

Academic Progress Rate

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The new Academic Progress Rate that the NCAA hails as the cornerstone of its academic reform in college athletics serves merely to encourage academic corner-cutting if not outright fraud, its critics say.

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At the least, universities have learned to operate within the system to boost their APR scores.

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Under the 2-year-old APR, the NCAA can, for the first time, level penalties against schools whose scholarship athletes do not meet prescribed levels of academic success.

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"In one sense, (APR) is good, because for the first time someone other than the student-athlete is being penalized or bearing responsibility for not performing academically," said Ohio University Professor John Gerdy, a former legislative assistant at the NCAA and associate commissioner of the Southeastern Conference who oversaw academics.

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On the other hand, he doubts this reform will "fundamentally change the equation ... It will just raise the bar for academic fraud."

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The APR has already prompted academic advisors and athletics departments to take steps to protect their scores, which are based on the number of semesters each athlete remains both academically eligible and in school: Recommending that student-athletes who have played their final season, particularly those who have professional aspirations in football, not return to school for the following semester.

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Advising student-athletes not to graduate before athletic eligibility expires, because graduate student-athletes, who are required to take a full academic course load, often fail to maintain academic eligibility.

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Not renewing the scholarships of student-athletes in danger of becoming academically ineligible in order to head off the loss of APR points.

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Guiding student-athletes into majors where they can easily meet the NCAA's requirement of satisfactory progress toward a degree, which requires student-athletes to complete 40 percent of their degree before their third year, 60 before the fourth and 80 before the fifth.

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Reducing or doing away with the signing of junior college players, who traditionally have a more difficult time meeting the progress requirement.

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Gerdy views all those decisions as "academic fraud."

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"It's not just about changing grades," Gerdy said. "To me, when you tell a kid 'don't come back next semester because it's better for our APR,' that's gaming the system. You're doing things that are not necessarily in the kids' best academic welfare."

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Some coaches have talked about helping their APR numbers by awarding unused athletic scholarships to walk-ons who excel academically.

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"Is that a bad thing?" asks Greg Sankey, who now sits in Gerdy's office as an associate SEC commissioner responsible for compliance and academics. "To reward the kids who are good academically instead of the kid who is maybe a better athlete but a poor student - that's what we're trying to do. Adjust behavior, to a certain extent."

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Amy Perko, the executive director of The Knight Commission, a group of former university presidents who also advocate academic reform, disagrees.

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"There is an honor system in regard to the data," she said. "We do have concerns when we hear certain institutions are looking at the APR more as book-keeping measures, where they put a walk-on athlete on scholarship just before that walk-on is getting ready to graduate in order to bring up the numbers. While that type of book-keeping measures are in accordance with the black-and-white writing of the rule, it still does not follow the spirit of the rule."

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The NCAA relies on schools to compile their own APR scores, but will begin auditing some selected and random schools.

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UAB interim Athletics Director Richard Margison said he doubts there's a perfect way to measure the academic performance of athletes, but the APR "is a fairer measure than looking at just graduation rates ... Whether it's the right measure or best measure, I don't think we've had enough time to judge."

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