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NCAA Attacks Academic Abuse

New Rule Targets 'Diploma Mills'

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By Eric Prisbell and Josh Barr
Washington Post Staff Writers
Wednesday, May 2, 2007; E01

In its latest and most significant step toward addressing academic abuses in prep basketball, the NCAA has approved a rule that prohibits the practice of players attending prep schools for a year to correct deficiencies in their academic transcripts following four years of high school.

The new rule states that upon entering ninth grade, athletes have four years to meet the eligibility standards in core academic courses to participate in college athletics; following those four years, they may take only one additional core course to achieve eligibility at any high school recognized by the NCAA.

The rule addresses the recent proliferation of "diploma mills," fraudulent schools that players use to correct deficiencies in their academic transcripts compiled at traditional high schools. In the past, players who did not meet eligibility standards after their high school careers could enroll in these prep schools, which had little if any oversight, and receive the grades necessary to compete as college freshmen.

The rule also takes aim at the emerging trend of "reclassifying," in which players repeat a high school grade in order to enhance their attractiveness to colleges, by either retaking classes to improve their academic standing or by competing largely against players one year younger than they are. As of Aug. 1, all student-athletes who need more than four years to fulfill their core-course requirements -- except for those currently attending prep schools -- must apply to the NCAA for a waiver to be eligible to play college athletics.

"If you've been a good student and taken academic courses, you shouldn't be worried at all," said Kevin Lennon, NCAA vice president for membership services, adding that the association likely would be lenient as it phases in the new policy. "I'd be worried if I hadn't done very well in high school and I transferred to a new school and had a miraculous recovery in one year, then, yeah, the NCAA is going to look at my record and my SAT or ACT score.

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"If you're a prep school that was in the business of educating students to go to college, you have nothing to be worried about. If you're a prep school that is more interested in eligibility and having these students gain eligibility, then that might be a problem."

The Washington Post reported in February 2006 that Lutheran Christian Academy in Philadelphia, which sent players to Georgetown and George Washington among other programs, was operated out of a community center, had no textbooks and had only one full-time employee, a former sanitation worker with no college degree. The New York Times reported in November 2005 that University High, a

*"An Oscar"-
caliber
performance
by Julie Christie."
- Ruthie Stein,
San Francisco Chronicle*

correspondence school in Miami, offered diplomas to students despite having no classes or instructors.

By limiting the number of core courses allowed to be taken after four years of high school to one, the new rule prevents significant overhauls of academic transcripts. The NCAA's goal is to revamp legislation that, in some cases, encouraged recruits to "purposefully delay high school graduation to meet NCAA initial eligibility requirements. This is not a sound academic practice."

"The primary target were the kids who were deliberately not graduating," said Gary Roberts, the faculty athletic representative at Tulane and a member of the NCAA's initial eligibility subcommittee. Roberts, speaking of his personal opinions, added that the practice of deliberately not graduating for athletic purposes "was the most outrageous and abusive tactic. There are an awful lot of kids who are doing it to redshirt for athletic reasons and that is one of the things the rule is designed to stop."

Chris Chaney, the boys' basketball coach at the Patterson School in Lenoir, N.C., said more than half the players on his team have been reclassified. Chaney said the practice of reclassifying players is "going to go out the window. It's not going to happen. It's going to take away a lot of prep school kids obviously and it's going to help junior colleges.

"It's going to affect a lot of situations. Obviously, it's going to affect us. It's going to change things.

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