6. Dohrmann, George, "Trouble in Paradise," *SI.Com*, Posted August 7, 2007, http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2007/writers/george_dohrmann/08/07/trouble.in.paradise0813/index.html
7. Splitt, Frank G., "Truth Telling on Campus," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Truth_Telling_on_Campus.pdf