

College graduation rates show mixed bag

By Jimmie Briggs
Special to Sentinel-Voice
NEW YORK (NNPA) - On the morning the National Collegiate Athletics Commission released its report on the graduation success rates of student-athletes, Norfolk State University athletic director Marty Miller was not surprised. The Norfolk State Spartans had the fifth worst graduation among Division I schools.

"I had some idea of what our graduation rates were before they came out," he says. "You're trying to do all you can for student-athletes, but they also have to do something for themselves."

More effort needs to be displayed by both college athletic departments and athletes themselves, if the recent data are any indication. In releasing the second of two reports detailing graduation success rates in college sports recently, the NCAA draws a picture of mixed academic success. A sport-by-sport breakdown was published earlier, in mid-December. The results are based on freshmen entering college for the period from 1995-1998 and graduating within a six-year period.

The graduation rate for all athletes entering a college from high school or transferring to a new one was 76 percent, but along racial lines the disparities are significant with 82 percent of White student-athletes graduating compared to just under 60 percent of Black student athletes.

In particular, historically Black colleges and universities, or HCBUs fared much worse than their predominantly White counterparts; five of the worst 10 Division I schools are HCBUs, including Jackson State University, Norfolk State, Texas Southern, Florida A&M, and Savannah State. The NCAA follows the recommendation of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics in considering 50 percent or higher to be a successful standard for graduating students. In the bottom 10, Jackson State had the highest among HCBUs with 44 percent. Only one Division I school, Radford (Va.), graduates all of its athletes.

"African-American student-athletes graduate at a 59 percent rate," notes NCAA president Myles Brand. "Over the last 15 years, there's been a remarkable increase and we're making significant progress."

Black male students who are not athletes in Division I schools graduate at a rate of

40 percent, compared to 61 percent for White student, non-athletes. As a whole, the national graduation rate for Division I students is 59 percent.

The system for computing graduation success rates among colleges and universities by the NCAA differs from that of the U.S. Department of Education. Whereas the NCAA includes student-athletes who transfer from one school to another in good academic standing, graduate in six years' time, or turn professional, the federal government does not.

"The federally mandated rate from the U.S. Department of Education uses a simple and simplistic measure," explains NCAA president Brand. "It neglects transfer rates, among other things. In urban universities, the transfer rate can be more than 50 percent. With urban students, there are economic considerations, family reasons. With this method, you get a much more accurate picture."

Both approaches depict striking disparities for Black athletes, especially in football and basketball.

In an examination of the graduation success rates supplied by the NCAA for men's and women's Division I basketball teams in the championship series last March, the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida found that 43 of the schools in the series wouldn't have been eligible if the 50 percent graduation rate standard for student-athletes was in place. Further, 73 percent of the schools playing in "March Madness" graduated more than 40 percent of their White players but less than half graduated the same percentage of Black players.

The same institute also looked at bowl-bound football teams in December. Of the 56 teams playing in college football bowls last month and December, 40 percent did not graduate half their players. Northwestern University, which lost the Vitalis Sun Bowl, graduated the highest number of its Black players, while Brigham Young, which lost the Las Vegas Bowl to California, had the lowest rate of graduating its Black players. Even the national bowl champion, the University of Texas, only graduated a third of its Black players compared to the school it beat, USC, which has a 52 percent graduation rate for its Black

players.

"Race remains a persistent academic issue, reflected in the continuing gap between graduation rates for White and African-American student-athletes," noted Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute and of the DeVos Sport Business Management Graduate Program at the University of Central Florida. Lapchick was formerly at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, which released an annual "racial and gender report card." That study is now published by Lapchick and

his staff at UCF.

"We still have the lingering and profound problem of too many of our student-athletes not getting on track to complete their education," he continued. "One of the benefits of examining graduation rates is that it focuses attention on the fact that too many of our predominantly White campuses are not welcoming places for students of color, regardless of whether they are athletes."

Myles Brand considers the economic backgrounds of the students to be a factor, as well as the lack of resources

of the schools themselves.

"There are certain factors I think individuals need to understand about graduation rates," said Marty Miller, at Norfolk State University. "We work with a lot of students who may not be prepared for college and give them the opportunity to get a higher education. There are resources for all student-athletes. Miller points out that Norfolk State had a policy of open admissions from 1995-1998, the period on which the NCAA report is based. Four years ago, the university ended that admissions policy

and has created more stringent academic support for athletes, including pairing student athletes with two academic advisors and requiring time in study based on the assessment of coaches and counselors.

"The changes take time," explains Miller. "You have different agencies and individuals expecting better results from the students. The university is trying to attract students who are better prepared for the college experience. One of the main philosophies of HCBUs is to provide access."

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