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Don't Let Facts Get in the Way of a Good Myth

By Myles Brand, NCAA President

What are you going to believe...myth or the facts?

Do you want to continue believing the popular myth, the false perception, the uninformed bias that student-athletes as a lot are dumb jocks? Or do you want to believe the data that say student-athletes are, on average, graduating at higher rates from college than other students?

Last week, I wrote about the dumb jock myth. It has been around a long time. It pervades popular culture about the academic status of student-athletes. From the Broadway musical *Good News* in 1927 to Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* in 2005, the perception persists that college athletes - especially football players and male basketball players - are coming to campus only to play sports and avoid classrooms.

Commenting on last week's blog entitled "The 'Dumb Jock' Myth is Dumb," craigjjs wrote, "Right, the jocks are all Rhodes Scholars. Let's hear the stats for the major sports."

Okay, here are the facts when you look at the graduation rates released earlier this week. These are the rates that include the success and failure of transfer student-athletes (which the federal rates simply ignore as academic dropouts and undercount by more than 37,000 students annually).

For the freshmen football student-athletes in the Football Bowl Subdivision institutions (the ones who draw the most attention and the largest revenue producers) who entered in 2001, the graduation rate is 66 percent. Two-thirds of all football players graduate in six years (the same time span the federal government uses for all students).

Basketball student-athletes who were part of the same cohort at the same institutions graduated at 65 percent, one percentage point lower.

When you look at the entire class of freshmen from the 2001 cohort, the rate is 79 percent. Nearly eight of every 10 student-athletes earn a degree in six years. And every demographic is doing better than their counterparts in the student body (as measured by the federal calculation) except for white males who trail by two percentage points.

All of these numbers have been trending upward over the last six years. If, as I noted last week, you count student-athletes who return to school over a 10 year period, the graduation rate is 88 percent, almost nine of 10!

So what, Craigjjs contends. “You forgot to compare the majors when you cooked up your statistics. I would guess that the ‘recreational science’ and similar majors tend to receive higher grades and find graduating a bit easier than those of the serious students.”

We had the same concern, so we looked at majors for Division I student-athletes in 2004. Student-athletes were underrepresented by about four percent compared to all other students in the humanities and by about 9 percent in sciences. They were overrepresented compared to all other students by about five percent in social sciences and three percent in business. Both groups were about the same in education majors.

Across the spectrum of Division I, there is little evidence of “clustering,” or disproportionate numbers of student-athletes in certain majors.

Let me be clear! You can find examples of football or men’s basketball programs with unacceptably low graduation rates. You can also find teams where unexplainably large numbers of football or men’s basketball athletes are clustered in certain majors.

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But these examples are not the rule. They drive the myth. They are no more valid as a generalization than to argue that all student-athletes are great scholars, which some are.

What we have seen during the last few years - and what we will see increasingly in the future - are trends that in time will have most teams in most sports at most institutions graduating above or well above the 60 percent threshold where other students on average graduate.

Why do we know this and what is the cause?

Four years ago, the presidents in Division I put in place the most comprehensive package of academic reforms ever in the history of college sports. The package had three key components:

- Higher standards—Entering freshmen had to present successful completion of 16 academic core courses in high school and a sliding-scale achievement on both grade-point average and standardized tests. Enrolled student-athletes had to make 20 percent progress each year toward a declared major (and one open to all students).
- Better metrics—We look at academic performance semester by semester to track whether members of a team are on course to graduate, and we examine the success or failure of all student-athletes, including transfers.
- Sanctions—Teams that fail to meet threshold requirements each year will lose scholarships and teams that fail to perform academically over time could lose additional scholarships, be withheld from post-season tournaments or even be decertified.

We've never taken such an approach before. There is no place for low-performing teams to run and hide. Next spring, the first post-season sanctions will be leveled against teams that show a pattern of academic underachieving and no improvement. If that fails to get the attention of coaches, athletics directors and presidents, the entire athletics program could be withheld from NCAA championships.

That's going to leave a mark.

Our goal from the outset has been to change behavior. We want student-athletes to get an education and graduate. We would rather reward improvement than punish low performance. But we are dead serious about better results.

The dumb jock myth has always been an unfortunate generalization that unfairly stigmatized the great majority of student-athletes, including the majority of football and male basketball athletes. And the academic reform effort currently underway makes it even more untrue.

So, what are you going to depend on now for your perception of college athletes as students...an uninformed bias that says all jocks are dumb or the undeniable data that shows on average student-athletes are doing as well or better than other students?

It's a shame to let the facts get in the way of a good story, but they just don't support the myth that jocks are dumb.