A Framework for Understanding which Factors Predict Positive APR Scores at NCAA Division I Institutions

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Management/leadership  
Saturday, May 31, 2014  
20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions) 
(Conference Center B)

Due to traditionally low graduation rates throughout much of the late twentieth century (Grant, Leadley, & Zygmont, 2008), the NCAA put forth measures which allow the association to monitor the academic progress and ultimately the graduation rates of student-athletes (Crowley, 2006). One such initiative designed to increase graduation rates is the Academic Progress Rate (APR). Developed in 2004, APR measures the eligibility and retention of NCAA scholarship student-athletes (Crowley, 2006). Every athletic team involved in an NCAA sponsored sport has an APR score for the rolling span of four years. As of 2012, the penalty threshold is a 930 (out of a possible 1000). According to the NCAA (2012), an APR of a 930 equates to a 50% Graduation Success Rate (GSR).

Per NCAA regulations, any athletic team which fails to meet the APR threshold of a 930 will be penalized. As of the 2012-13 academic year, three penalty levels existed for teams which fail to reach the APR benchmark. These sanctions increase each year a team fails to meet NCAA requirements. Penalties range from reduced practice time to possible coaching suspensions and athletics related financial aid restrictions (NCAA, 2013a).

Last year, the NCAA made $702 million (81% of the organization’s total revenue) from its contact with CBS Sports and Turner Broadcasting to broadcast the NCAA Men’s D-I Basketball Tournament (NCAA, 2013b). The revenue is then distributed among the competing teams (NCAA, 2013c). Therefore, the inability for teams, specifically men’s basketball programs, to qualify for championship play based on APR can negatively impact the revenue that NCAA member institutions generate which can be used to enhance academic performance or provide grant-in-aid for student-athletes (NCAA, 2013c).

While pressure is placed on athletic coaches to win, athletic academic advisors are under fire to figure out a way to protect the eligibility of student-athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011). Thus, ensuring teams meet APR requirements has become a priority. Previous research on APR has examined perceptions of academic support services from athletes (e.g., Ridpath, 2010) and athletic administrators (e.g., Campbell & Andrew, 2009; Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008; Comeaux, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Ridpath (2010) concluded minority male athletes at non-AQ conferences, particularly those in revenue sports of football and basketball, believed academic support services were needed to academically persist and remain eligible. Furthermore, Campbell and Andrew (2009) found that hiring learning specialists to assist in the academic support of student-athletes led to an increase in APR.

Early research into the perceptions of athletic administrators suggested the APR would have a positive impact on college athletics, particularly in the area of admissions for at-risk student-athletes (Christy et al., 2008). However, Kirkpatrick (2012) observed opposite results, discovering more than a quarter of athletic administrators believed the impact of the APR at low-resource Division I institutions was “negative/tremendously negative”, particularly in football and men’s basketball.

Increasingly, scholars have sought to understand factors that influence APR (e.g., Johnson et al., 2013; Johnson, Wessel, & Pierce, 2012). Johnson et al. (2012) found gender, race, sport, coaching change, and winning percentage significantly predicted APR scores. In their study of the impact of head football coaching changes in FBS institutions, Johnson et al. (2013) observed lower APR scores are during years of a head coaching change, except when a coach is promoted internally, and higher for the most athletically successful teams.

Despite the growing body of literature on APR, a large gap exists in the role of student-athlete academic services and how those services might impact APR score, primarily in “revenue” sports of football, men’s basketball, and women’s basketball. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a framework to understanding how resource...
allocation decisions within student-athlete academic service impacts APR scores. This study is informed by the vast literature on distributive justice in intercollegiate athletics. Grounded in Adams' Equity Theory (1963, 1965), this line of inquiry has primarily examined the perceived fairness of equity, equality, and need principles when making resource decisions in intercollegiate athletics (Mahony, Hums, Andrew & Dittmore, 2010).

Research from Hums and Chelladurai (1994a, 1994b) indicated resource distribution decisions in intercollegiate athletics based on need and equality were most fair, however, Mahony and Pastore (1998) observed most decisions were actually made based on equity principles. Subsequent research has focused on distribution decisions made from the athletic department to individual sport teams (e.g, Mahony, Hums, & Riemer, 2002; 2005), as well as the student perspectives of these allocation decisions (e.g., Kim, Andrew, Mahony, & Hums, 2008; Mahony, Riemer, Breeding & Hums, 2006). To date, no research has explored how resource allocation decisions are made to support services.

This study uses a mix of primary and secondary data regressed on the most recently reported APR scores (from 2011-12) as obtained from the NCAA website. An instrument was distributed and presented to a panel of experts for review prior to being emailed to the senior student-athlete academic services person at all 345 Division I institutions. The instrument contained a series of questions regarding the amount of support services (e.g., study hall hours, numbers of tutors, priority registration, etc.) provided by the athletic department to student-athletes. Athletic department revenues were obtained from the 2011-12 EADA reports at the Department of Education's website.

While data gathering was on-going at the time of abstract submission, results should identify which variables have a positive influence on APR. The researchers hope these results, when put into practice, will assist athletic departments in providing a more stable educational experience for their student-athletes.