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Inside the tougher academic requirements for freshmen

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Changes to the academic requirements for incoming Division I student-athletes will require freshmen to meet a tougher academic standard to compete in the first year of enrollment at a Division I institution.

The changes, approved last month by the Division I Board of Directors, represent a philosophical shift in the way the NCAA examines academic credentials. The new philosophy will require student-athletes enrolling in August 2015 and later to meet a higher academic standard to compete in the first year. Student-athletes who meet the current initial eligibility standard will be eligible for aid and practice only.

Division I initial-eligibility changes

The changes adopted by the Division I Board of Directors continue to use a student-athlete's grades in high school core courses in combination with the student-athlete's ACT or SAT score and core-course accumulation.

Prospective student-athletes who achieve the current minimum initial-eligibility standard on the test score-GPA sliding scale with at least a minimum 2.0 core-course GPA would continue to be eligible for athletically related financial aid during the first year of enrollment and practice during the first regular academic term of enrollment. Student-athletes serving this academic redshirt year would have to successfully complete nine semester or eight quarter hours during their first academic term to be eligible for practice during their second term.

For immediate access to competition, prospective student-athletes will be required to present at least a 2.3 GPA and an increased sliding-scale credential. Specifically, prospects need to earn about a half-point higher GPA for a given test score compared to the standard for aid and practice. For example, an SAT score of 1,000 would require a 2.5 high school core-course GPA for competition and a 2.0 high school core-course GPA for aid and practice.

Incoming student-athletes will be required to successfully complete 10 of the 16 total required core courses before the start of their senior year in high school. Seven of those 10 courses must be in English, math and science.

"The changes adopted by our presidents acknowledge that some incoming student-athletes need more time and assistance to be academically successful in college," Lennon said. "We believe the new standards will give more student-athletes the opportunity to thrive in the classroom."

The changes (see accompanying story) do not deny access to college to any student-athlete who meets the current standard. The enhanced standard is designed to identify students at risk of academic difficulties in college and intervene by imposing an academic redshirt year.

“The implementation date allows prospective student-athletes just beginning their high school careers ample time to plan their academic curriculum to meet these standards,” said Kevin Lennon, NCAA vice president for academic and membership affairs. NCAA research using the academic profiles of student-athletes entering Division I institutions in 2009-10 indicates that up to 15.6 percent of student-athletes might be required to serve the academic redshirt year, with the most visible impacts in men’s basketball (up to 43.1 percent) and football (up to 35.2 percent).

Both sports also regularly post the lowest Academic Progress Rates and Graduation Success Rates, illustrating that student-athletes who participate in these sports need the most help academically. The impacts are expected to decrease over time as prospective student-athletes adjust to the changes and work to improve their preparation over the four years before the new standard takes effect.

Some have compared the philosophical shift to [Prop 48](#) (1983) and Prop 16 (1992) that resulted in partial-qualifier status for some student-athletes, but considerable differences exist between the two standards.

- Test scores play a less significant role in the new standard; no student-athlete is prohibited from practice, athletically related financial aid or competition based on a test score alone.
- Student-athletes are allowed four full years of participation after the academic redshirt year, consistent with the NCAA’s desire to assist academically at-risk student-athletes to succeed in college. The previous partial-qualifier standard took away a year of eligibility on the back end of a student’s career unless they graduated within four years.

The initial-eligibility changes are part of an overall move to toughen academic standards for student-athletes. The presidents also adopted more rigorous standards for transfers from two-year colleges, a higher academic requirement for teams to participate in the postseason and a new penalty structure for the Academic Performance Program.

All of the new standards will be phased in over the next five years.