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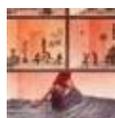
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UMass football players struggle academically

Team skirts NCAA sanctions

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 30, 2014



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WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

University of Massachusetts football players worked out at home venue Gillette Stadium recently.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst football team has struggled not only on the field, but in the classroom as well, leaving it barely above the academic threshold to avoid sanctions from the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

However, school officials say they are confident that the squad's next scholastic performance review will show improvement, staving off potential penalties, including the threat of losing eligibility to compete in any college playoffs.

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“We know we’re going to satisfy compliance,” said athletic director John McCutcheon. “I really don’t have any qualms that we’re at risk of penalties.”

The NCAA uses a formula to evaluate the likelihood that players will graduate, and over the past few years, it has raised the standards teams must meet. Teams need to maintain a four-year average academic progress rate of 930 or above to avoid penalties.

The UMass team’s score sits at 932, which ranks near the bottom nationally among college football teams at the Division I level.

“Obviously that’s not where we want to be,” said McCutcheon. “We take this extremely seriously, and we want all of our students to graduate.”

The team’s next score, which will be based on results from this past academic year, is scheduled to be released in October. UMass athletic department officials said they project their score will rise to somewhere between 935 and 939.

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That range is still on the low end among Division I schools nationally.

The school said it is taking steps to further improve the academic standing of its football players, as well as for other student-athletes.

In the past two years, the college has expanded its summer school offerings for student-athletes, said John Sinnett, spokesman of the UMass athletic department. He said the hockey team has had success with such scheduling.

“It gives them an opportunity to space out their course load over the academic year, so during the season they’re not necessarily having to load up on classes,” Sinnett said. “If there are some kids who might be at risk, they have a chance to bolster their GPAs and get a little more work done to help that.”

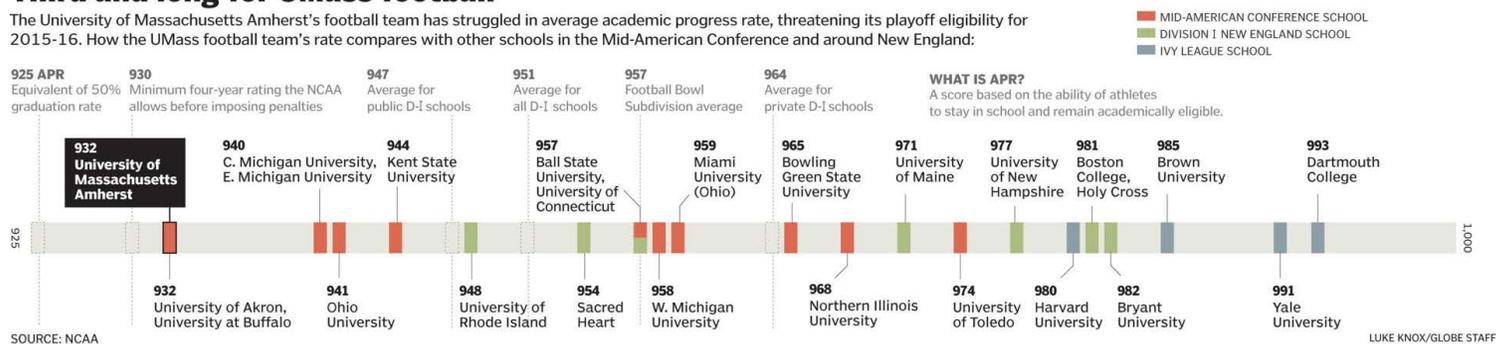
UMass over the past couple of years has also started to offer scholarships to former student-athletes who have not graduated and want to return to the university to try to finish coursework needed to earn a degree, he said. If such a former student returns and graduates, his or her particular team’s academic progress rate can improve retroactively.

Athletic department officials attributed the football team’s classroom struggles in part to a series of coaching changes and frequent player turnover the program has undergone in the past few years.

“Anytime you have a transition in coaching you’re going to have some turnover in players, and it’s going to impact” the academic progress rate, said McCutcheon.

Third and long for UMass football

The University of Massachusetts Amherst’s football team has struggled in average academic progress rate, threatening its playoff eligibility for 2015-16. How the UMass football team’s rate compares with other schools in the Mid-American Conference and around New England:



Two years ago, UMass made a pair of controversial and financially risky moves. One was moving up from college football’s second-highest level to its highest level, the Football Bowl Subdivision. The team also moved its home games to Gillette Stadium, nearly two hours from its longtime home gridiron on the flagship campus.

Although projections have shown that, even with improvements, the UMass football program will not be profitable until about 2020, the efforts have been seen as a key strategy for the university to try to boost its overall fund-raising, alumni loyalty, and the general profile of the school.

But the team, which currently sits at the bottom of national FBS rankings, has struggled to attract crowds

because of its abysmal play and the relocation of its home venue.

The university has faced calls from faculty, students, alumni, and taxpayers to stop the multimillion-dollar push to elevate its football program. Word of the team’s academic shortcomings prompted more concern.

“This is one of the things we all feared where you make this big push to win and improve, and you either bring in students who are not qualified academically or there’s such a big focus on winning and being competitive on the field that you don’t do well in your education,” said Max Page, an architecture and history professor who cochairs a faculty senate committee that has reviewed UMass football’s move to the FBS.

But Sinnett said the low academic rating is not a product of the team letting students slide in the classroom or ignoring academics in favor of recruiting more athletically talented players.

A spokeswoman for the NCAA declined to comment on the UMass football team’s academic rating, citing the association’s general policy of letting athletic program officials comment for themselves.

UMass is just one of the schools that have struggled to keep pace as the NCAA has raised academic standards.

This year, across all Division I college sports, 36 teams will be ineligible for playoffs because of low academic progress rates, up from 13 last year. Fifty-seven teams will face penalties other than playoff ineligibility, which is up from 32 a year ago.

“Access to championships is a privilege that is earned based not on just your on-field performance, but also your classroom performance,” the NCAA said in a prepared statement.

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