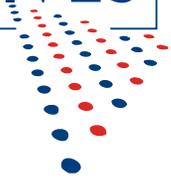


PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



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2014-2015 Series:

Inspirational Innovation

CHAPTER

9

Innovation and Self-Regulation:
Significant Change in College Sports



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Innovation and Self-Regulation: *Significant Change in College Sports*

Dr. Walter Harrison: President of the University of Hartford

Ask any sports fan about the future of college sports and here's at least part of what you will hear. College sports have serious problems that must be addressed, but the NCAA, the self-regulatory body charged with overseeing college sports, will not be able to make any substantial difference because it is too dominated by self-interest. The most powerful sports conferences and universities will not work cooperatively to promote desperately needed change.

I want to challenge that widely held opinion by considering the substantial improvement in the academic success of student athletes over the past decade. This cooperative work, led by college and university presidents, has resulted in ten percentage point gains in student graduation rates: student athletes now in NCAA Division I graduate at an 84 percent six-year rate, six points higher than the overall student bodies at these universities. This is one of the least well-publicized achievements in higher education in the twenty-first century, and it represents an outstanding example of the power of self-regulation.

Anyone who follows college sports knows that this is one of the most challenging periods in its history. The whole future of college sports hangs in the balance. And I know full well that the NCAA is not without its flaws.

But the NCAA is also one of the largest and most visible self-regulatory bodies in higher education. Within this complex and highly visible organization, a group of college and university presidents, NCAA staff, athletics professionals, and faculty from around the country have worked together to change an important part of university culture. In this change, I suggest, are examples that could be duplicated elsewhere within higher education.

“The sports where the initial graduation rates were lowest (baseball, men’s basketball, and football) have seen the most rapid improvement...”



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

I am not an impartial source: for the past decade I have chaired the NCAA Division I Committee on Academic Performance. But as I leave the chair of this committee, I think it might be useful to summarize how this innovative approach to a highly visible and controversial subject succeeded.

By 2001 the Knight Commission on Athletics had issued two reports that focused national attention on the need for college and university presidents to reassert control of the NCAA and college sports, and on the particular need to improve student athletes' academic performance. Their graduation rates trailed those of the overall student body. Recruited to play big-time sports, many of these athletes were admitted to colleges with very weak high school academic records. Once in college, eligibility standards for athletic competition were based on grade point averages and not progress toward degrees. Most embarrassingly, several well-known college athletes revealed that they had been passed through classes without being able to read, write, or perform relatively simple analytical tasks.

The NCAA Division I Board of Directors, whose makeup had resulted from the 1991 Knight Commission Report, responded quickly to the 2001 report that focused on the need for academic reform. I want to examine the factors that led this NCAA success in three stages over the succeeding 13 years: the initial response in the years 2001 to 2004; the important early work during the years 2004-2008; and the work of the more mature period of established policies and programs, 2008-2014.

The response of the early years was led by the NCAA Division I Board of Directors and NCAA President Cedric Dempsey, followed in 2003 by President Myles Brand. Four important factors made this early response successful:

1. The Board's early decision not to become defensive about the problem but to take on the serious matters of reform. The Knight Commission Report had also called on NCAA presidents to lead the reform effort, and the NCAA Board took on that challenge. From the start this was a presidentially led effort; success would have been impossible without that.
2. The Board decided early on to base its decisions on data, not on opinion. It retained nationally recognized leaders in statistical research to advise the board on this effort. This was especially important in sports, in which the illusion of transparency often hides the complexity of the endeavor. This is a central part of the appeal of sports: many fans believe they are experts. But this illusion of transparency also leads to simple and wrongheaded answers to complex questions.
3. Based on the findings of this data-driven research, the Board defined three important priorities: increasing the basic entrance requirements and eliminating the use of a "cut score" based on standardized testing; concentrating not solely on grade point average but also on progress toward degree; and focusing on establishing new rates of judging real-time academic success and a more accurate graduation success rate.
4. As a result of statistical research, the Board established the basic principle that eligibility (remaining academically eligible) and retention (remaining a member of a team) were the best predictors of graduation success.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

The Board established the Committee on Academic Progress in 2004, and from the beginning the 15-member committee was drawn from a wide and diverse group of members—both in the types of institutions they represented and the balance on the committee among presidents, faculty, athletic administrators (including athletic directors), conference commissioners, and associate commissioners. Dozens of committee members devoted long hours over the decade of the committee’s existence.

Factors for success during this important middle period included:

1. Early on, the Committee decided to establish two new rates—the Academic Progress Rate (APR) to measure semester-by-semester, year-by-year academic progress; and the Graduation Success Rate (GSR), a more accurate way to measure graduation because it allows for tracking transfer students (not possible in the federal graduation rate, which measures the success of first-time, first-year students only). This was an enormous decision—many people doubted the ability of the NCAA to establish completely new rates. Both rates have proven to be accurate and explainable.
2. A commitment early on that these rates would be transparent, open to the public and media. The Committee and the NCAA staff also devoted enormous time early in the process to educating the membership. Since the rates were completely new, this required widespread and consistent seminars and information sessions all over the country.
3. Two early and fundamental decisions have proven invaluable: (1) the basic unit of measurement was the team, not the institution; (2) that everyone—coaches, athletic administrators, and presidents—was equally responsible for failure and equally responsible for success. This second decision resulted in winning over coaches, who were quite resistant early on. Since implementing these decisions, coaching groups have become consistent advocates for academic success.
4. Maintaining the goal of academic success while making political compromises that retained the basic accuracy of the system. Two important decisions reflected this responsiveness to member concerns: (1) not penalizing transfers when the athlete achieved a GPA of 2.6 or better, a figure that data indicated predicted graduation success and (2) allowing a “bonus point” for graduation by student athletes who had previously left without graduating. While both decisions diminished the accuracy of the APR, neither made a substantial difference to achieving the goal.
5. Maintaining flexibility. When early lack of success by baseball players became apparent, the committee and the Board put together a committee made up of academics, administrators, coaches, and representatives of the coaching association. The result was significant change in policies aimed only at baseball, which has resulted in dramatic graduation improvement, the best of any single sport.

Once the rates had been determined and data collection began in earnest, the committee entered a mature period. This period has seen the establishment of a fair and consistent appeals process, and a system of hearings that have, in most cases, resulted in academic success after the penalty years.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Success factors in this period included:

1. Focusing on the problems of limited resource institutions. From the outset, both the Board and the committee have been concerned that resources available to institutions have had a disproportionate affect on academic success. The committee has provided filters that reflect resource availability and institutional mission, and for the past few years, provided substantial funding for limited resourced institutions to adopt new academic initiatives.
2. The decision to increase entrance requirements—both high school GPA and course requirements—and to provide high schools four years of advanced notice should dramatically improve graduation rates when they become effective in 2016.
3. The most publicly debated decision—to raise APR rates and to require teams to meet these rates in order to compete in post-season competition—has resulted in immediate improvement of APR rates.

The success has been dramatic—in every measureable area student athletes' graduation rates have increased by 10 or 11 percentage points, from 74 to 84 percent for all student athletes (the overall student body rate has remained fairly steady nationally at 78 percent during this period). African American athletes have improved by 11 percentage points during this period, and while they still trail white athletes, they are quickly closing the gap. The sports where the initial graduation rates were lowest (baseball, men's basketball, and football) have seen the most rapid improvement, and while men's basketball and football still trail other sports, they too are closing the gap.

The intangibles may be even more dramatic than the tangible results. Simply put: the entire culture has changed. The APR is widely understood as a fair and unbiased measure of academic success. Coaches, athletics administrators, and presidents alike are dedicated to maintaining this success. While vigilance is always important, the building blocks for future success are firmly in place.

Is this a perfect world? Of course not. National sports headlines continue to point to individual academic problems. In recent years a number of scandals involving academic misconduct (by students, by coaches and administrators, and [in a few well-publicized cases] by individual faculty and staff members) still remind us there is much to be done. And while limited resource institutions achieved increased success for their student athletes, most continue to face significant challenges in reaching required academic progress rates.

College sports, of course, face even greater, pressing challenges today, especially those caused by the enormous influx of revenue from television network contracts to the highest performing conferences and institutions. Over the next few years, outside influences—from the courts, from the executive branch, or from Congress—may forever change the nature of college sports. But the NCAA's record of success in student athlete academic achievement remains strong evidence that self-regulatory change can result in significant and lasting success.

Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford, chaired the NCAA Division I Committee on Academic Performance from 2004-2014.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



Dr. Walter Harrison

Since Walter Harrison's appointment as the University of Hartford's fifth president in 1998, the University has experienced a period of energy and momentum unmatched in its history. He has overseen dramatic improvements in academic quality, finances, and fundraising.

President Harrison serves on many boards in the Hartford area, including Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, The Connecticut Science Center, World Business Capital, The Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, and the MetroHartford Alliance. He is a past president of Hartford Stage. President Harrison is also active nationally and is recognized as a leader in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). He chairs the NCAA Division I Committee on Academic Performance and serves on other NCAA committees.

President Harrison is a scholar of American literature and culture. A native of Pittsburgh, he graduated from Trinity College in Hartford in 1968, and then earned a master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1969. After an interim of three years to serve as captain in the United States Air Force, President Harrison earned a doctorate from the University of California-Davis. His doctoral dissertation, "Out of Play: Baseball Fiction from Pulp to Art," was one of the earliest scholarly treatments of baseball and its place in American life.