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How to Evaluate NCAA Success in Attaining its Stated Mission. Implications for Athletes' Rights and Social Justice

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Most major organizations have mission statements that define their purpose or reason for existing. A mission statement is meaningful only if it acts as a unifying force for guiding strategic decision making and achieving long term goals. Well defined mission statements also serve as a yardstick for measuring organizational effectiveness in attaining stated goals. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to discuss methods that can be used to determine whether the NCAA is achieving its educational goals or merely using its mission statement as support for an “unrelated business.” Differences between Federal Graduation Rates, Graduation Success Rates, and the Academic Progress Rate are examined. Implications of the NCAA’s statement of purpose for social justice and athletes’ rights are also discussed.

Most major organizations have mission statements. A mission statement is sometimes referred to as a statement of purpose, a statement of philosophy, or a statement of what business one is in. Regardless of the label, mission statements provide the foundation for setting priorities, developing strategies, and defining organizational goals (Pearce & David, 1987). Most important, mission statements specify the fundamental reason why an organization exists. Well defined mission statements also serve as a yardstick for measuring organizational effectiveness and progress toward attaining stated goals (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2004; Robbins & Coulter, 2009).

The NCAA’s basic purpose as stated in the *NCAA Manual* (2010) is “to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body, and by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports.”(p.1). Mission statements, if used strategically can serve as an important tool for communicating an organization’s statement of fundamental values to external constituencies (Mission Newsletter, 2010). In the NCAA’s case, these constituencies may include powerful organizations like the Federal Government and the Courts. The NCAA

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for instance, has repeatedly relied on its mission statement to deflect challenges from the Internal Revenue Service, and from legal challenges by athletes seeking financial and medical benefits that exceed what NCAA rules allow (McCormick & McCormick, 2006; Nagy, 2005; Sobocinski, 2000).

Although the NCAA has been very successful in communicating its educational message over the years, the explosive growth revenue-producing sports has led some to question the educational value of practices such as the sale of TV broadcasts for billions of dollars, regular season football games played on weekday evenings, coaches' salaries in the \$4 million range, and the expansion of conferences to penetrate new markets. For instance, in 2006 William Thomas, chair of the House Committee on Ways and Means, asked NCAA President Myles Brand, to explain how the NCAA and its member institutions accomplish their educational mission, thereby justifying the college sport industry's exemption from unrelated business income taxes (New York Times, 2006).

As big time college sport takes on more of the trappings of professional sport, it will become more important than ever for the NCAA to provide valid and reliable measures which can help to answer questions like those posed by Congressman Thomas. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to discuss methods to determine whether the NCAA is achieving its educational goals or merely using its mission statement as ideological camouflage for an exploitative business cartel. I will also comment on the implications of the NCAA's mission for athletes' rights and social justice. A major assumption of my address is that maintaining athletes as an integral part of the student body entails far more than keeping athletes eligible for competition.

Measuring whether College Athletes Are an Integral Part of the Student Body

Federal Graduation Rate (FGR)

The Federal Graduation Rate which I will refer to in this paper as the Fed Rate is one way to measure whether athletes are an integral part of the student body. The Fed Rate is the percentage of students who manage to graduate within six years from the school they entered as freshman. The NCAA began to make Fed Rates public after the passage of the Student-Right to Know Act and Campus Security Act (P.L. 101-542) by Congress in 1990 (Hagedorn, 2004). The Student-Athlete Right to Know Act, which was originally introduced by Senators Bill Bradley and Edward Kennedy, was passed as "a consumer-information provision" to help prospective college athletes and their parents make informed choices about the institutions they are considering.

The Fed Rate's value as a measure of whether college athletes are an integral part of the student body derives from its focus on retention. For instance, research based on the interactionist model has found that the higher the retention rate, the more socially and academically integrated students are likely to be into a college or university (Nora & Cabrera, 1993; Tinto, 1997). Students who remain at the same university until graduation are likely to be those who become engaged in academic and campus culture. These students also have an opportunity to progress through a curriculum designed to meet that school's mission. Research

also has found that the stronger a student's affiliation with a college's milieu—both in and out of class—the greater the likelihood of retention (Nora, 1993; Titus, 2006).

The Fed Rate is especially useful in the athletic context because it allows comparisons of athletes with other students on campus. For instance, the Fed Rate for the University of Florida's general student body in 2009 was 80%, meaning that 80% of the students that entered Florida as freshmen actually graduated from Florida in 6 years.¹ The Fed Rate for the football team was 42%, resulting in a 38% gap. The Fed Rates at Stanford University in this same period were 95% for the general student body and 85% for the players, a difference of only ten percentage points (NCAA, 2009). All colleges and universities experience a certain amount of attrition. But when athletes are far more likely to drop out or transfer to another school than other students, one has to question how well the athletes fit the school's academic profile and mission in the first place.²

The retention rates of athletes are an important measure of how well the NCAA is attaining its mission. However, Eckard (2010) has argued that Fed Rate comparisons tend to underestimate the graduation rate gap between athletes and other students. This, he argues, is because the graduation rates of the general student bodies to which athletes are compared are biased downward by the presence of part-time students who often take longer than six years to graduate. Boise State, for instance, graduated only 27% of its general student body in the 2009 Report, but 48% of its football players. The percentage of part-time students at Boise State is 34%, among the highest in the FBS. Eckard argues that if those part-time students were full-time, as football players must be to be eligible to play, the Fed Rate for the general student body would exceed that of the players. Eckard's statistical adjustment for eliminating the part-time bias (AGG), while provocative, remains a rough estimate of the graduation gap.

Graduation Success Rate (GSR)

The National Center for Education and Retention differentiates the terms “persistence” and “retention,” when discussing college graduation rates (Hagedorn, 2004). “Persistence” focuses on a student's success at attaining a college degree, regardless of how long it takes or the number of colleges attended. “Retention” focuses on a school's success at transforming freshmen into alumni of their institution. According to Hagedorn (2004) “institutions retain and students persist” (p. 6). For instance, a college athlete who begins school at one institution, transfers to another, and ultimately graduates will count against the retention rate of the first institution even though he or she has persisted and graduated elsewhere. While the Fed Rate is an excellent measure of retention, it was not meant to measure persistence of students who leave for another school and graduate sometime in the future.³

For years, coaches and college athletic officials have complained that the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), as defined by Congress, inaccurately and unfairly measures the academic performance of the players on their teams. To address this issue the NCAA, in 2005, introduced its own graduation rate which is called the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). The assumption of the GSR—and it seems like a fair one—is that athletes who leave one university often end up completing their degree in another. The GSR methodology excludes from the calculation of graduation rates those athletes—transfers are an example—who leave school early but

in good academic standing. The NCAA methodology also includes athletes who transfer into an institution in a school's graduation rate. It seems fair to say that the Federal Graduation Rate focuses on retention, while the NCAA Graduation Success Rate emphasizes persistence.

The major strength of the Graduation Success Rate is its recognition that athletes often take a different path to graduation than other students. The GSR will make a major contribution to understanding how athletes are educated when it can accurately track all of the athletes who leave in good academic standing. At present, the NCAA has no way of knowing the exact number of athletes who leave that actually graduate later on. Although the GSR captures a sizable number of athletes who transfer in and out, a large percentage is still missing when it comes to graduation data (Denhart, Villwock, & Vedder, 2009). In terms of fairness, the GSR recognizes the accomplishments of athletes who transfer from one school to another and earn a degree. The Fed Rate is a fair measure of how well schools retain athletes when compared with other students. Both methods are fair and necessary, but measure very different things.

Other Measures of Whether Athletes Are an Integral Part of the Student Body

Admission Test Scores and Special Admits

Graduation rates are only one measure of whether the NCAA is achieving its stated mission. A critical measure of whether athletes are an integral part to the student body is whether they are as well prepared for college level work as other students. This is especially important for college athletes in sports that demand a great deal of practice and travel time and can leave athletes physically and emotionally exhausted. Having roughly the same verbal, reading, and quantitative skills as other students would help athletes reconcile the often contradictory demands made on them by faculty and coaches (Adler & Adler, 1991; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Counseling centers can help athletes who are struggling academically, but these centers can also isolate athletes from other students on campus, thereby increasing what Adler and Adler (1991) refer to as role engulfment.

Investigative reporters have been increasingly successful in gaining access to data that sheds light on these issues. The *Atlantic Journal Constitution*, for instance, gathered test score data via public records requests in 2008 on 54 public universities that play big-time college sports and found significant gaps between big-time college football players and other students in standardized test scores (Knobler, 2008). Other journalists have reported data on the disproportionate number of "special admits" in big-time college sports schools (Alesia, 2008). Although these studies contribute to our understanding of how college athletes are educated, they fall short of the rigor needed to qualify as scientific studies, largely because these authors often work with woefully inadequate data bases. *U.S News and World Report* publishes such data on entering freshman students on a yearly basis. The NCAA should return to its former practice of reporting test scores by sport and university. The NCAA should also examine the issue of special admits. This kind of transparency would demonstrate NCAA commitment to its mission.

Clustering

Being academically prepared for college is important for academic success, but so is athletes' freedom to choose their own major. Research (Fountain & Finley, 2009) has found that athletes are more likely to cluster around certain majors than are other students. An over-representation of athletes in some courses is not a problem if there is a legitimate academic reason for them to do so. Clustering only becomes an academic problem if athletes have no choice but to take courses and majors to accommodate the demands of their sport. The issue of "gut courses" and "friendly faculty" is one that faculty should address. But NCAA research on this issue would shed light on how well athletes are integrated into student life. The NCAA might also consider coming to the defense of faculty who face ostracism for exposing academic fraud.⁴

Academic Progress Rate (APR)

The NCAA introduced the APR in 2005. The APR is a semester by semester measurement of an athletic team's academic success. When first enacted, each student receiving athletically related financial aid earned one retention point for staying in school and one eligibility point for being academically eligible (NCAA, 2010). The teams total points earned were divided by points possible. That score was then multiplied by 1000, yielding the teams APR. Since 2005, significant changes have been made in the calculation. Exceptions are now made for athletes in good academic standing who leave early for the pros, athletes who transfer while meeting minimum academic requirements, and athletes who return to school at a later date. In essence, the APR now gives little emphasis to retention. A question that needs to be addressed is whether maintaining athletic eligibility is what the NCAA means by "maintaining athletes as an integral part of the student body."

Retaining a Clear Line of Demarcation Between Collegiate and Professional Sport

The prestigious Knight Foundation Commission on College Athletics has stated that the look and feel of big-time college sport has become increasingly professional (Knight Foundation, 2001).⁵ Stadium expansion that includes skyboxes and other luxury seating, licensing deals worth millions, the sale of television rights to networks and new media outlets, conferences with their own TV networks, coaches with four and five million dollar salaries, conference expansion spurred primarily by the prospect of selling college games in more lucrative markets and attracting more corporate sponsors: these are just a few of the ways that big-time college sport mimics its professional counterparts. It is little wonder that Congressman Thomas, Chair of the House Committee on Ways and Means, asked in his 2006 letter to NCAA President Myles Brand to explain how college sports differs from professional sport aside from the former's tax exemption.

The NCAA's answer to that question has not changed since the NCAA's first organizational meeting in 1906, even though rules regarding athletically-related financial aid have changed dramatically. According to the NCAA, big-time college athletes are amateurs engaged in an avocation. "Amateurism," as former NCAA

president Myles Brand correctly asserted, “defines the participants, not the enterprise,” meaning that the amount of revenue generated by college sport, even if the revenue comes from the same sources as those used by professional leagues and franchises, is totally irrelevant when it comes to differentiating amateur and professional sports (Brand, 2006). The difference lies with whether the athletic participants are paid, and from the NCAA’s perspective athletic scholarships do not constitute pay for play.

A very different perspective on the NCAA’s ability to retain a clear line of demarcation between collegiate and professional sport comes from scholars and reformers who support athlete’s rights. From their perspective, big-time college sport made a clean break from amateurism in 1973 when four-year scholarships were replaced by one-year scholarships whose renewal can be conditioned on athletic performance and injury (Byers, 1995, Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Sack 2008; Oriard, 2009). According to this argument, one-year renewable scholarships give coaches control over the lives of college athletes not unlike the control employers have over employees. And the college sport industry has become more of an unrelated business of the university than an integral part of the educational program.

The question of whether the NCAA is successfully achieving its mission to retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports is not likely to be resolved by data and empirical research. Rather the answer depends on how long the courts will continue to support the NCAA’s claim that athletes whose room, board, tuition and fees are conditioned on performance are amateurs. This will be a legal and political battle, not one likely to be resolved by yet another scholarly study. A Class Action Complaint recently filed in a U.S. District Court by a college athlete at Rice University challenges the NCAA’s right to limit the period of a scholarship award to one-year (U.S. District Court, 2010). Other cases which challenge the NCAA’s right to limit athletes’ financial aid are likely to increase in years to come. The Ed O’Bannon versus NCAA licensing case is another important example (Thamel, 2010).

Implications for Athletes Rights and Social Justice

There may have been a time when mission statements were perfunctory documents which managers stored away in a filing cabinet and seldom read. Today such statements are often powerful tools for communicating with internal and external stakeholders. The NCAA’s statement of purpose expresses educational principles that are at the core of American higher education. But even the perception that the NCAA is saying one thing and doing another can undermine the organization’s legitimacy and make rule enforcement almost impossible. The NCAA’s use of its mission statement to mask an unrelated business would constitute blatant exploitation and an assault on social justice.

African Americans comprise a small minority of all students in Football Bowl Subdivision Conferences. Yet about 82% of all African American athletes in the FBS play football or basketball, the two sports that generate the lion’s share of the revenue and have the lowest Fed Rates (Coakley, 2007). Some scholars (Hawkins, 2010; Edwards, 2000; Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002; Sailes, 1993) have argued that many high school and college athletes, especially African Americans—given the racial ideology to which they have been exposed—pursue a career in profes-

sional sports with little regard for developing skills necessary for success in other professions. If the NCAA is not meeting its educational mission, such athletes not only miss out on crucial academic opportunities but the chance to create financial security for their families and themselves while still in college.

It is not enough for an organization to define its mission. It must also evaluate whether that mission is being accomplished. Whether the issue is conference expansion, BCS playoffs, coaches' salaries, race in sport, gender in sport, or disabilities in sport, discussions must begin with how these initiatives meet the NCAA's mission and objectives and how successful outcomes will be measured. If the NCAA and its member institutions are failing to meet their stated mission, they must either develop new strategies or rewrite the mission to fit current realities. If the NCAA is accomplishing its mission, total transparency and disclosure of data on how athletes are educated could only enhance its standing as the voice of college sports and as a strong proponent of social justice.

Notes

1. The 4-class average based on the most recent graduating class and the three previous classes was used throughout this paper when referring to the Fed Rate.
2. According to former Notre Dame athletic director, Mike Wadsworth (Delsohn, 1998), there was concern at Notre Dame toward the end of Lou Holtz's years that the Fed Rate for players had dropped from about 83% under the previous coach to about 72% under Holtz. "Some players," said Wadsworth, "left for an outstanding professional opportunity...but others left for disciplinary reasons, or because *they transferred* (emphasis mine). Well that does become a concern. Because somewhere along the line in our recruiting, we did not get the proper fit for Notre Dame" (p. 344).
3. The Fed Rate, which focuses on retention, allows exclusions for students who leave school to enter the armed services, official church missions, foreign service of the federal government, or who die or are totally disabled (NCAA, 2007).
4. In 2006, Jim Gundlach, a sociology professor at Auburn, disclosed that significant numbers of Auburn football players had enrolled in a sociology class whose professor gave A's to students who attended no classes and did no work. Since then, a crackdown on such practices at Auburn sent the football team's APR plummeting from 4th to 85th in the FBS. Gundlach, who was harassed and ostracized as a "whistle blower" has left Auburn (Thamel, 2011).
5. To quote from the Knight Foundation (2001) "Big-time college basketball and football have a professional look and feel—in their arenas and stadiums, their luxury boxes and financing, their uniforms and coaching staffs, and their marketing and administrative structures. In fact, big-time programs have become minor leagues in their own right, increasingly taken into account as part of the professional athletics system" (p. 13).

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