



COLLEGES' RECORD MIXED WHEN IT COMES TO GRADUATION RATES AMONG BASKETBALL PLAYERS

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Despite excelling on the court, student athletes on many of the best college basketball teams in the nation have an alarmingly low graduation rate, according to a new study. The top ranked team in the country, Ohio State, has been graduating only 38 percent of its players. And some schools, like the University of Tennessee, have graduated less than 20 percent.

A study released by the University of Central Florida in March also found only 24 of the 65 schools in the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament graduated more than 70 percent of their players. The research also highlighted a large racial disparity in the graduation rates, with more than three-quarters of white student athletes earning degrees and only half the black students doing so.

Richard Lapchick, the study's author and director of UCF's Institute of Diversity and Ethics in Sports, said in the study that while graduation rates have gone up in recent years, "the lingering bad news is the continuing disparity in the academic success between African-American and white men's basketball student-athletes."

Some leaders in higher education say these numbers are particularly troubling, given the millions of dollars some schools earn from their basketball programs.

The NCAA recently initiated measures to better track graduation rates and hold schools accountable for their players' academic success. So far, the changes have met with mixed reviews.

Measuring success

The disturbing findings come despite recent changes in the way colleges measure athlete success. Prior to 2006, college athletic programs counted players who left school to enter the National Basketball Association's draft as non-graduates. The new measure, called the Graduation Success Rate, excludes these players from the teams' rating as long as they were in good academic standing when leaving school.

As could be expected, GSRs for teams competing in this year's tournament are generally higher than teams' graduation rates under the old system. The gap in graduation rates between white and black athletes, however, remains significant.

To measure student athletes' progress toward degrees, the NCAA also imposed a second measure, the Academic Progress Rate. Starting next season, all teams with players who fail to complete a required number of classes toward a degree will be subject to penalties, such as the loss of scholarships.

Many top ranked college basketball programs depend on these scholarships to recruit the best high school players and field strong teams.

As Lapchick told the NewsHour on March 30, "scholarships are [teams'] bread and butter. ... How they stay in contention to get in the tournament."

Getting a quality education

Critics of the NCAA's new measures say they don't go far enough or insure that student athletes are getting a quality education, despite the millions of dollars that some schools make off their basketball programs.

Richard Southall, associate professor of Sport and Leisure Management at the University of Memphis, says that teams often recruit students who are under-prepared for college-level academics, then force them to miss classes for games and devote huge amounts of time to training and practice.

"We're setting the kids up for failure, and then we blame them," Southall said. "That, to me, is the height of exploitation."

An optimistic trend

Some leaders in higher education, however, see rising graduation rates and the NCAA's commitment to tracking academic progress as a good sign.

Britt Kirwan, current Chancellor of the University of Maryland and a member of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve academic values in college sports, is optimistic about the NCAA's new guidelines.

"I would concur that graduation rates don't necessarily measure what students are learning, but that doesn't mean that this measure is not a good one to have," he said.

Kirwan believes that holding schools accountable for their players' progress toward degrees will force athletic programs to start addressing a long-standing problem.

In the next couple of months, the NCAA could announce that a few schools with top athletic programs will be penalized under the new guidelines.

"When some high-profile teams start losing scholarships, you're going to see some pushback," Kirwan said. "I think it's going to be very important that the NCAA and the governing bodies of the NCAA stand up to this pressure."

If these reforms prove effective, Kirwan hopes they will be a foundation for putting the "college" back into college basketball.

-- *By Noah Buhayar, NewsHour Extra*

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