Using outside Factors to Predict APR Scores of NCAA Division I Football Programs: The Impact of Non-Calculated Variables on Postseason Eligibility

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) began utilizing the Academic Progress Rate (APR) as a measurement of the academic success of student athletes in 2004 as a way of keeping schools accountable for the education of their student-athletes. According to the NCAA, “Each student-athlete receiving athletically related financial aid earns one point for staying in school and one point for being academically eligible. A team’s total points earned are divided by the total points possible and multiplied by 1,000 to produce the team’s APR. A 930 APR predicts about a 50 percent graduation rate,” (NCAA, 2014). The NCAA began implementing postseason bans to teams not meeting APR standards during the 2012-13 postseason. To be eligible for that competition season, teams had to post a four-year APR average of 900, or two-year average of 930. This was raised to a 930 four-year average or 940 two-year average for postseason eligibility beginning in the 2013-14 academic year, and a flat 930 four-year average beginning with the 2015-16 postseason. The most notable ban came when the 2011 National Champion Huskies from the University of Connecticut were banned from competing in the 2013 NCAA Men’s Division I Basketball Championships. The NCAA has since made it clear that it will not back down on these bans, no matter the success of the team or school.

Due to the NCAA Division I FBS Football championship being a non-NCAA sanctioned event, there continues to be questions about how college football teams will be penalized if their APR falls below 930. However, in 2014, the NCAA banned the University of Idaho football team from participating in a postseason bowl due to the team’s four-year APR average score of 907. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions understand what has an effect on a team’s APR score outside of the numbers used to calculate APR in order to ensure its athletics teams remain eligible for postseason competition.

This study will attempt to discover which variables beyond team retention rate and team eligibility rate that have either a positive or negative correlation with the score. The variables utilized in the multiple regression analysis model include the head coach salary, assistant coach salary, average financial aid given to male student-athletes at the institution, football team operating expenses, athletic department annual expenditures, and football team win percentage. All data utilized came from the 2011-12 academic year, reflecting the most recent APR score dataset available from the NCAA.

Sack, Park, and Thiel (2011) found that academic selectivity and a team’s commitment to athletic success had a significant relationship with the team’s NCAA Graduation Success Rate (GSR). Variables the authors utilized to test the institution’s commitment to athletic success included the team’s average Sagarin rating over a five-year period, its median Rivals.com composite recruiting score over a five-year period, and the number of seats in the team’s football stadium. The variables for this study were chosen based off growing criticism of high profile Division I athletics departments annual expenditures, including budgets upward of $100 million for Division I FBS football teams, and annual head coach salaries at the highest level regularly exceeding $1 million, with several highly coveted coaches earning more than $5 million annually.

Due to the relationship between retention and graduation, and therefore APR and GSR, it can be hypothesized that similar variables testing for institutional commitment to athletics and academic prestige will have a similar relationship with APR scores. Better understanding all factors that impact team APR scores is imperative for departments of athletics, including coaches, to ensure teams are addressing issues that may potentially impact the score and, as a consequence, prevent teams from competing in postseason bowls or championship games.