

**March Madness will go on as it always has ... unless** As usual, Frank Splitt gets right to the heart of the matter regarding APR end-arounds and the linear follow-the-money whys and wherefores.

by Frank G. Splitt

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YOU CAN ASK AMERICANS about big-time college sports and they will be willing to tell you three things: first, it's great entertainment; second, they know most schools cheat; and third, they don't want to be bothered with the details of related issues and reform efforts -- especially during the NCAA's March Madness. Who cares about teams that don't measure up academically? -- certainly not the NCAA, even though it says it wants to penalize schools that don't. Under the NCAA's highly touted Academic Progress Rate (APR) formula, one point is deducted from its maximum APR point count of 1000 for each team player who is failing, does not stay in school or leaves school early in bad academic standing. Any team falling below the NCAA's minimum APR standard of 925 would suffer loss of scholarships, even ineligibility for post-season competition.

However, the NCAA allows waivers for anomalies, appeals, and whatever it takes to allow academically unqualified schools with competitive teams to remain eligible for the tournament. If the NCAA enforced its academic standard for post-season competition this year, there would not be a Sweet 16; only five of the 16 teams scored above the NCAA's standard of 925. Also, in "A Bracket You Won't See Elsewhere" [InsideHigherEd.com, March 14, 2006], David Epstein calls our attention to a Center for American Progress campaign that is aimed at underscoring the academic failures of many big-time teams and pressuring the corporations that pour money into big-time programs to direct some of the money to recognize teams that perform well academically, <http://thinkprogress.org/march-madness/>.

Could all of this signal the end of March Madness as we know it, the end of college and university conferences serving as the NBA's minor leagues with athletes pretending to be students? It should, but it doesn't. THE NCAA'S LARGEST MONEY MAKER will go on without a hitch. For the schools, this means providing near professional level teams of athletes by beefing up their eligibility centers, aka Athletics Advisory and/or Support Centers, and putting more pressure upon faculty to pass poor (or worse) students, raise grades and otherwise compromise their academic integrity by fashioning courses and degree tracts for the sole purpose of meeting eligibility and graduation-rate requirements for their athletes.

The NCAA will likely continue doing its part by: letting the schools operate on an "honor" system (grading themselves without independent oversight), granting exceptions and waivers, showing that their flawed system is "working" by penalizing weak schools, co-opting the Knight Commission, and leveling infraction penalties so minor that it would be well worth the risk of being caught cheating, as well as by employing an enforcement staff that is not matched to the monumental task of monitoring schools that appear willing to do almost anything to build a winning team.

If the NCAA is really looking to get schools to measure up academically, it could ask each member school to provide aggregated (Buckley-compliant) academic data so it could assess whether or not their athletes are legitimate students in good standing. A cohort of a school's basketball team consisting of the top 50% of the athletes with the most playing time would suffice. As for the data, the NCAA could request aggregated attendance records and the names of the faculty (along with the title of their courses, the athlete's grades, and the course GPA) who are providing university-level courses for many academically unprepared athletes who have a full-time, basketball-playing job, miss numerous classes, and come dead tired to others.

You can bet that this won't happen. As syndicated sports columnist Bob Gilbert has said: "The NCAA pro-academic story is what it is: A big lie."

Simply put, the NCAA has no incentive to change and neither do the schools -- the money is so good and the ways to game the system are so many.

March Madness will go on as it always has ... unless the proliferation of phony 'student-athletes' prompts congressional scrutiny along with a credible threat to remove the tax-exempt status of the entire college sports entertainment business. Frank G. Splitt, a former Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University and a member of The Drake Group, [www.thedrakegroup.org](http://www.thedrakegroup.org), has been named the recipient of the Group's 2006 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award. The Award is given annually to faculty or staff members who take a courageous stand to defend academic integrity in higher education, often risking job security in doing so.

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