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NCAA's Evolving Academic Picture

The evidence is mounting. In year three of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's new system for measuring and reporting athletes' and teams' academic performance, through what it calls the [Academic Progress Rate](#), the association is getting a good sense of which teams are safe from penalties and which are digging themselves into trouble.

"What we're seeing for the first time is a mature set of data, a comprehensive set of data," said Walt Harrison, president of the University of Hartford and chair of the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance.

The APR [data](#), a real-time measure of how many of a team's scholarship athletes are on track to receive a degree, shows that 112 teams at 75 Division I colleges have either received a public sanction or face the loss of at least part of an athletic scholarship because of poor academic performance. Last year, [99 teams at 65 Division I colleges](#) faced the scholarship loss.

The APR is the NCAA's preferred way of measuring how athletes fare in the classroom, because unlike the traditional measure of academic success — the federal graduation rate — the NCAA's standard doesn't penalize colleges whose athletes transfer or leave early in good standing. For the APR, each scholarship athlete can receive a maximum of two points per term: one for finishing in good academic standing and another for remaining enrolled at the institution. A team's APR is calculated by dividing the total number of points earned by the players on its roster for the year by the total number of points possible, then multiplying by 1,000.

The APR is part of the NCAA's academic reform package, which also includes the [Graduation Success Rate](#), designed to measure what proportion of athletes earn a degree.

Information released on Wednesday reveals that 63 teams face an immediate penalty for scoring below a 925 — the NCAA's threshold for contemporaneous sanctions — and having at least one athlete fail academically and leave school. A team can lose up to 10 percent of its scholarship allotment under the year-by-year penalty.

For the first time this year, the NCAA also began handing out "historical" penalties (more on this later) to 31 colleges. Eighteen institutions received both immediate and historical penalties. That's a relatively small number given the NCAA's 6,000-plus Division I teams, but NCAA officials warned that many more teams could be in trouble next year.

The NCAA said that 44 percent of men's basketball teams, 40 percent of football teams and 35 percent of baseball teams would have posted APRs below 925 (and, as a result, potentially lost scholarships this year) had it not been for "squad-size adjustments," which are meant to prevent smaller teams from being unfairly penalized by the actions of just a few athletes.

Starting next year, when the NCAA will for the first time have a four-year data set, the squad-size adjustments will end, putting any team below a 925 APR in jeopardy of more serious sanctions.

"The philosophy is to provide gradually more penalties over time to those who don't show improvement," said Myles

Brand, the NCAA's president. "[Sanctions] are going to get more strict once the historical penalties kick in and squad size disappears."

Teams whose cumulative APR score over three years (2003-4, 2004-5, 2005-6) fell below a 900 and weren't granted relief by the NCAA were subject to the historical penalties, which this year meant college presidents received a letter of warning. Starting next year, those penalties will include additional scholarship reductions, practice restrictions, and even lack of access to postseason competition and restricted membership.

Since the historical penalties will take into account a four-year APR average, many seriously underperforming teams have little hope of avoiding the historical penalties over the next several years. The best such shot a college would have would be to persuade the NCAA that it has a serious academic reform plan.

Florida International University's football team, which made news last fall for being part of a [brawl](#) with the University of Miami's squad, posted a multi-year APR score of 889. While the squad-size adjustment kept it from a historical penalty this year, the team does face nine immediate scholarship losses.

"Our APR scores are what we expected them to be, as are the penalties associated with them," said Pete Garcia, FIU's director of athletics, in a statement. "Right now, we are more interested in a solid turnaround in our APR scores and the time it takes to accomplish this is not the most critical component."

Garcia said the university has already started to develop a strategic plan that will include improvements in academic advising, support, compliance and more chances for summer school attendance. Florida International plans to hire someone who specializes in degree requirements and fulfillment.

A significant number of this year's penalized teams came from the less-visible Division I conferences. Kevin Lennon, the NCAA's vice president for membership services, said historical waivers are available for teams that show improvement and for those that are "low-resource" institutions, among other factors. Brand said low-resource colleges are receiving letters from the NCAA describing a \$1.6 million fund intended to help them jumpstart academic reform on their campuses.

Waivers also are granted for coaching changes. Iowa State University's men's basketball program lost two scholarships as a result of a poor APR score, but the NCAA has granted the team a conditional waiver from further penalties because six athletes left after a coaching change in 2006. To avoid future penalties, the team has to show progress toward moving above the 925 mark.

The two-time champion University of Florida men's basketball team recorded a 917 APR, but because of the squad-size adjustment isn't eligible for contemporaneous penalties this year. The runner-up Ohio State University men's basketball team had an even worse score, 902, but also avoided immediate penalties for the same reason.

The latest data show the average APR for all Division I athletes is 960. The average for males is slightly lower than for females. APR scores are rising for football (931) and baseball (935) but dropping in men's basketball (928).

Baseball is still a concern to NCAA officials, particularly given the high number of athletes whose academic performances suffer when they transfer within Division I institutions. The NCAA Division I Board of Directors decided that baseball players should be required to show that they are academically eligible at the start of the fall term to be eligible to compete during both the fall and spring semesters; as it is now, where players can be eligible to play in the spring only by proving their eligibility at the end of the fall semester, many players are perceived as blowing off the spring and summer terms.

"Baseball surprised a number of us, that it was the one sport we weren't expecting to have poor scores but did," said Harrison, the NCAA committee chairman. "There's an intense season in the spring, and many athletes play into the summer, so they use the fall semester to get well [academically.] That's not a good academic pattern to fall into."

NCAA data also showed that men's teams with the highest APRs are fencing (976), gymnastics, ice hockey and water polo (all at 970). Women's teams with the highest APRs are crew (984), and field hockey and lacrosse (tied at 983). Women's bowling (942) posted the lowest APR for women's teams.

Last week, the NCAA [honored](#)

more than 800 Division I sports teams that posted multi-year APR scores in the top 10 percent of all squads in their respective sports.

— [Elia Powers](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/05/03/apr>.

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