

## **ISSUE SEVEN: ACADEMIC CONSIDERATIONS**

### Issues

Division III emphasizes the educational value of athletics participation and the academic success of its student-athletes. Institutional and conference autonomy in such matters as academic performance and continuing eligibility has been a guiding philosophical and legislative principle, with very limited oversight by central authorities. As the size and diversity of the division increases, to what extent should the division consider establishing more specific legislative standards and processes to further support these core values?

### Background and Factual Summary

For most schools, student-athletes make up an important part of the overall student-body, with the mean participation rate of approximately 21%. Issues related to the academic profile of student-athletes, and the similarity of those enrolling student-athletes to the general student population, have been discussed more frequently in recent years. Divisions I and II have established significant legislative standards related to recruiting, initial eligibility and continuing eligibility, as well as a detailed academic reporting process. These matters continue to be determined by institutional and conference autonomy in Division III.

At the 2004 Convention, the division adopted legislation to preclude the practice of “redshirting.” The rationale emphasized that Division III athletics should primarily be focused on the undergraduate educational experience in a four-year time frame. Student-athletes who participate in practice activities beyond the first contest are charged with one of four maximum “seasons of participation,” which they must exercise within their first ten semesters or fifteen quarters of full-time enrollment. Formerly, student-athlete eligibility was based upon “seasons of competition” against other teams and competitors—team practice was not charged toward the student-athlete’s eligibility limits, even if the student practiced with the team for the entire season. Subsequent proposals have attempted to repeal, limit or extend the application of the redshirting prohibition, with limited success.

The initial and continuing academic eligibility standards applicable to Division III student-athletes essentially are a function of institutional and conference discretion. Few conferences have adopted significant standards. This stands in sharp contrast to the numerous, complicated, controversial and highly publicized eligibility standards applicable in Divisions I and II. Division III schools annually report student graduation and persistence data to the Department of Education. But because they do not award athletics aid, Division III members do not report

separate student-athlete graduation and persistence data. The Association compiles and reports these data annually for Divisions I and II, giving special emphasis to the superior overall graduation rates of student-athletes compared to the general student body. Data to support the assumption that the academic performance of Division III student-athletes compares favorably to the rest of the student body is not readily available. A limited number of conferences share such data internally. It is not known how many institutions actively compile and review such data. Various criteria beyond graduation rates exist, such as grade-point average or class rank.

Approximately 80 members of the College Sports Project (CSP) are entering the third year of a five-year, voluntary pilot program to track the academic preparation and performance of student-athletes compared to the general student body. The pilot, and its results, could prove valuable in the consideration of any potential data collection and reporting models for the division.

#### Division III Philosophical Principles:

Three tenets of the division's philosophy statement seem especially relevant:

- Division III member schools place the highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students' academic programs. They seek to maintain an environment in which a student-athlete's athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete's educational experience.
- Division III members assure that the academic performance of student-athletes is, at a minimum, consistent with that of the general student body.
- Division III members assure that admission policies for student-athletes comply with policies and procedures applicable to the general student body.

The latter two provisions were adopted by the membership in 2006, as part of the "Future of Division III, Phase II" initiative.

#### Identification of Options:

The primary options related to initial and continuing eligibility are: 1) establish national legislative standards; 2) more actively encourage the establishment of voluntary conference standards; or 3) retain the current emphasis on institutional and conference autonomy.

The primary options related to redshirting appear to be: 1) retain the current prohibition; 2) expand the current standard, either in scope or in legislative status; and 3) relax or appeal the current prohibition.

The primary options related to academic reporting appear to be: 1) establish national reporting requirements; 2) more actively encourage and support the establishment of voluntary conference and institutional reporting programs; and 3) retain the current emphasis on institutional and conference autonomy.

#### Summary of Membership Feedback:

The membership survey indicated the following:

- Recruiting and initial eligibility: 95% agreed or strongly agree that admitted student-athletes should fit the general academic profile of all incoming freshmen students. 87% indicated a desire to retain current standards. 66% agreed or strongly agreed that athletics is a key component in enrollment management at their institution, while only 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed. 59% agreed or strongly agreed it is appropriate for individual schools or conferences to place additional restrictions on student-athlete recruitment, but a similar percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed that that such limits should be established by the division.
- Redshirting: 56% agree or strongly agree with the current prohibition; 26% disagree or strongly disagree with the current rule.
- Academic performance: Survey results indicate that Division III members believe that student-athletes should have similar academic performance to non-student-athletes. 96% agree or strongly agree that the academic performance of student-athletes should be, at a minimum, consistent with the general student body. 88% agreed or strongly agreed that schools should set their own standards for satisfactory academic performance. Only 36% agreed or strongly agreed that conferences should set their own satisfactory academic standards, and only 13% agreed or strongly agreed that the NCAA should establish such standards. 17% agreed, or strongly agreed, that schools should report on the high school and college academic performance of student-athletes to a central body, while 52% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that concept.

Feedback from the Town Hall Forums varied related to the current limits on redshirting. Some identified redshirting as a key philosophical premise which should not change easily. Others emphasized that the practice of redshirting is favorable to student-athletes, as it helps students adjust to college life, provides greater opportunities for tryouts, and allows participation in athletics for the duration of the increasingly more common five-year collegiate experience. Given the diversity of views on this issue, it is likely legislative efforts to adjust the standard will continue.

Forum feedback on centralized academic reporting indicated significant resistance. Many concerns were rooted in logistics. These included the difficulty of defining who is a student-athlete. In addition, many schools already are comparing academic performance at the local level. It might be burdensome to change reporting processes to meet a national standard. Philosophical concerns suggested it would be inappropriate to move the reporting responsibility away from local academic authorities. Significant opposition especially was expressed regarding the establishment of minimal initial and continuing eligibility standards for Division III student-athletes – an idea that was not formally suggested in the survey or the forums.

Supporters of academic reporting emphasized that, based on anecdote, such data will be positive and provide a favorable opportunity for the membership to publicize the academic nature of the Division III model. It also was noted that annual student-athlete graduation and persistence data could easily be separated from the data currently provided annually to the Department of Education. Compiling this data, and comparing them to the academic performance of the general student body, would be similar to the current annual financial aid reporting process.

The Chancellors and Presidents Advisory Group (PAG) expressed similar feedback. No PAG member supported the establishment in Division III of initial and continuing eligibility standards; all acknowledged that this matter is best left to institutional and conference autonomy, and that the survey questions related to academic reporting may have been misunderstood in this regard.

Regarding redshirting, the PAG felt strongly that the current standards should remain in place. The group further recommended the establishment of a “super majority” standard to amend this legislation.

Related to the compilation and reporting of the academic progress of student-athletes, the PAG acknowledged legitimate, but conflicting viewpoints. On the one hand, group members were not enthusiastic about establishing an additional reporting requirement; many questioned the value of such data. However, many PAG members noted the value that such a process would have in supporting the division’s commitment to the student-athlete’s academic experience, especially in

conjunction with the possible marketing initiative described in White Paper No. 2, which would emphasize the division's academic identity. It was noted that the administrative burden related to such a process could be minimized if reporting was based upon the graduation and persistence data for all students currently provided annually to the Department of Education.

Ultimately, the PAG determined that the division should proceed with caution regarding any academic reporting initiative. It noted that the current reporting pilot involving approximately 80 members of the College Sports Project should serve as a guide during the further consideration of this concept.

Recommendations/Initiatives for Consideration:

- Modify legislative procedure to require a division-dominant (two-thirds majority) vote to amend the redshirting prohibition.
- Amend the philosophy statement to emphasize that Division III athletics are primarily focused on the undergraduate educational experience in a four-year time frame.
- National initial and continuing eligibility standards do not appear to be necessary or supported. Clarify that this topic is not under active consideration and amend the philosophy statement to clarify that such standards are best left to institutional and conference autonomy.
- Encourage conferences to actively monitor and review the initial eligibility and continuing academic progress of student-athletes vs. the general student body.
- Explore the establishment of aggregate “dashboard” indicators (e.g., grade-point averages, class rank, persistence and graduation rates), which would permit a school to compare institutional data with aggregate data from selected institutions of interest.
- Actively monitor the progress of the College Sports Project's pilot reporting program and consider the experience and results of program participants in the consideration of further, division-wide policy initiative.

- Consider the limited reporting of student-athlete academic performance, in conjunction with student data currently provided annually to the Department of Education. Such a program has great potential to enhance the division's identity in a positive way, and deserves greater investigation. The program would emphasize the comparison of student-athlete and nonstudent-athlete data within institutions, not between institutions, similar to the current financial aid reporting process. Remaining details (e.g., reporting standards, timing, disclosure) must be considered carefully.
- Assign the reporting process a prominent role related to any Division III marketing effort, consistent with the division's academic identity and its philosophical tenet that the academic performance of student-athletes is consistent with that of the general student body.