

Factoring Academics into *March Madness* Tournament Eligibility

By Dr. Frank G. Splitt

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DEDICATION

This essay is dedicated to the memory of General Andrew J. Goodpaster, 1915-2005, a soldier, engineer, and scholar who fought with uncommon valor in World War II, advised several presidents, and commanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

He came out of retirement in 1977 to become superintendent of West Point as it was reeling from a cheating scandal that involved 151 cadets. In his four-year tenure at the academy, the general sought to substitute "positive leadership" for hazing and personal abuse, to bolster courses in humanities and public policy, as well as to ease the admission of women.

Subsequent to his government service, he served as a senior fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and at the Eisenhower Institute, which studies foreign and domestic policy issues.

General Goodpaster was a bright, thoughtful, humane, trustworthy, and exceedingly modest person of high integrity—an example of a truly enlightened military intellectual who used his considerable talents in the service of his country.

His life story now serves as an inspiration to others who are challenged with the task of resolving complex domestic and foreign policy issues.



General Andrew Jackson Goodpaster

For more on General Goodpaster, go to <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/ajgoodpaster.htm>

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College Athletics Clips Guest Commentary

Our guest author delineates the confusion caused among the general public from the non-integrated alphabet soup of GSR, FGR and APR.

Frank G. Splitt, The Drake Group, 4-1-10

Education Secretary Duncan not only recognizes that corruption and cheating exist in collegiate athletics, but is also attempting to do something about it while millions of Americans remain fervently captivated by the exciting competition surrounding the NCAA's professionalized and highly commercialized March Madness basketball tournament. This essay tells the story behind the headlines.

INTRODUCTION – Over the past six years, The Drake Group has maintained a dialogue with the U. S. Department of Education on widespread academic and other forms of corruption and cheating in collegiate athletics. Secretary Duncan is the first high-level official to grasp the enormity of the surrounding issues. He has responded with a well-timed second challenge to the NCAA saying he wants the NCAA to exclude teams from post-season play unless 40-percent of their players finish degrees.^{1, 2}

Based on extensive experience, government intervention appears to be the only mechanism that has a realistic chance of restoring academic primacy in higher education. Nonetheless, simply weighing graduation rates and/or academic progress rates (APRs) as part of tournament eligibility would shine a light on the NCAA cartel's operations and pressure the NCAA to not only comply with its basic purpose and its principle of amateurism,³ but also comply with the tax-exempt requirement that its athletes be legitimate degree-seeking students that are maintained as an integral part of their school's student bodies—or else risk losing its tax exempt status.

PROFESSIONALIZED PROGRAMS – A close examination of the NCAA's rule changes over the past 50 years or so will show that these changes have not been to support or reinforce their stated purpose and principle of amateurism, but rather have been to increase their market size and revenues by professionalizing their big-time football and men's basketball programs at the expense of the education of participating athletes. Nowhere is this professionalization more evident than at the NCAA's moneymaking *March Madness* basketball tournament.

ACADEMIC MEASURES – Weighing graduation rates, and/or the NCAA's Academic Progress Rates (APRs) as part of *March Madness* tournament eligibility as Secretary Duncan suggests would be an even better idea if the reported rates were legitimate measures of the education the athletes are receiving; please see NOTE 4 and the APPENDIX. Without transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, there is no way of knowing what's going on re: the real—as opposed to the reported—academic life of college athletes.

Also, factoring academic measures into the tournament eligibility process without transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, would likely trigger even more cheating and academic corruption than exists today. Nonetheless, there are still two powerful arguments for proposing this factoring—first it would be a step in the right direction by stressing the importance of

academics and second, it would tease out a litany of revenue-protecting reasons from the NCAA cartel as to why it's not a good idea. It has already begun as the NCAA says the 40-percent standard would have unfairly punished athletes for the record of their predecessors.⁵

COMPARING APPLES & ORANGES – Nowhere do the data sets used for calculating the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) and the NCAA's Graduate Success Rate (GSR) give the reviewer any insights as to the quality of the education that merited an athlete's graduation. Also, the data sets don't give the reviewer insights as to the academic integrity of the institution, evidence of easy majors for athletes, athletics-beholden and/or intimidated faculty, clustering of athletes in customized courses and special study programs, as well as other innovative cheating and scamming mechanisms used to maintain eligibility as well as rationalize the granting of diploma-mill-like degrees. Neither do the data sets give the reviewer insights as to the measure of school's:

1. Maintenance of intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program,
2. Maintenance of its athletes as integral parts of the student body, and
3. Protection of its athletes from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.

However, the data sets do give numbers that are readily accepted at face value since they are what the NCAA makes available. The numbers cannot be scrutinized because of a lack of transparency. However, these unscrutinized numbers can be crunched, summarized, compared, and reported in the media as if they really tell the story about the academic life of college athletes. For example, see the otherwise excellent story by the *Chicago Tribune's* Pulitzer Prize winning syndicated columnist Clarence Page,⁶ and the transcript of the *March Madness* related *PBS Newshour*.⁷ Editorials and media buzz have wholeheartedly supported Secretary Duncan's stress on academics.⁸

Comparisons of the graduation rates of college athletes to those of non-athletes are somewhat ludicrous, akin, for the most part, to making comparisons between apples and oranges. This is especially true when comparing rates for cohorts of full-time college athletes participating in big-time football and men's basketball programs with relatively easy majors against those of cohorts of full-time non-athlete males. The latter would include a considerable number of pre-med, pre-law, business, economics, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and other time-consuming majors. If the cohort of full-time college athletes participating in big-time football and men's basketball programs were limited to to say the top 50-percent of the team roster with the most minutes of playing time, publicized comparisons would be even worse.⁹

The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport uses the data provided by the NCAA that is, in turn, provided by the self-reporting schools. Again, without transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, there is no way of knowing what's going on re: the academic life of college athletes. This is precisely what piqued the interest of House Ways & Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas and Senator Chuck Grassley back in 2006 when they were seeking to determine the justification for the NCAA's tax-exempt status.

As has been stated many times and communicated to members of the press and *PBS Newshour* producers over the past few years, the academic performance of college athletes is likely worse than data indicates if the athlete's graduation rates as calculated by either the Federal or NCAA methods if they could be downward adjusted to reflect cheating and academic corruption.¹⁰

CONCLUDING REMARKS – We of The Drake Group, have reminded Secretary Duncan that the academic life of college athletes is shrouded in secrecy—thanks to the NCAA's ability to use and abuse the privacy provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) whenever it is asked for information that could prove embarrassing, as, for example, in 2006.

Secretary Duncan must understand that if he could somehow have the NCAA ban teams with low grad rates and/or low APRs, schools and coaches would likely work harder to mask cheating and academic corruption that enables them to employ professional teams for the *March Madness* basketball tournament.

Once again, without transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, there is no way of knowing what's going on re: the academic life of college athletes. A serious conversation between Secretary Duncan and Senator Grassley could very well catalyze long-awaited bipartisan action aimed at achieving transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of collegiate athletics and related academics.

President Obama appears to not only be an avid basketball fan, but also appears to be oblivious to the widespread academic corruption in collegiate athletics.¹¹ He is apparently reacting to supernormal stimuli.¹² This, coupled with political realities, may not allow him to give his wholehearted support to Secretary Duncan's effort to have the NCAA ban teams with low graduation rates. As stated in a previous essay, ending academic corruption in collegiate athletics won't be easy.¹³

AFTERWORD – We of The Drake Group believe Secretary Duncan deserves kudos for following up on the challenge to change that he directed toward the NCAA in his keynote address at their convention this past January.¹⁴ To the best of our knowledge the Secretary's action—stressing an academic measure as a criterion for eligibility in the NCAA's *March Madness* basketball tournament was unprecedented. NCAA officials are not used to getting told what they ought to do by a member of the president's cabinet. They have become accustomed to having their way with state officials, members of Congress, and the media.

The Secretary's action was not only deemed masterful, but courageous as well. It created a media buzz on par with that surrounding House Ways & Means (then) Chairman Bill Thomas' sharply worded 2006 letter to NCAA President Myles Brand that sought to determine the justification for the NCAA's tax-exempt status and (then) Senate Finance Committee Chairman Senator Charles Grassley's follow-up hearing in December of that year.¹⁵

The March 26, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* low keyed the Secretary's action—reporting that the NCAA is lukewarm to the eligibility policy advocated by the Secretary. That is a gross understatement. Why? Because the NCAA is not likely to support any policy that would factor academics into eligibility for its *March Madness* basketball tournament since such factoring could possibly compromise its vested moneymaking interests.

The NCAA has, and will most likely continue, to resist and/or work to undermine any effort that could possibly diminish the attractiveness of its commercial products for the simple reason that it is structured as an entertainment business featuring professional athletes, not an academic institution featuring athletes that are legitimate-degree-seeking students.

Given Secretary Duncan's reference to graduation rates, *Indy Star* investigative reporter Mark Alesia's breakthrough research on and analysis of graduation rates for Final-Four players should prove to be a valuable resource for the U. S. Department of Education and the Senate Finance Committee.¹⁶ The related database shows evidence of clustering and easy majors.

What could be next? As previously stated, a serious conversation between Secretary Duncan and Senator Grassley could very well catalyze long-awaited bipartisan action aimed at achieving transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of collegiate athletics and related

academics. Such an action would go a long way toward mitigating against the NCAA cartel's compliance avoidance techniques. Besides working with Senator Grassley to catalyze transformative bipartisan action, Secretary Duncan could also use his bully pulpit to continually remind NCAA officials and the public that they simply can't have it both ways. If this comes to pass, it will really be "one shining moment" for collegiate athletics and related academics.

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Frank G. Splitt, a member of The Drake Group, is a former McCormick Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University, and a vice president emeritus of NTI (the U.S. portion of the former Nortel Networks Corporation). He was the recipient of the *2006 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award* for his courageous defense of academic integrity in collegiate athletics and was the author of "Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education" and its sequel, "The Faculty-Driven Movement to Reform Big-Time College Sports." These documents are accessible at <http://thedrakegroup.org/splittessays.html>.

APPENDIX – A Note on Federal and NCAA Graduation Rates

In 2005, The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) released a self-serving method for calculating the graduation rate for college athletes—the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). It then began to lobby for the GSR as a replacement for the U. S. Department of Education's Federal Graduation Rate (FGR).

The NCAA claimed the GSR gives a more accurate indication of what's going on with the academic lives of college athletes than the FGR which simply asks whether the athletes enrolled at the school graduate within six years. Athletes who do not receive a diploma at that school for whatever reason, including transferring to another school, are counted against the institution's FGR—unfair argued the NCAA because colleges can't stop people from transferring. Also, since the FGR ignores athletes who transfer into a school and then go on to graduate, the NCAA asked: What's the point of calculating a school's graduation rate if it doesn't include some of the students who actually attend and graduate from the school?

The NCAA's GSR calculation method increases the number of graduating athletes by including athletes who transferred in and then graduate. It eliminates athletes who leave the school from the denominator as long as they would've been academically eligible to compete the following semester even though there is no evidence they would graduate. The latter would include athletes who choose to drop out of school so they can play professionally. Since dropouts should be counted against the school's graduation rate because they won't graduate from the school, the GSR can render higher graduation rates than the FGR—no doubt the aim of the NCAA since the Federal rates are appallingly low, especially when statistical adjustments are made for the percentage of part-timers in the general student body that have a lower graduation rate than full-time students.

If the truth be told, the Federal and NCAA methods of calculating graduation rates do not necessarily tell the entire story—both are imperfect systems as neither gives the true graduation rate for college athletes. Although both systems have flaws, the NCAA's GSR method has designed-in flaws that render a higher graduation rate than the Federal FGR method, for example, the elimination of dropouts from the initial cohort of enrollees.

Flaws notwithstanding, the FGR is the best (graduation-rate) measure of whether athletes at a given school are an "integral part of the student body." Unfortunately, it appears that the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport seems to have been able to substitute the GSR for the FGR in the press and the public consciousness—virtually killing a metric that was adopted by the federal government in 1990—much to the delight of the NCAA's PR department.

NOTES

1. Brady, Eric, "Education Secretary Duncan: Ban NCAA teams with low grad rates," *USA TODAY*, March 16, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/mensbasketball/2010-03-16-grad-rate-proposal_N.htm
2. Editor's Quick Take, "Duncan Challenges NCAA Again," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 18, 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/03/18/qt>. This essay is based in part on the author's posted comment on this news report.
3. The basic purpose of the NCAA is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body, and by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports (NCAA Manual, 2008-09, Bylaw 1.3.1 – Basic Purpose).

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises (NCAA Manual, 2008-09, Bylaw 2.9 – Principle of Amateurism).
4. Splitt, Frank G., "Why the NCAA's latest reform measures won't work," Essays & Commentaries on College Sports Reform, p 7, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Essays.pdf
5. "NCAA reacts to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's comments," http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/ncaahomeWCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/ncaa/ncaa/ncaa+news/ncaa+news+online/2010/division+i/ncaa_statement_duncan_graduation_rates&utm_source=delivra&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NCAA+News+Direct
6. Page, Clarence, "March Madness, diploma sadness," *ChicagoTribune.com*, March 21, 2010, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/college/ct-oped-0321-page-20100321,0,7971128.column>
7. Woodruff, Judy, "Duncan Wants NCAA to Stress Academics with Athletics: *March Madness* Fervor Hides Low Graduation Rates," *PBS Newshour*, March 18, 2010, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/sports/jan-june10/basketball1_03-18.html
8. Editorials, "Low grad rate should bench NCAA teams," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, March 21, 2010, <http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/2113412,CST-EDT-edit21.article#> and "The NCAA weaklings," *The Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 2010 www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/editorials/ct-edit-hoops-20100322,0,5290128.story
9. The NCAA has a propensity to obfuscate and mislead—making self-serving comparative calculations by selecting data sets covering populations that show the academic performance of college athletes in the most favorable light. It is fond of claiming that most athletic departments have graduation rates that are on par with or even better than the rest of the student body—counting on the fact that reporters and others simply don't have the time, energy, inclination, or wherewithal to delve into the details of data that goes into the calculation of these rates.
10. Splitt, Frank G., "The Academic Performance of College Athletes: No Doubt Worse Than Reported," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Academic_Performance_of_College_Athletes.pdf
11. This is despite two open letters sent to President Obama in 2009; see "The Drake Group's Open Letters to the President and His Administration," <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf> and <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama2.pdf>.
12. Barrett, Deirdre, *Supernatural Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 2010.
13. Splitt, Frank G., "Ending Academic Corruption in Collegiate Athletics Won't Be Easy," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Ending_2010.pdf
14. Moltz, David, "Duncan Challenges NCAA to Change," *Inside Higher Ed*, Jan. 15, 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/15/ncaa>. My comments posted after this piece had a direct bearing on subsequent personal communications with Secretary Duncan's senior staff.
15. Splitt, Frank G., "The U.S. Congress: New Hope for Constructive Engagement with the NCAA and Intercollegiate Athletics," *The Montana Professor*, Spring 2007, mtprof.msun.edu/Spr2007/splitt.html
16. Alesia, Mark, "They got game, but do NCAA players graduate?," *Indianapolis Star*, April 2, 2010, <http://www.indystar.com/article/20100402/SPORTS0609/4020331/In-NCAA-they-can-play-but-how-many-graduate>, Database: http://www.indystar.com/data/sports/finalfour_gradrates.shtml, and "Butler players' academic success inspires optimism," <http://www.indystar.com/article/20100402/SPORTS0609/4020387>