



Arthur Ashe Jr.  
**SPORTS  
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# Putting the 'Student' Back into Student-Athlete

**IN AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES,  
THE NCAA ROLLS OUT NEW RULES AND REGULATIONS**

BY KENDRA HAMILTON



Dr. Lee McElroy, director of athletics at the University at Albany, was one of the original 17 consultants involved in deciding the direction of the NCAA's academic reform efforts.

**"We spent three years looking at background research and considering various directions. Now that our recommendations are being implemented, I think we're going to see great benefits."**

**C**ollege sports is a numbers game, full of so many calculations — batting averages, free-throw percentages, BCS and RPI scores — that keeping them all straight can be a full-time job for a sports program. Now, the National Collegiate Athletic Association has put a new number on the table, and it has captured the attention of every athletic director, coach and student-athlete in Division I.

The number is 925 — and it represents the magic number in the NCAA's multiyear effort at putting the "student" back into "student-athlete." Under the new system the NCAA began rolling out on Feb. 28, schools that have an "academic progress rate," or APR, of 925 or above have demonstrated a graduation rate of at least 50 percent and are safe from NCAA penalties.

Schools that don't make the grade will earn a whack with the NCAA's stick: They'll face "contemporaneous penalties," i.e., they'll start losing athletic scholarships, explains Diane Dickman, managing director of membership services for the NCAA.

And that's not all. If the APR drops below 925 for a period of years without improving, the school will face even stiffer "historical penalties": Limits on post-season play, perhaps even restricted NCAA membership. The exact details of those sanctions have not yet been ironed out, Dickman adds.

But all in all, says NCAA President Myles Brand, the new system represents the most "far-reaching academic reform in decades."

Dr. Lee McElroy, director of athletics at the University at Albany and a member of the NCAA's Division I Management Council, agrees.

"Our goal is to change the culture among our member institutions," says McElroy who was one of the original 17 consultants involved in deciding the

direction of academic reform efforts. "We spent three years looking at background research and considering various directions. Now that our recommendations are being implemented, I think we're going to see great benefits," McElroy says.

## THE NCAA'S NUMBERS GAME

So just what does the magic number mean? And how did the NCAA arrive at it?

According to NCAA spokesman Kent Barrett, the APR is based on points awarded for eligibility and retention, the two factors that are the strongest indicators of whether a student-athlete will graduate. Each player on a given athletic roster can earn two points under the APR system: One for remaining academically eligible to play and one for staying with the institution.

As an example, let's say a student-athlete decides to transfer to another institution to improve his chances at playing time. His former school loses the retention point, but if he's in good academic standing when he leaves, the school still gets to count his eligibility point — for a total of one. If, however, a player leaves early to go to the pros without bothering to take his final exam in history class, the institution loses both points because the student wouldn't have been eligible to play even if he'd decided not to enter the draft.

Calculating each team's APR is a relatively simple matter, Barrett explains. The total points earned by the students on the team's roster are divided by the total points possible. Then, the resulting figure is multiplied by 1,000 for ease of reference. There will be waivers and exceptions for schools that come close to the cut score but don't actually make it. Waivers can also be given for smaller teams like golf and for teams that serve students from "economically distressed segments of the population" — such as urban schools and histor-



ically Black colleges and universities. The NCAA hasn't yet determined how to measure "economic distress," Barrett says, but he expects the Division I Management Council to take the matter up at its spring meeting in April.

The APR joins two other reforms aimed at reinvigorating the student portion of the student-athlete equation, explain McElroy and Dickman.

Phase one of the reform process began in 2003 with the NCAA's eliminating another "cut score" — in this case 820, the minimum SAT score required to play at the college level. The move generated a lot of controversy, according to McElroy. "A lot of people were uncomfortable with that decision."

But what was not well understood at the time was that the NCAA had actually raised the bar — both by increasing the number of "core courses" high-school athletes had to take and by increasing the grades they were expected to make in them. Those changes are taking place gradually, with full implementation by 2008.

Phase two was an even more revolutionary change for the athletes, according to Dickman. Formerly, student-athletes had to keep one set of figures in mind: 25-50-75. The first number, 25, represented the percentage of the student's degree that had to be completed by his third year of eligibility. The 50 and 75, meanwhile, represented the percentages that had to be completed by his or her fourth and fifth years.

Now the percentages are 40-60-80. "So that's a big leap in the third year for these athletes," says Dickman. But the research indicates that a big shift was needed to make a dent in the dismal graduation rates experienced by "revenue" sports. The graduation rate for student-athletes was 62 percent for 1997-98, the most recent year for which the figures are available. That figure is comparable to the overall student graduation rate, which was 60 percent in 1997-98.

For football, baseball and men's basketball, however, the rates were 55, 46 and 44 percent, respectively.

## MAKING SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE

The APR data released in February are for informational purposes only — the first penalties won't be assessed until December, after the 2004-05 data are in. But for a large number of institutions, the data just released raised some warning flags.

For example, while the average APR data for all men's and women's sports look good, they project that only 7 percent of all teams will be in trouble when the penalty phase begins in 2005-06. The picture for "revenue sports," however, is not rosy at all. Consider these findings:

- Football, baseball and men's basketball are the only sports whose average APR falls below 925.

- Of the 284 Division I baseball teams, 23 percent fell below the APR cut score, posting an average APR of 922.

- Thirty percent of the 234 football teams didn't make the cut — an average APR of 923. Twenty percent of the 326 men's basketball squads fell below par. Basketball's average APR was also 923.

The names of some of the troubled programs might come as a surprise. Despite an overall graduation rate of 81 percent, the University of Southern California, the 2004 college football champ, didn't make the APR cut. Indeed, USC fared poorly in all revenue sports, scoring APRs of 910 in football, 878 in baseball and 761 in men's basketball.

The men's college basketball programs did much better, at least those schools at the top of the rankings. At the close of the regular season, all of the Top 4 ranked programs were in good shape with the APR. No. 2 North Carolina scored a perfect 1000, while No. 1 Illinois and No. 4 Wake Forest scored 979, and No. 3 Duke followed with 960.

But other teams rounding out the Top 10 stumbled badly. No. 5 Washington scored 871. No. 6 Louisville managed only 833, and No. 8 Kentucky posted an 827. Nos. 7 and 9 Oklahoma State and Kansas missed the cut, too, but not by much. Oklahoma State scored a 920, while Kansas fell short with a 923.

## A Passing Score?

### Average APRs by Subdivision

Schools that have an "academic progress rate," or APR, of 925 or above have demonstrated a graduation rate of at least 50 percent and are safe from NCAA penalties.

Sport	I-A	I-AA	I-AAA
Baseball	912	931	927
Men's basketball	906	933	934
Women's basketball	953	960	957
Football	921	925	NA
Men's soccer	934	955	952
Women's soccer	969	970	972
Men's lacrosse	966	968	951
Women's lacrosse	986	983	971

### Public/private APR comparison

Sport	Public	Private
Baseball	910	948
Men's basketball	912	945
Women's basketball	952	965
Football	913	949
Men's soccer	934	961
Women's soccer	963	982
Men's lacrosse	957	968
Women's lacrosse	979	982

SOURCE: NCAA



Joseph Taylor, assistant director of athletics and head football coach at Hampton University, says it's too early to determine what kind of effect the APRs are going to have.





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**MEN'S SPORTS AVERAGE APR**

(with number of teams in cohort)

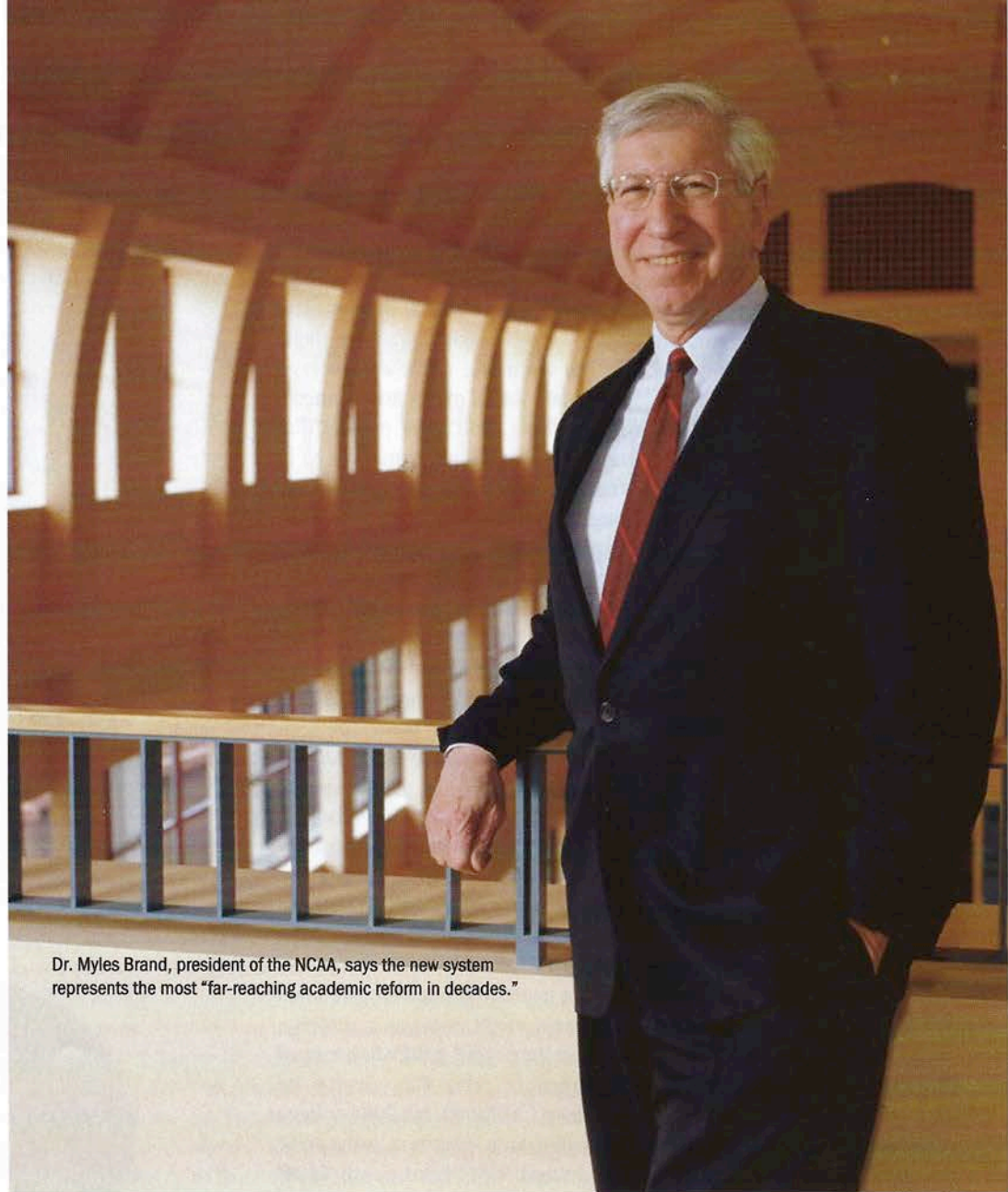
- Gymnastics (17) - 973
- Ice hockey (57) - 968
- Skiing (13) - 967
- Swimming and diving (140) - 967
- Fencing (20) - 965
- Lacrosse (54) - 964
- Golf (285) - 961
- Water polo (17) - 956
- Tennis (265) - 955
- Cross country (216) - 954
- Rifle (4) - 950
- Soccer (198) - 948
- Volleyball (21) - 948
- Outdoor track and field (252) - 946
- Wrestling (84) - 932
- Football (234) - 923
- Basketball (326) - 923
- Indoor track and field (156) - 923
- Baseball (284) - 922

**WOMEN'S SPORTS AVERAGE APR**

(with number of teams in cohort)

- Field hockey (76) - 981
- Lacrosse (77) - 981
- Rowing (80) - 981
- Gymnastics (64) - 979
- Ice hockey (29) - 975
- Swimming and diving (185) - 975
- Golf (223) - 970
- Rifle (10) - 970
- Soccer (295) - 970
- Equestrian (5) - 969
- Skiing (15) - 969
- Water polo (30) - 968
- Fencing (24) - 967
- Tennis (310) - 967
- Volleyball (311) - 965
- Softball (264) - 964
- Outdoor track and field (283) - 959
- Cross country (230) - 958
- Indoor track and field (200) - 957
- Basketball (324) - 956
- Bowling (25) - 946

SOURCE: NCAA



Dr. Myles Brand, president of the NCAA, says the new system represents the most "far-reaching academic reform in decades."

PHOTO BY DAN F. BERNSTEIN

The scores are a clear signal that a new day has dawned in the NCAA.

"We've used the term 'runoffs' to describe some of these problem programs," says Dickman, "where the coach recruits a kid, the kid doesn't play well and you run them off—like a minor league ball club sort of mentality. Well, those practices will be problematic now because of the retention issue.

"We know that most teams over a four-year period are going to lose points," she adds. "Things happen in people's lives — they meet the love of their lives or a parent has a health issue — and they transfer. That's why we didn't set the bar at perfection. But if you're having sustained, regular 'runoffs' to the point that half of your roster is just leaving year after year, something's wrong, Dickman says."

And the NCAA is going to slam down the hammer, said Dr. Robert Hemenway, chancellor of the University of Kansas and chairman of the NCAA's Division I Board of Directors, in a state-

ment. "Those institutions that have not been dedicated to graduating their student-athletes know they now are in some considerable jeopardy because of having taken that approach."

Indeed, there are some indications that the APR is already having an impact. "In my own program," says McElroy, "I've already met with every coach and discussed every team's APR. And we have a good overall score. But we also took the next step and made some projections about next year. And I have to tell you, it has changed some of the decisions our coaches are making in their recruiting."

And while "the APR is still in its infant stages. It's much too early to try to determine right now what kind of effect it's going to have," says Joseph Taylor, assistant director of athletics and head football coach of the Hampton University Pirates. "But Hampton was known for academics before it was known for athletics and that's not going to change." ■