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## Can't NCAA improve graduation rate of student-athletes?

David Carter

One of the sports industry's greatest creations, March Madness, college basketball's national championship tournament, is about to get underway. For college basketball junkies, this 19-day event is a hoops nirvana, complete with multiple "road trips," endless partying, and a lot of gambling -- as much as \$7 billion will be wagered, both legally and through office pools.

The extraordinary interest in this tournament is further demonstrated by CBS' new TV contract for the tournament, valued at \$6 billion over 11 years starting in 2003. With an average of \$545 million per year, the new contract dwarfs the previous \$219 million annual rights fee to televise this spring spectacle.

Over the next several weeks, the phrase "The Road to Atlanta" will be uttered more than a few times by commentators to describe the difficult and, at times, unpredictable if not serendipitous path traveled by the eventual national champion as it wins its way to the Georgia Dome, host to this year's Final Four.

Such high-profile events garner the lion's share of attention given to college athletics and overshadow some of the NCAA's meaningful but seldom reported successes. These include providing almost \$1 billion in financial aid annually to student-athletes in all sports who, on average, graduate at higher rates (58 percent) than their peers in the general student body (56 percent). The NCAA has also provided the funding to double the number of women who participate in intercollegiate athletics over the past decade.

In many respects the path to the Final Four resembles the one that players will take in their unlikely pursuit of hoops glory. In his letter to college-bound student-athletes, NCAA president Cedric Dempsey is quick to point out the long odds of making it to the NBA.

"There are about 500,000 high school basketball players. Of that number, about 50 make an NBA team. The odds for a high-school basketball player making it to the pros -- let alone having a career -- are about 10,000-to-1."

Although these odds pale in comparison to the 5.7 billion-to-1 odds of an office pooler correctly selecting the outcome of every tournament game, it remains quite troubling to NCAA officials who are charged with matriculating America's athletically inclined youth.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between graduation rates and "revenue-generating" sports. For example, only about 40 percent of all basketball players receive their diplomas, a percentage bolstered by basketball powerhouses Duke (73 percent) and Kansas (64 percent), but compromised by the Universities of Cincinnati (8 percent) and Oklahoma (0 percent).

In its June 2001 report, "A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education," the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics concluded, "Big-time athletics departments seem to operate with little interest in scholastic matters beyond the narrow issue of individual eligibility."

Dempsey appreciates the dilemma faced by the NCAA when he referred to "trust gaps" in his annual state of the association address.

"The media, the general public, and even those of us involved in the administration of college sports all have said that the NCAA and intercollegiate athletics give real service to raising revenues and lip service to supporting the best interests of student-athletes."

To remedy this situation, the Knight Commission advocates three meaningful changes to improve graduation rates and restore the NCAA's credibility. First, it believes the same admissions criteria should be applied to all students, regardless of their athletic prowess. The Commission also advocates reducing the length of the playing seasons to improve the likelihood that athletes will complete their degrees. Finally, by 2007, it suggests barring programs that graduate fewer than 50 percent of their athletes from conference championships and postseason play.

But implementing these recommendations requires what Dempsey deemed "the will to act." Unless the will to act is vociferously and demonstrably supported by tournament sponsors and advertisers, any meaningful improvement in the fate of student-athletes cannot be achieved. Until the NCAA successfully addresses the Knight Commission's recommendations -- particularly by linking pay (TV revenue) to performance (graduation rates), it will be unable to trumpet the NCAA's track record and rehabilitate its reputation.

Meanwhile, enjoy the madness.

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