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Those Pesky Academic Standards

The frequent contributors to [Tiger Illustrated](#) and [TigerNet](#), two fan forums for Clemson University athletics, have been fuming of late.

Just before national signing day, two top high school football players were told that a Clemson academic review panel had rejected their applications. One of the players quickly signed with Clemson's Atlantic Coast Conference rival University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Concerned fans, boosters and gadflies sent angry messages to James. F. Barker, Clemson's president: Why the late notice from the committee? Why do we always seem to turn down athletes that our competitors admit? Do you even care about sports?

Put on the defensive, Barker responded this week: "We are in danger of becoming deeply divided because of questions and misperceptions about our process for admitting student-athletes," he said in a statement.

And then, in essence, he held out an olive branch to his critics by [announcing](#) that the university would review its admissions process for athletes who meet the National Collegiate Athletic Association's minimum entry requirements but who fall below Clemson's normal academic standards. The provost and athletics director's offices will conduct the review.

"Ultimately we may decide to keep the process we have, make minor modifications, tighten standards further or create an entirely new system," Barker said. "My only directive will be that we have a process that maintains academic integrity while not putting Clemson at a competitive disadvantage.

"This is not a competition between academics and athletics," he added. "It's between Clemson and all the institutions who are recruiting the same students."

Under the current procedure, the five-person [Athletic Advisory Review Committee](#) — comprising faculty, admissions and athletics department representatives — reviews each athlete's academic resume and determines whether he or she has a chance of succeeding academically. Coaches can appeal the decision and ask for a second review. If the committee still denies the athlete, Clemson's athletics director can request a special look from the provost's office, and finally, the president.

The committee, established in 2002, reviews athletes' academic credentials year-round, though Clemson said the majority of its athletes are admitted via the regular admissions process.

“At times we admit a student who does not qualify under NCAA guidelines, and at times we deny a student who goes on to be successful at another institution,” Barker said in the statement.

According to Clemson’s data, about 60 percent of all applicants are admitted into the university, and the average SAT score is roughly 1200.

Barker maintains that the university’s standards are not a barrier to athletics success. In a recent speech to donors, Barker said that Clemson’s admissions standards are no different than at many other institutions. He added that the university accepted more students this season who fell below regular admissions standards than in years before.

Clemson’s graduation success rate for football, which examines the proportion of a four-year institution’s freshmen who earn a degree within six years, is 94 percent. Every sport other than men’s basketball there had an equal or higher figure.

Its federal graduation rate, a measure that counts athletes who transferred in good academic standing as dropouts, is only 49 percent. Clemson’s women’s sports have a significantly higher number. (Both GSR and federal indicators measured athletes who entered from 1995-8.)

Much of the fan concern is about the football program, which finished 8-5 last season with a loss in its bowl game. The team regularly plays in the postseason. Clemson’s academic performance rate, a snapshot of a team’s academic standing, is 940 in football. That ranks in the top half of Division I-A football teams but toward the bottom when looking at all sports.

“There is no university conspiracy to devalue the football program in favor of an academic ranking,” said Terry Don Phillips, Clemson’s athletics director, in a statement. “To suggest so is simply not true. If I believed that, I would not remain at Clemson.”

Phillips and Tommy Bowden, Clemson’s head football coach, both said that they appreciate Barker’s decision to review the admissions process.

“I have confidence that the university administration understands the importance of recruiting on a level playing field and that we will be able to recruit on a level playing field in the future,” Bowden said in a statement.

Larry LaForge, a faculty representative on the review committee, said he disagrees with boosters that the process is unfair but welcomes a review.

“I don’t think anyone wants to do anything to affect our academic integrity,” said LaForge, a professor of management who is the faculty representative to the National Collegiate Athletic Association. “Athletics is part of the culture at Clemson. It’s an important part of the experience and we want it to be competitive.”

Beth Kunkel, president of the Faculty Senate and a professor of food science and human nutrition, said it seems as though those protesting are a vocal minority. She said she agrees that the president needs to review the process, but she is looking for a different outcome than many who asked for a change.

“If anything, we’d like to see more stringent guidelines,” she said. “[The president] isn’t looking to make concessions.”

Hodding Carter III, former president of the James L. Knight Foundation and a professor of leadership and public policy at Chapel Hill, said he is unfamiliar with the student who was rejected from Clemson but admitted at UNC.

Clemson's review could go in a number of different directions, he said.

"Any review of a program intended to provide assurance that admitted athletes are academically qualified can be for the good of the campus," he said. "Any review based on an uproar and resulting in the weakening of standards also weakens the connection between the values of higher education and big-time sports.

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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