

An Evaluation of the Freshman Eligibility Question

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The relationship of intercollegiate athletics to the purposes of higher education has long been debated. Fundamental to the issue is a concern of the academic standing of the college athlete. Eligibility standards have often been thought of as a means to assure, and to encourage, the academic development of athletic participants.

The theme of this paper is that the freshman rule (restricting freshmen from varsity competition) was implemented for reasons other than concern for the academic development of the first year student. During the first two decades of the NCAA, the question of freshman eligibility was discussed in regard to its impact on professionalism, commercialism, competitive equality, public interest, and financial gain.

Primary among the concerns of college officials was the threat of professionalism. Amateurism, inherited from the English ethic of sport, did not blend smoothly with the competitive ethos of American society. Lacking a unified definition of amateurism, officials turned to measures that took the form of prohibitions. The freshman rule emerged out of a perceived need to protect intercollegiate athletics from the spectre of professionalism. Yet because eligibility was perceived as a prohibitive function rather than a standard for academic aims, uniform acceptance of the rule remained elusive.

The NCAA, because of the different needs and circumstances of its member institutions, adopted a "home rule" policy regarding eligibility codes. The result was that many of the small colleges, needing to compete against the larger universities for economic reasons, chose to allow freshmen to compete on varsity teams. The fact that intercollegiate athletics were funded almost entirely from gate receipts highlighted the need for winning teams. Small colleges like Middlebury, Wesleyan, and Williams needed to field their best athletes and were thus reluctant to restrict freshman participation.

That eligibility guidelines were for institutional rather than student concerns became clear during World War I. Faced with diminished funds and male enrollment many colleges waived their eligibility restrictions, including the freshman rule, in order to field competitive intercollegiate teams. The Southwest Conference took the position that all "athletic resources must be rallied" to keep public interest in intercollegiate sport from diminishing.

The debate over the freshman rule during the first two decades of the NCAA indicates a belief that enforcement of academic residence was a means to control abuses resulting from professionalism and commercialism. The inability to establish a uniform code suggests that priorities were often given to concerns for competitive quality and financial considerations rather than truly educational matters. Acceptance of the freshman rule often depended **upon** the competitive and financial **status** of the institution. The NCAA, in its first two decades, had not yet found a way to merge the interests of intercollegiate athletics with the high purpose of education.