Cutting class doesn't pay; in fact it can cost

by Brent Schrotenboer

About 15 minutes before classes began each day at the University of Georgia this spring, dozens of student workers waited outside various classrooms to make an observation:

Did athletes show up for their scheduled classes, or did they play hooky?

Paid about $8 per hour by the school, these "class-checkers" recorded their findings over the spring semester, helping establish what could be a revolutionary policy in college sports. Several schools are considering it, and have been in contact with Georgia about implementing something similar.

Georgia's policy works like this: Student-athletes who have three or more unexcused absences from a class are suspended 10 percent of their season.

"It applied some pressure and put student-athletes on the record about what they're willing to do to engage in the education process," said Ted White, Georgia's director of academic services. "That's what we're after."

The school also fined athletes $10 if they skipped more than one academic appointment or tutoring session - a plan similar to those at Arizona State and USC. Since the new policies started in January, White said the Georgia football team earned 200 more credit hours than the previous spring and accumulated its highest team grade-point average ever: 2.65.

Feeling the pressure to up the ante in response, the Southeastern Conference - of which Georgia is a member - is requiring each of its 12 schools to have some sort of class attendance policy in place by this fall. Details are left up to each school, but player suspensions must be included on the penalty scale.

WHO'S PLAYING HOOKY? - Is there an Aztec athlete in this San Diego State auditorium? At Georgia, a 'class-checker' would know. CNS file photo.

"Ninety percent of the problem can be cured by just going to class," said David Ridpath, executive director of the Drake Group, which pushes for academic reform in college sports. "This is a policy that has teeth and I commend (Georgia Athletic Director) Damon Evans for having the courage to do it, because the constituents in the SEC that he has to deal with are probably none too pleased, especially if a big shot is suspended."

Many athletic departments deal with unexcused absences on a team-by-team basis. Coaches decide how to mete out discipline with their players, usually with extra physical conditioning after practice.

By changing to a departmentwide policy such as Georgia's, control of their game-day roster would be taken out of their hands on this issue.

"It certainly can affect a lot of things," said Grant Teaff, executive director of the American Football Coaches Association. "But I think everybody understands it's about education first and foremost. Let us not forget that."

One issue for schools considering the "Georgia model" is financial. White said Georgia increased its academic support budget from $200,000 to $300,000 last year, including money for more tutors and 50 class-checkers.

Implementing a Georgia-like policy with fewer than 50 class-checkers could create uneven enforcement and a perception of unfairness if some athletes were caught skipping class and others weren't.

But NCAA-mandated academic reforms have put pressure on many schools to find ways to improve academically. For 2003-04, San Diego State's football Academic Progress Rate (APR) of 848 was third-worst

among 117 Division I-A teams. Last year the NCAA hit SDSU football with a four-scholarship penalty for a poor APR. This year, the Aztecs had made enough academic improvement recently to receive a reprieve from a three-scholarship APR penalty.

A policy such as Georgia's is "over and above what NCAA rules require," said Amy Perko, executive director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, also a promoter of academic reform. "It's one thing for institutions to say they value academic success and holding athletes accountable. It takes it to a different level to back it up with policies that may cause pain in the short run. But in the long run they'll have athletes who are academically successful."

BULLDOG MENTALITY

BY THE NUMBERS

A look at the University of Georgia's academic policy regarding class attendance for student-athletes:

2: Unexcused absences for a class that will generate an electronic message warning.

3: Unexcused absences in a class that will result in a suspension of 10 percent of player's season.

50: Paid class-checkers hired to document player attendance.

$10: Fine for more than one unexcused missed academic appointment, tutorial session, etc. USC and Arizona State also fine athletes for missed sessions.

5: Missed academic appointments that result in a 10 percent season suspension.

3.0: GPA needed to make an athlete exempt from academic appointments (but not from attending class).

Source: University of Georgia

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