The Relationship between Academic Progress Rates (APR) of Student-Athletes and Athletic Expenses: The Effect of Team and Division I Football Status

Jay Santos, University of Florida
Michael Sagas (Advisor), University of Florida

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National Collegiate Athlete Association (NCAA) Division I schools are forced to ensure academic progress and eligibility of their student-athletes. The Academic Progress Rate (APR) is one of the metrics of the Academic Performance Program (APP), which was adopted by the NCAA as part of an academic reform package in 2003 to ensure that member-schools promote optimum academic and athletic performance for their student-athletes. APR measures continuous eligibility and retention on a team for athletes who received institutional financial aid over a period of four years. APR is the most crucial component of APP as non-compliance to minimum rates results in penalties to team (a minimum four-year APR of 930 is the current penalty threshold for every team participating in NCAA Division I). Sanctions for failure to meet minimum APR standards include practice and playing restrictions, scholarship reductions, postseason bans, and coaching suspensions. Indeed, institutions can face severe sanctions for failing to meet minimum APR standards (NCAA, 2013).

NCAA schools generate hundreds of millions dollars in athletic-related revenues each year and are expected to invest a large sum of their budget in attracting academically qualified student-athletes who will fit into their program (e.g., recruiting prospects who will meet entrance scores and application requirements), and in implementing academic support services to remediate deficiencies and enable performance in the classroom. Recent data from the NCAA (2015) indicated that average APR across Division I are steadily increasing. However, the extent to which the increase is relative to organizational expenditures and resources has not been established by any NCAA or reported academic research. Previous researchers have explored predictors of APR for NCAA football teams (Johnson, Wessel, & Pierce, 2012). However, this limited analysis failed to assess the relative importance of overall athletic budget and individual team budget on a team’s APR. Further, no research has evaluated any relationships between APR and expenses at the team level (e.g., football teams vs basketball teams or men’s teams vs women’s teams). An understanding of the relative contribution of teams and departments fiscal commitments may shed light on the ability to meet minimum rates for under resourced teams.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between APR and athletic expenses among 12 different teams (6 men’s and 6 women’s) in NCAA Division I. Further, we aimed to assess the importance of team level expenses as well as the overall expenses of teams based on their NCAA divisional status (e.g., Football Bowl Subdivision [FBS], Football Championship Subdivision [FCS], and members that did not play football). Specifically, we explored if overall athletic expenses and team expenses for the 2013-14 year were significantly and meaningfully correlated with multi-year and single year APR (2014), and if football division status impacted these relationships. Multi-year APR and 2014 APR were assessed across 70 different bivariate relationships, which included analyses across each of the 12 teams selected.

Data were collected from two primary sources. Multi-year APR and 2014 APR were obtained from the NCAA Data Sharing Initiative (http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research). Overall expenses and individual team expenses for 2013-14 were collected from the Equity in Athletics Data Analysis Cutting Tool on the Office of the Postsecondary Education website (http://ope.ed.gov/athletics/). The two datasets were combined and equated and only the APR of the 12 sports of football, baseball, men’s and women’s basketball, men’s and women’s golf, men’s and women’s soccer, men’s and women’s tennis, softball, and women’s volleyball, and the teams’ individual expenses and overall school athletic expenses for 2013-2014 academic year were retained for analysis. Pearson product moment correlations were used for all analyses and the cut score for the coefficients (r) that were interpreted was set at .30 and p < .05.

Results showed that APR (single year and multi-year) and overall athletic expenses were significantly correlated in 21 out of 70 possible cases across several teams. Multi-year APR was significantly correlated with overall expenses in 15 out of 35 possible cases (range of significant values were from r = .30 to r = .60, p < .05). These significant
correlations were found in men’s basketball and football in Division I FBS, in baseball, men’s basketball, football, women’s basketball, women’s golf, softball, women’s soccer, women’s tennis, and women’s volleyball in Division I FCS, and in baseball, men’s soccer, women’s golf, and softball in Division I no football. Multi-year APR and team level expenses were also significantly correlated (values ranged from $r = .31$ to $r = .46$, $p < .05$) in 6 out of 35 possible cases. These significant correlations were found in men’s basketball and football in FBS, in women’s basketball and softball in FCS, and in softball and women’s tennis in Division I-AAA (no football).

Single-year (2014) APR and overall expenses were significantly correlated (values range from $r = .31$ to $r = .41$, $p < .05$) in 6 cases out of possible 35. These significant correlations were observed in football, women’s basketball, softball and women’s soccer in FCS, and in women’s golf and softball in Division I no football. No significant correlations between 2014 APR and overall expenses were found among teams in FBS. Significant correlations between 2014 APR and team expenses were found only in two teams in FCS—men’s golf ($r=.30; p < .05$) and men’s tennis ($r=.38; p < .05$).

All 12 teams included in the study showed significant relationships between APR (either multi-year or single year) and expenses (either overall or team). Most of the significant correlations were found at the FCS level (17 out of 29 significant cases). Except for men’s soccer, all teams in Division I FCS showed significant relationships between expenses (either overall or team) and APR (either multi-year or 2014). On the other hand, only four teams in Division I no football and two teams in Division I FBS were found to have significant relationships.

In summary, budget appears to be most enabling of achieving higher levels of multi-year APR for Division I FCS institutions. As suggested, in this group a total of 17 significant relationships were noted across several sports (both men and women), yet only 4 were noted among all teams at FBS schools, and 8 at institutions that did not sponsor football. No gender differences emerged from the data across any of the NCAA level subgroups. There are several implications of this study. First, scholars assessing predictors and outcomes of APR in future research should be cognizant of the potential compounding effect of the overall budgets on the reported values, especially for FCS schools and teams. Further, research should begin to investigate the potential reasons for why overall budget appears to shape successfully APR performance at the FCS level. Constraints on resources may be shaping the potential to succeed at this level as they are attempting to compete at a high level but lack resources that many of the FBS institutions enjoy.