

Attachment #1

MEMO

To: Aminta Breaux, Vice-President for Student Affairs
Roger Bruszewski, Vice-President for Finance and Administration
Peg Kauffman, Athletic Director
Steve Roach, Associate Athletic Director

From: Richard A. Glenn, Faculty Athletic Representative

Date: May 1, 2008

RE: MU Policy/Practices on Athletic Eligibility and Eligibility Appeals

1. Statement of Interest

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires that each member institution appoint or elect a member of the faculty to provide a faculty perspective in athletics administration by serving in an advisory and oversight capacity. This practice helps ensure institutional control of athletic programs, a fundamental operating principle of the NCAA. The two major responsibilities of the faculty athletic representative (FAR) are protecting the academic interests of the student-athlete, broadly defined; and helping maintain compliance with NCAA regulations. At Millersville University, the FAR is appointed by the president, and works closely with the appropriate vice-president and the athletic directors.

One of the specific functions of the FAR is to hear and consider, with the athletic director, appeals that come from student-athletes who are ineligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics because of their failure to meet university standards.

2. Statement of Problem

The NCAA certifies student-athlete eligibility only once per year, at the outset of the fall semester. The typical rule is as follows: Once the NCAA certifies a student-athlete's eligibility, that student-athlete is eligible for the entire academic year. Millersville University has a more stringent policy. It conducts a mid-year certification of all student-athletes. Those student-athletes who fail to meet university standards after the fall semester are declared—by the university not the NCAA—ineligible. While this policy affects certain sports more than others—that is, spring sports have the potential to suffer the most harm—it has implications for all sports. A football player who fails to meet university standards in the fall is ineligible to participate in spring practices. A basketball player who fails to meet university standards in the fall is ineligible to participate in spring practices and competitions. In this situation, a student-athlete may be declared ineligible mid-season. A softball player who fails to meet university standards in the fall is ineligible to participate in spring practices and competitions; in effect, this student-athlete will not practice or play in her championship season.

Millersville University is the only PSAC institution that certifies mid-year; this is a policy, though, of which the university should be proud. The policy affirms the university's commitment to the academic success of student-athletes. At our sister institutions (and by NCAA rules), a student-athlete could take four courses in the fall, earn two Fs and two D-s (thus satisfying the six-credit rule), and still be eligible to practice and play in the spring. Furthermore, the student-athlete could enroll in four spring courses, never attend a single class, and participate in all practices and competitions during the spring. Such is preposterous.

Presently, student-athletes who fall below the university's standards (at this point, a 1.6 GPA in any single semester or a cumulative GPA of 2.0) are ineligible. The university should not apologize for expecting its student-athletes to maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.0. That is what the university requires of all students to earn a degree and it is not unfair to require as much from those who represent the university. Insisting upon satisfactory progress toward a degree each semester is laudable.

A number of student-athletes, however, have maintained laudable cumulative GPAs (in some cases, above a 3.0), but have fallen victim to the "one bad semester" problem (in which their single semester GPA falls below a 1.6). At present, one bad semester results in a declaration of ineligibility. To declare those student-athletes ineligible but not those student-athletes who only have a cumulative of 2.2, however, is a bit inconsistent and perhaps even unfair. After all, the cumulative GPA is a far better indicator of academic success than any single semester's GPA.

Additionally, our current policy—or if no policy exists, practice—is to permit coaches to appeal a declaration of ineligibility on behalf of a student-athlete to a two-person committee, composed of the athletic director and the FAR. When coaches appeal on behalf of their student-athletes, that committee, almost without exception, recommends restoration of the student-athlete’s eligibility. (Typically, the committee insists that the student-athlete consent to various forms of ongoing academic monitoring as a condition of reinstatement.)

When mid-year certification was implemented, the purpose of the appellate process was to prevent miscarriages of fairness. If there were *substantive* reasons for the poor academic performance of a student-athlete, the committee could remedy the miscarriage. But that is not how the appellate process has played out. The committee has in effect become an enabler of poor academic performance by accepting most any reason for poor academic performance—even bad ones. A list of some of the reasons articulated by the five ineligible student-athletes who appealed this semester is instructive.

- (1) I did not realize how tough college courses would be.
- (2) I was not prepared to attend early morning classes. No one was there to wake me up.
- (3) I decided to move off campus and did not have transportation to and from school.
- (4) I did not realize that missing classes would hurt my grades. (When asked how many practices he missed throughout the entire fall, the student-athlete said “None.”)
- (5) I attended class but had trouble getting my assignments turned in on time.
- (6) I had some personal issues that needed to be taken care of. These necessitated my leaving campus for large blocks of time. I told my coach but did not think I needed to tell my professors. (This from a senior.)
- (7) I just had a bad semester. (This from a senior who earned a 1.0 GPA last fall, no less.)
- (8) My professors were not very good.

Yet *none* of these excuses alone should justify reinstatement. They are mostly indicative of someone looking to shirk responsibility for not doing what it takes to meet minimal standards. If we grant an exception for a senior who earned a 1.0 GPA, are we fair in denying any appeal?

A list of some of the reasons (and promises) articulated by coaches is similarly instructive.

- (1) Just like _____ had trouble adjusting to the speed of the college game, _____ had trouble adjusting to college academics.
- (2) _____ came from a bad high school.
- (3) _____ did poorly, but it would be unfair to deny him his last season of eligibility.
- (4) He promises me that it will not happen again. I promise you that it will not happen again.
- (5) If you do not reinstate him, he probably will not come back to school.

Yet *none* of these reasons alone should justify reinstatement. They are mostly indicative of a coach who is being reactive to academic problems. After all, if a coach can promise that it will not happen again, why did the coach let it happen in the first place?

Each of these five persons referenced above performed poorly in the classroom. None was even close to a 2.0 GPA, which is what the university expects (requires) of all of its students. In fact, all were below a 1.6 GPA. While it is true that the NCAA and the university allow for some adjustment to college life, that adjustment is reflected in the NCAA and university policies that permit student-athletes to participate so long as they have earned a 1.6 or better. Yet we have created a situation where students who fall below that mark—in some cases, way below that mark—appeal successfully and are reinstated.

As a result, too few coaches and too few student-athletes take seriously the university’s standards. The committee, by recommending that most appeals be granted, deserves much of the blame for this state of affairs. (I confess that it is difficult for me to say “No” as often as I should.) But the coaches perhaps should share some of the responsibility for not being as proactive as they can be. In short, we have a policy with little bite.

3. Proposal

Therefore, I recommend the following proposals.

1. The university scrap its current policy that declares student-athletes ineligible because they have fallen below a 1.6 GPA in any given semester. The sole factor in determining eligibility would be the cumulative GPA, to be assessed *still* twice per academic year.

Justification: The cumulative GPA is a far better indicator of academic success than any single semester's GPA. To declare a student-athlete with a cumulative GPA of 3.2 ineligible because of one bad semester, while permitting the student-athlete with a cumulative GPA of 2.2 to participate, is inconsistent with university and athletic program objectives.

2. To assist in the transition from high school to college, the university would not insist upon a cumulative GPA of 2.0 until after the completion of the first year. First-year student-athletes would retain eligibility in the second semester of their first year so long as they earned a single semester GPA of 1.6. Any first-year student falling below the 1.6 requirement in the first semester would be ineligible for the second semester (and each semester thereafter until the cumulative GPA was above a 2.0).

Justification: The NCAA allows for some adjustment to college life. That adjustment is reflected in the NCAA requirement that permits first-year student-athletes to participate so long as they have earned a 1.6 or better. The university allows for this adjustment also. (This proposal is consistent with the university's current practice of lowering the academic requirements for first-year student-athletes.)

3. That we articulate immediately and clearly to coaches and student-athletes that for those student-athletes who fall below the university's minimal standards, "appeals for ineligibility will be sharply limited to those rare instances where the poor academic performance was precipitated by an exigent, unavoidable, and legitimate crisis." Perhaps we could even go further and provide a list of reasons that do not qualify as exigent, unavoidable, and legitimate crises. By this new standard, I do not think that any of the appeals heard this semester should have been granted.

Justification: Why have a policy if all ineligible student-athletes must do is file a *pro forma* appeal and appear before the committee with less than compelling reasons and bland promises? I think that a new approach may lead to better academic performance, more involvement among coaches, and fewer academic appeals.

If student-athletes (beyond the first year) know that a cumulative GPA of less than 2.0 means—really means—that they cannot participate in intercollegiate athletics, the incentive to attend class, turn in assignments, and do well academically will be paramount from the outset of each semester. Student-athletes will know up front that they will not automatically have a second chance. This, I think, may lead to better academic performance.

If coaches know that a student-athlete's cumulative GPA below 2.0 means that the student-athlete will not be eligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics, coaches will be more concerned about monitoring those things that are indicative of academic success—attending class, study time, roommates, etc. Greater involvement from coaches on academic matters is perhaps more important than intervention by faculty. If a coach can say, "I promise he will do better next semester," the coach can make that promise the previous semester. Why wait until the student-athlete is in academic trouble to intervene?

If student-athletes and coaches know up front that their appeals will not be successful—which is in stark contrast to what exists now—they will only ask for reinstatement where an exigent, unavoidable, and legitimate crisis precipitated the poor academic performance. And the committee has had some of those over the years—abortion and death of a parent, for example. A student-athlete who has a bad semester because she chose to terminate an unwanted pregnancy—with all of the attached emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological issues—is a much more sympathetic appellant than that student-athlete who chose not to attend class and now does not want to suffer the consequences.

5. Other Measures Adopted to Strengthen Academic Performance of Student-Athletes

The university has adopted numerous measures to strengthen the academic performance of student-athletes. First, as mentioned above, the university monitors the academic performance of student-athletes each semester (as opposed to once a year). Second, the university hired an assistant athletic director to focus primarily on providing academic assistance to male athletes. Third, the university strengthened its procedures for monitoring class attendance of student-athletes and improved its communications with faculty members about such matters. Fourth, the university initiated a faculty liaison program. Each academic department has identified a faculty member to serve as a resource for student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators on academic matters involving the respective departments. Fifth, the university has regularly and publicly acknowledged its scholar-athletes. A scholar-athlete is one who has maintained a 3.25 or higher GPA during the previous academic year.

6. Summary

The university should jettison its policy that declares student-athletes ineligible because they have fallen below a 1.6 GPA in any given semester. The sole factor in determining eligibility would be the cumulative GPA, to be assessed *still* twice per academic year.

Appeals for ineligibility should be sharply limited.

The athletic administration should begin to communicate these changes to coaches and student-athletes immediately.

7. Note

Nothing in these proposals in any way alters or attempts to get around NCAA rules or regulations. NCAA policies establish a floor, below which university policies may not fall. University policies may set higher standards than the NCAA, however. Millersville University would still have more rigorous standards than the NCAA in two ways—first, by assessing eligibility twice per year (whereas the NCAA does it once per year); and second, by insisting upon a cumulative GPA of 2.0 by the end of the first year (whereas the NCAA only requires such GPA by the end of the second year).

I have discussed this policy with the coaches, who are in support of these proposals. While some would like even more relaxed standards and longer acclimation periods, all agree that these proposals are better than the current ones.