

Madness, Inc.

How colleges keep athletes on the field and out of the classroom



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Every May, more than a million students across the country celebrate a life-changing moment: college graduation.¹ The pomp and circumstance takes over campuses, as cap-and-gown clad students take their final ceremonial steps across stages, move tassels from right to left, and collectively toss their caps as high as they can. But for far too many college athletes, this moment never comes. And if it does, they often walk across the stage without a degree that prepares them for life beyond athletics.

The lack of academic integrity across college sports may be the most insidious piece of a broken system. The only significant form of compensation many athletes will receive from their efforts is a scholarship. These scholarships are, of course, very valuable, and at every chance, the NCAA claims these scholarships are more than enough to compensate athletes for the full-time hours they devote to their sports. Yet, the NCAA and colleges look the other way as athletic programs – especially in revenue-generating sports – routinely defraud athletes of the tremendous value those scholarships hold.

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College athletes purportedly receive every advantage – a scholarship, academic counseling, tutoring, etc. Despite these supposed advantages, only a fraction of athletes from many college athletic programs graduate. In some cases, only one or two players on a team will graduate. Across the board, top programs graduate their athletes at significantly lower rates than the student bodies that fill up stadiums to cheer them on. And even when athletes graduate, their diplomas are often worth far less than their peers' due to schemes aimed at keeping athletes eligible – rather than ensuring a real educational experience.

Take Stephen Cline, a former defensive lineman for Kansas State University. Cline dreamt of using his scholarship to become a veterinarian. Instead, his academic counselor pushed him to settle for a less demanding major so he could concentrate on what everyone understood was his real purpose while in Manhattan, Kansas: football.

“The whole time...I felt stuck – stuck in football, stuck in my major. Now I look back and say, ‘well what did I really go to college for?’ Crap classes you won’t use the rest of your life? I was majoring in football.”ⁱⁱ

Then there is Jonathan Cruz, who played offensive line for Oklahoma State University. Cruz said his academic advisors completed coursework for him and other athletes so they could maintain eligibility rather than focus on real learning. “I would write them, and they would take them and just completely change everything about it because it was just so awful. I never really learned how to write a paper, but I had to pull a B in Comp I, and I pulled my B in Comp I.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These stories do not describe the experience of all college athletes. Many are able to pursue athletic and scholastic endeavors simultaneously. And some schools and some coaches are better than others at making sure athletes have the chance to be serious students as well. But, far too often, especially on the money-making Division I teams, so-called “student-athletes” are athletes first and students second. For their part, athletes commit to countless hours in weight rooms, training facilities, and public events, while at the same time putting their bodies on the line for the sake of winning games and competitions on behalf of their colleges. In return, colleges promise the opportunity for a world-class education and the support necessary for athletes to realize that opportunity.



Unfortunately, the NCAA and its member schools care far more about the appearance of educating athletes than they do about actually educating them.

Unfortunately, the NCAA and many of its member schools too often care more about the appearance of educating athletes than they do about actually educating them. That façade of educational opportunity manifests in too many former athletes left “worn, torn, and asking questions,”^{iv} despite the massive commitments they made to the very colleges that failed to fulfill their basic missions as institutions of higher learning.

This report – the second in a series on the madness of college sports – will shine a light on this systemic abuse and suggest reforms that can help restore academic integrity to college sports.

Graduation Rates

So how does this broken system work? And how do we change it?

Let’s begin at the end: graduation. While the NCAA reports record-breaking graduation rates for college athletes, a closer look at the numbers shows that far too many athletes – particularly black athletes – never make it to cap-and-gown ceremonies.

According to the NCAA, college athletes have never succeeded more in the classroom than they do today. Last year, the NCAA reported that nearly 21,000 Division I athletes graduated at an astounding 88 percent rate, a record high that outpaced non-athletes.^v In fact, the NCAA claims that graduation rates increased 14 percent since 2002.^{vi} By their measure, the modern NCAA is a success story in holding programs accountable and restoring academic integrity on college campuses.

Unfortunately, these numbers are both incomplete and misleading. That’s because the NCAA uses its own metric to calculate and report graduation rates: the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). The NCAA introduced the GSR in 2002 as a replacement for the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), which they believed was unfair to athletic programs. The main difference between the two is how they account for students who transfer between colleges. The FGR calculates the rate of full-time freshmen at a college that eventually graduate from their original institutions within six years. When a student transfers, it reflects poorly on that rate. Due to the relatively high rate that athletes transfer between programs, the NCAA wanted to create a metric that would fairly account for athletes who transfer. The GSR, it insists, does just that.

In practice, however, the GSR is dramatically flawed. The GSR inflates graduation rates precisely because of how it accounts for athletes who transfer. If an athlete leaves a program prior to graduation but in good academic standing, the GSR calls that athlete a “Left Eligible” and they are excluded entirely. Wherever the athlete transfers to then becomes responsible for their academic success and it reflects upon their GSR. While this seems fair, the numbers on transfers paint a startling story. For the most recent cohort used to calculate GSR, the NCAA reported 95,782 athletes who entered college from 2006-2009.^{vii} Within this group, the NCAA reported 23,112 athletes who transferred out of their programs in good academic standing, thus labeled “Left Eligible”.^{viii} However, the NCAA only reported 8,165 athletes who transferred into programs, meaning there were nearly 15,000 – or two-thirds of all “Left Eligible” athletes and 16 percent of all athletes – who went missing in the data.^{ix} These athletes did not graduate, but the numbers account for them as if they did – painting an inflated picture of academic success. As a result, the GSR for programs is consistently 20 points higher than the FGR, and the NCAA can falsely declare victory.^x



Number of players missing from NCAA graduation rate calculations

No matter what metric you use, one thing is consistently clear: black male athletes are not doing well. Whether you use the NCAA’s metrics or the federal standard, significant disparities exist. According to the University of Southern California’s Race and Equity Center, black male athletes at the 65 colleges that comprise the top athletic conferences, also known as the Power Five, graduate at a rate that’s 5 percent lower than black undergraduate men overall, 14 percent lower than college athletes overall, and 21 percent lower than all students.^{xi}

These gaps are even more startling for black football and basketball players, who generate most of the money in college sports. According to an analysis by the College Research Institute, black football and basketball players at Power Five

colleges have graduation rates that are 22 and 35 percent lower than their peers, respectively.^{xii} In the Pac-12 Conference, the graduation gap for black men's basketball players is an astounding 53 percent.^{xiii}

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Within some individual programs, it can be a rarity for any athletes to make it to graduation. According to an analysis of the 2015 NCAA men's basketball tournament, also known as "March Madness," several teams were lucky to graduate any players at all. The University of Cincinnati and Indiana University each reported an FGR of 8 percent, with Oklahoma State University just behind them at 9 percent.^{xiv} Compared with the student body as a whole, these programs had 52, 66, and 60 point gaps, respectively.^{xv} That means in each of these cases, only one player out of a typical 15-player roster would have graduated within six years at the college from which they originally accepted a scholarship.

Federal Graduation Rates of 2015 March Madness Teams



Regardless of how you look at the numbers, there is a crisis on college campuses. While the NCAA may try to find ways to sugarcoat the data, far too many athletes are missing at graduation ceremonies. Considering that scholarship athletes must remain in good academic standing to be eligible to play at all, it begs the question: how could so many compete one day and fail to get a diploma the next? Further, these athletes are disproportionately black and primarily compete in basketball and football, the sports that generate billions in revenues for mostly white administrators, coaches, shoe company executives, and media company owners. As we covered in our first report, the refusal to compensate college athletes is a modern civil rights issue, as black teenagers are kept poor in order to enrich white adults. The failure of so many black athletes to graduate, especially in the program that makes the most money is another aspect of the growing civil rights crisis in college athletics.

Unfortunately, failing to graduate athletes is only one way that colleges and their athletic programs leave athletes without a meaningful education.

Academic Fraud 101: Keeping athletes eligible, at all costs

Every few months, it seems, a new academic scandal breaks out on a college campus. Since 1990, the NCAA has processed more than 40 cases of academic fraud, practically an annual tradition.^{xvi} Yet, the NCAA and its member institutions routinely tout the opportunities big-time college sports afford. “A college education is the most rewarding benefit of the student-athlete experience,” they say.^{xvii} In some sense they’re right: a college education is transformative. That is, if colleges maintain an environment where athletes have the opportunity to learn. Still too often, that promise is hollow.



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College athletic programs routinely find ways to undermine educational opportunities for athletes. Most egregiously, some programs have committed outright academic fraud to maintain an athlete's eligibility, often by having tutors complete assignments for athletes, enrolling athletes in courses that require no attendance or work, or fabricating eligibility information such as test scores.

Two cases of widespread academic fraud, at the University of North Carolina (UNC) and Syracuse University, best illustrate how programs put athletics before academics and what the implications are for athletes.

First up: Syracuse, New York. In 2005, following a season of poor academic performance from his players, Syracuse's head basketball coach, Jim Boeheim, hired a new director of basketball operations with an imperative: "fix" the academic problems of his athletes.^{xviii} Coming off a national championship just two years prior, the program's poor academic performance threatened to keep Syracuse out of future "March Madness" tournaments, regardless of performance on the court. The message was clear: turn things around, at all costs.

According to an eight-year investigation by the NCAA, the director found a simple solution: impersonate the athletes at risk and do their coursework for them. The director and academic support staffers sent emails from players' accounts and corresponded directly with their professors.^{xix} Many of these emails included attached academic coursework, which was necessary to maintain the required grades for eligibility. As with the emails, those assignments were completed by the staffers. The NCAA investigation revealed this scheme extended well beyond the precarious 2005 season.^{xx}

Perhaps most telling was Syracuse's desperate attempts in 2012 to keep their star center on the court. In January of that year, Syracuse was the top-ranked team in the country with a perfect 20-0 record. However, their star seven-foot center Fab Melo had failed to make enough academic progress to remain eligible. Syracuse submitted a waiver to the NCAA hoping for an exception in his case due to medical and personal difficulties. When the NCAA denied the request, Syracuse held a meeting of top university leaders, including the associate provost, athletics director, and the director of basketball operations, to discuss their options. One day later, a professor met with Melo and agreed he could submit extra work to raise the C-minus grade he received the previous year. The assignment? A paper on the medical and personal problems Melo faced in college. Melo simply submitted a minimally revised version of the waiver Syracuse sent to the NCAA

and his grade improved to a B-minus. The grade change was posted on February 1st. Melo played three days later.^{xxi}

Meanwhile, down in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the biggest academic fraud scheme in college sports history was concluding after operating for nearly two decades.

The cheating began simply enough. In 1988, Julius Nyang'oro, a faculty member with UNC's African and African-American Studies (AFRI/AFAM) department, offered an independent study course to two basketball players with marginal academic records.^{xxii} Typically, independent study courses are rare and only extended to outstanding students whose interests cannot be accommodated by traditional course offerings. Regardless, the two players earned B's, even though neither was an AFRI major and both had struggled in their other course work.

Over the next decade, independent study courses ballooned in the AFRI/AFAM department. In 1993, Nyang'oro became the chair of the department, and with the help of Burgess McSwain, the longtime academic counselor for UNC's basketball team, and Debbie Crowder, who served as Nyang'oro's administrative assistant, they developed a system of independent course offerings with increasingly large enrollments. From a handful of students in 1991, the enrollment in these courses grew to 34 in 1995, 50 in 1998, 86 in 2000, 175 in 2002, and a whopping 341 in 2004.^{xxiii}

Colloquially known as "paper classes," the independent study courses required only a research paper at the end of the semester. The issue: no faculty members were involved in the courses. Instead, Crowder would sign up students, assign them papers, and do all of the grading. Students were guaranteed an A or a B no matter the quality of the paper. Often these papers were plagiarized, written by the athletes' tutors, or barely qualified as a legible paper at all.^{xxiv} Later versions of the "paper classes" were designated as lecture courses to allow athletes to take more in a semester. These courses appeared in the course catalog as having a meeting room and time, but no students ever met.

By the end of the scheme in 2011, following Nyang'oro's departure, more than 3,000 students in total would enroll in nearly 200 courses that qualified as fraudulent.^{xxv} Nearly half of all enrollments were athletes, despite accounting for only four percent of UNC's undergraduates. More than 20 percent of UNC athletes took these courses, while just two percent of the general student population did.^{xxvi}

The results of the “paper classes” prove their singular intent was to keep athletes eligible and ensure they could focus entirely on athletics. Between 1999 and 2011, about 170 athletes would have seen their semester GPAs drop below the 2.0 eligibility threshold at least once if not for the “paper classes.”^{xxvii} After Crowder left in 2009, the football team experienced its lowest cumulative GPA in a decade. Ultimately, 80 students would not have graduated without these courses.^{xxviii}

Notably, when academic fraud schemes are uncovered, let alone any violations of NCAA rules, the athletes tend to bear the brunt of the punishments. Melo would eventually lose eligibility for the entire NCAA tournament in 2011-12, despite Syracuse’s best efforts.^{xxix} While Jim Boeheim and Syracuse would suffer from vacated wins and a one-year post-season ban, Boeheim remains the head coach and Syracuse continues to be a top contender annually. And at UNC, several football players and other athletes were banned from NCAA competition, but the university itself only received probation from its accreditor.^{xxx} Further, despite widespread participation by men’s basketball players, neither the program nor its Hall of Fame coach, Roy Williams, received any punishment and went on to win multiple national championships in the aftermath.^{xxxi}

These scandals also speak to the tension between athletics and academics that routinely undermines academic integrity and with it, the educational opportunities colleges purport to provide. It is tempting to view these scandals as athletes being complicit in breaks and privileges not available to other students. But athletic programs have nearly complete control over the lives of their athletes as well as the culture they instill. Programs can choose to exercise that unique responsibility in ways that give their athletes both educational opportunity and freedom or steer their athletes away from a real educational experience. Far too often, under the pressure to win, programs elect to undermine the educational mission at the core of the institutions they represent. In these cases, regardless of victories on the field or court, the athletes lose.

Academic Fraud 102: “Majoring in football”

When Stephen Cline, a former Kansas State University lineman, explained to USA Today that “he was majoring in football,” he described an experience that has become pervasive across college sports: the pressure and commitment to win comes before the opportunity and responsibility to learn. The tension between

the “student” and the “athlete” has become increasingly unbalanced, as the latter takes precedence amid the high stakes of college sports. As a result, athletes promised an education implicit in their scholarships too often find that promise hollow, no matter the choices they make.

Consider the actual daily experience of a college athlete. While the NCAA makes clear at every chance that “student-athletes” are not employees, their schedules mirror the most strenuous jobs. According to the NCAA’s own study, athletes average more than 40 hours a week on athletic commitments, while in-season.^{xxxii} Already that amounts to a full-time job, but even this is likely an underestimation. A 2015 study by the Pac-12 conference found that athletes averaged more than 50 hours per week on athletics-related activities,^{xxxiii} and during the Northwestern University football team’s hearing with the National Labor Relations Board that same year, the players revealed they spent upwards of 60 hours a week on football-related activities.^{xxxiv}

Now add the hours required to qualify as a student and maintain eligibility. At a minimum, athletes must average 12 credit-hours per term to maintain adequate progress towards a degree. This typically includes two to three hours outside the class studying per credit-hour.^{xxxv} That amounts to 36-48 hours devoted to coursework per week. Combined with average athletic commitments, an athlete will spend 80-90 hours per week just fulfilling their dual obligations as a student and an athlete, and easily those commitments can surpass 100 hours.

The extensive time commitments help explain another common part of a college athletes’ experience: counseling into easy majors and coursework unrelated to their interest or ambition. Again, Cline’s story offers an illustration. Despite a passion to become a veterinarian, which would require rigorous science coursework, his academic counselor pushed him toward settling for a sociology degree. A 2008 review by *USA Today* showed that athletic programs routinely push athletes toward a handful of majors they deem are either less demanding or that better fit athletic schedules. *USA Today* defined this phenomenon of “major clustering” as when a quarter or more of a program’s athletes were in the same major. After reviewing football, softball, baseball, and men’s/women’s basketball at 144 top division schools, they found that more than 80 percent had at least one cluster and more than a third had at least two.^{xxxvi} Further analysis found that black athletes were far more likely to be clustered into majors than their white teammates. At six football programs in the Atlantic Coast Conference, over 75 percent of the black players were enrolled in one or two majors.^{xxxvii}

In-season daily schedule for a Division-I football player

5:00 am Wake up

6:00 am: Work out

7:15 am: Check-in to breakfast

(grab whatever you can so you're not late to class)

7:30 am: Class

9:00 am: Class

10:30 am: Rehab and treatment

12:30 pm: Class

1:30 pm: Grab lunch if you have time

(most days you don't)

1:45 pm: Get taped, and get to meetings
by 2pm

2pm-6:30: Meetings and practice

7:00 pm: Dinner

8pm-10pm: Study hall

10pm-Midnight: Finish school work, find
food, watch film, study playbook

(credit: former Purdue safety Albert Evans)

The frequency of this phenomenon proves a broad lack of academic integrity across college sports, and more importantly, a disregard for fulfilling the promise of a scholarship. If an athlete cannot pursue their academic interests, the central value of a college education is lost. Stephen Cline exemplifies the result of this practice: at the time of his *USA Today* interview and despite having a degree in sociology, he was trying to enroll again in college – to earn the prerequisites for acceptance into a veterinary program.

“Left torn, worn and asking questions”

Myron Rolle is the exemplar of what the NCAA argues a “student-athlete” can be and achieve. As a safety at Florida State University, Rolle managed a 3.75 GPA while completing pre-medical requirements and earning a Rhodes Scholarship, all while remaining a top prospect for the NFL.^{xxxviii} If anything, Rolle should extol the virtues of a system that gave him so much opportunity.

Yet, testifying before the Senate Commerce Committee in 2014, Rolle told the truth:

“A lot of players would go through this academic machinery in their colleges and be spit out at the end of that machinery, left torn, worn and asking questions, with really no guidance on where they should go. No purpose, no idea of their trajectory, and sometimes left with a degree in hand that didn’t behoove any of their future interests.”^{xxxix}

Mary Willingham also saw the product of this system, firsthand. Willingham served as a learning specialist at UNC before she courageously blew the whistle on its academic fraud scheme. “The guys I worked with are power-washing houses, they’re working odd state jobs, they’re working third shifts at Targets,” she recalls. “They’re not using their degrees because we didn’t teach them what that degree can really get you.”^{xl}

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These stories disproportionately affect the most marginalized: those who are black and come from poverty. Meanwhile, they serve a multibillion-dollar industry and play before predominantly white audiences. Last year, black men made up 2.4 percent of undergraduate students enrolled at the 65 Power Five conference schools, but comprised 55 percent of football teams and 56 percent of men’s basketball teams on those campuses.^{xi} In fact, at many of these schools, black male athletes make up as much as 40 percent of all black men on campus.^{xii}

College mission statements are littered with high-minded ideals about the value and purpose of an education. However, it’s clear these ideals too often do not extend to the athletes that dedicate their bodies and well-being to the very institutions that break their promises to them.

Conclusion

A college degree and the education it represents have the power to transform lives. Unfortunately, the potential of a true college education will never be realized for far too many athletes across college campuses. Whether due to outright academic fraud, overly burdensome athletic schedules, academic counseling into specific majors and mismatched courses, many college athletes never get a fair shot at the opportunities that should come with a scholarship. Frequently, those most exploited within this system are athletes of color and those who come from impoverished backgrounds. The fact that this exploitation happens at institutions of higher education makes the current crisis all the more disturbing.

Incremental changes won't fix this crisis. The NCAA and its member institutions need to take immediate and significant steps to restore the promise and opportunity of a college education to athletes who have been denied that for too long. Those changes begin with complete transparency into the academic data of college athletes while they're on campus and their economic outcomes once they leave. It continues with ensuring that an athlete's educational opportunities are protected from and prioritized over the demands of their sport. College programs should guarantee scholarships for four years – rather than keep them subject to the year-to-year whims of coaches or the risk of career-ending injuries. Further, colleges must maintain a reasonable balance between the hours athletes commit to athletics and academics. Finally, there must be real accountability on programs that commit academic fraud – not just in the most egregious cases but when they systemically prioritize athletic commitments over educational pursuits.

Change means giving athletes a fair shot at an education. It means finally living up to the promise every institution makes to an athlete when it extends a scholarship offer. It means actually practicing the values these higher education institutions espouse.

Let's start supporting athletes not only when they're on the field, entertaining us, but also in the classroom when that support truly matters. Let's demand better from colleges, which benefit every day from their athletes' efforts without returning the favor.

Preview of Future Reports

This is the second in a series of reports that will consider a range of problems with college athletics. Subsequent reports will examine the long-term health and well-being consequences that college athletes face and the lack of comprehensive healthcare afforded to them, why the NCAA fails to enact meaningful reforms, and a look forward at how we can address the litany of issues within this industry.

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