

Pre-NCAA Eligibility: Not Academic Concerns

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Eligibility standards for college athletes have been a topic of concern for over a century. Indeed disputes pertaining to the student status of athletes pre-date the formation of the NCAA in 1905. The nature of these disputes suggest that the concept of eligibility was developed for reasons other than an interest in the academic development of athletes.

Intercollegiate athletics began as extracurricular activities founded and managed by the students themselves. Unrestricted freedom to pursue success on the athletic field often led to improprieties in the means to achieve this end. The issue of the student status of athletes became important primarily as a means to satisfy the mutual suspicions and distrust of rivals intent on producing winning teams. Academic guidelines were a means to enforce equitable competitive standards on otherwise independent athletic associations.

The demise of the Intercollegiate Football Association (formed in 1876) resulted from unresolved eligibility conflicts among member institutions. Following an 1889 dispute concerning the status of Fifteen players from Princeton, Harvard withdrew from the league. Penn left the association in 1893 when an amendment to existing eligibility standards forced the withdrawal of several of its players with the season in progress.

Eligibility requirements emerged as a means to settle disputes resulting from the highly competitive nature of intercollegiate athletics. Athletic associations turned to academic guidelines for direction in the establishment of regulatory standards. Late nineteenth century athletics demonstrated the necessity for an eligibility formula which would satisfy the needs for mutually agreed upon institutional limitations. Academic residency proved the most expedient method to achieve this end:



Bruce Bennett presented a paper on the Naval Aviation V-5 Pre-Flight Program.