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## Junior college sports: A study in oversight

By Ryan Gabrielson  
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*SLAM DUNK: At both Mesa and South Mountain community colleges, coaches encourage their players to sign up for coaching classes. In this file photo, the colleges' women's basketball teams square off. TRIBUNE FILE*

In the coming months, the Maricopa County Community College District will become an even more important feeder to the nation's major college sports programs. New NCAA rules taking effect in August are designed to crack down on university athletes' poor academic performances. So universities will likely rely more than ever on two-year schools like the Maricopa colleges to help gifted players with bad grades get ready for tough class work.

If athletes fall short academically at four-year schools, universities risk losing scholarships and other penalties that cost sports programs money.

College coaches and scouts foresee "a resurgence in the number of top-caliber players that are going to have to go back through the junior college route," said Michael L. Johnson, who runs a news service on sports at two-year schools. "They're going to go through the programs that have been successful in the past."

The strict standards will put a brighter spotlight on schools like the Scottsdale and Mesa community colleges, where team coaches enroll their players in classes that are often just team meetings, as a Tribune investigation found. These classes leave junior college athletes - often the weakest students - unprepared for the universities they transfer to.

The NCAA, which governs sports at four-year schools, is enacting regulations to block universities from accepting students who use high school "diploma mills" to become eligible. For a fee, these businesses boost athletes' failing

grades on paper, making them eligible at universities right out of high school without class work.

Meanwhile, next school year the NCAA will begin imposing penalties using a more sophisticated system to measure university athletes' performance in the classroom. The system will take into account players' academic progress every semester in addition to the graduation rate for all athletes.

As many as 40 percent of the nation's college basketball and football programs appear headed for penalties, such as the loss of scholarships, an NCAA analysis found.

"There's going to be a lot of pressure on college coaches to (recruit) students who can be successful academically," said Nathan Tublitz, head of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, which works to reform college sports.

And while two-year schools are expected to help universities avoid this fate, the organization that governs sports at junior colleges does not have a single rule concerning what coaches and athletes do in the classroom.

Art Becker, Scottsdale's athletic director, is president of the National Junior College Athletic Association.

He said the two-year schools' organization does not have near the resources needed to police colleges like the NCAA does. NJCAA has only a fraction of the staff and far less money.

"It's an entirely different organization," Becker said. "You cannot even compare the two organizations."

Several of NJCAA's top officials come from the Maricopa district, which is the nation's largest junior college system. MCCCAD athletic directors from South Mountain and Paradise Valley Community College represent all two-year schools in California and Arizona.

More than 500 two-year schools are members of NJCAA. The junior college association cannot write rules on academics that would be fair to all, said Scott Geddis, Phoenix College's athletic director.

"It would be dangerous for an organization like this to get too involved in that," Geddis said. "We're all too different."

However, the NCAA oversees a diverse group of hundreds of universities. Both Arizona State University and Harvard University follow the same set of rules.

But Becker said that despite what four-year schools are doing, junior colleges should not be subject to the same oversight. He said the community colleges themselves should handle questions about academic integrity.

And, he noted, that responsibility also falls to accrediting agencies, which are supposed to thoroughly evaluate every college once every 10 years. A school must be accredited for its classes and degrees.

Becker's college, SCC, recently completed a yearlong reaccreditation by the North Central Association, one of the country's major accrediting agencies.

Yet the agency did not review any of the 18 coaching classes the college offered during the process. No one from the accreditation team showed up to check out the classes and no documentation about the classes was reviewed, according to Amy Goff, chairwoman for physical education at the Scottsdale college.

In fact, the team visited only one of her department's classes, she said.

Universities are even less equipped to judge the classes taken by the junior colleges athletes they recruit.

Daniel Strawn took a number of difficult classes to earn his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering last month.

But the Colorado State University graduate said he can thank the Scottsdale Community College baseball team for two classes that required no struggle at all. Strawn, an SCC pitcher in 2003, took courses on coaching baseball while at the two-year school.

"The fact that they transferred still amazes me," Strawn said, laughing. "I took two classes about baseball."

His coach served as instructor. His teammates were his classmates. Game preparation replaced schoolwork.

Colorado State officials considered rejecting some of the more rigorous classes Strawn took at SCC, he said. But the university gave him six credits for the baseball coaching classes, without question.

A state board of representatives from each university and junior college decides what classes transfer and the number of credits for every subject taught at Arizona's institutions of higher education.

For each class the two-year schools want to transfer, the colleges submit outlines of what the class is supposed to teach, said Maggie Tolan, an ASU assistant vice provost.

The system is based largely on trust; the outline is the only information the state board receives to judge a class. At ASU, there can be a more thorough review when a student complains, or other concerns arise, Tolan said.

Recently, the university began rejecting a business math class from the Maricopa colleges because the level of math being taught was not high enough.

When problems come up, they are typically because a junior college class is not as difficult as it is supposed to be, Tolan said.

The state does not have a way to detect if a junior college class is taught appropriately, Tolan said.

Outside of the state, every university has different criteria for deciding what classes can transfer.

Vincent Anderson took a football coaching class last year with his twin brother, Victor, and more than a dozen of their teammates from the MCC football team. Vincent, a receiver, said he and his brother, a quarterback, used the class to help with their transfer to Southeast Missouri State University this year.

And the four-year school is counting the class the same way the junior college did. "P.E. credits, maybe," Vincent said.

William Tukuafu said the football coaching classes he took at the Scottsdale and Mesa colleges the past two years helped him earn his associate's degree - which he needed to become eligible to play for a university.

But they won't move the highly touted defensive lineman toward his bachelor's degree. The University of Oregon, where Tukuafu transferred in January, did not accept the classes.

"It's just an elective class," Tukuafu said, "so it doesn't matter."



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