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## An investigation of successful Football Bowl Subdivision coaches and the disproportional academic achievement of their White and African-American football players

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## *Introduction*

While coaches in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) are under tremendous pressure to deliver winning seasons, they are certainly well compensated for their efforts. In 2007 there were over fifty coaches making more than \$1 million per season, and a dozen of them were paid over \$2 million. Only five coaches had made over \$1 million per season in 1999. In that same year, the average compensation for 182 university presidents and chancellors was a little more than \$397,000 (Wieberg & Upton, 2007), underscoring where the priorities are on today's big-time college campuses. In spite of the current economic recession, coaches continue to seek more lucrative contracts, led by Mack Brown of Texas, who secured a \$5 million per-year deal late in 2009, just slightly more lucrative than the contract of Nick Saban of Alabama, who scored a one-year extension to a deal that will pay him \$4.7 million annually.

The coach being the program's leader both on the field and in the classroom is evident when examining common provisions in most coach's contracts. Contracts typically contain provisions for incentives based on the academic performance of players; however, the bonuses tend to be a tiny fraction of the total compensation. Some provisions represent very low expectations, such as simply avoiding sanctions based on the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate. Others contain provisions that are nearly impossible to achieve, such as having a 100 percent graduation rate for a program that typically hovers around 45 percent every year (Fountain & Finley, 2008; Luebchow, 2008).

Many coaches report that academic incentives would have to be considerably higher and that the culture of college football would have to drastically change for them to amend their practices of student-athlete recruitment. According to Georgia coach Mark Richt, "The bottom line is, if you don't win, you are going to get fired" (Eichelberger and Levinson, 2007, p. 1). Richt went on to say that he would recruit more academically prepared players if half his pay was based on academic performance, but that they might not be able to play and he would "get canned because you can't play on the field" (Eichelberger and Levinson, 2007, p. 1). Phil Hughes, an associate athletic director at Kansas State University called the incentives a public relations shell game and said, "It's a feel good story that suggests we somehow care about this" (Eichelberger and Levinson, 2007, p. 1). Dennis Howard, a business professor at Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon has studied coaching contracts and incentives and concluded that he would "like to see coaches made accountable for G.P.A.s and graduation rates. Perhaps football-related bonuses would be activated only when coaches meet the academic standards. Then the school's first responsibility would be to make the players graduate" (Sandomir, 2007, p.1).

In an effort to better encourage increased graduation rates, the NCAA introduced the Academic Progress Rate (APR) in 2004 (Lapchick, 2007). The APR was intended to act as a real-time measure of academic progress, awarding points for athletes who remain in good academic standing and

remain at an institution. According to the NCAA, teams that chronically under-performed on the APR measure could be subject to practice restrictions, loss of scholarships, postseason bans and restricted membership status (NCAA, 2010). Nathan Tublitz, co-chair of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, is one of many academicians concerned that the APR will lead to a game of “catch us if you can,” as athletic departments seek creative ways to keep student-athletes eligible to avoid loss of scholarships (Yost, 2008, p. D10).

As concerns about sanctions due to APR scores increase, academic attention returned to examining programs for signs of academic clustering, defined as having 25 percent or more of the athletes on one team enrolled in a single academic major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). Clustering is widespread among Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) programs, including schools in the Big Ten (Nash, 2008), the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) (Fountain & Finley, 2009a), and occurs among some poorly performing programs as well as top tier programs (Finley & Fountain, 2007). Most concerning was the evidence that clustering at a number of schools was significantly more widespread among African-American football players than among their White counterparts (Fountain & Finley, 2009b). Five schools in the ACC had over half their African-American football players enrolled in a single major in 2006, and almost every school in the conference showed evidence of clustering African-Americans more densely into a single major than the White players (Fountain & Finley, 2009a).

In the addition to the APR, the NCAA developed the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) to assess the academic success of student-athletes using a metric that the NCAA deemed more accurate than the federal graduation rate. The GSR, unlike the federal rate, accommodates for transfer students and midyear enrollees. Under the GSR, schools are not penalized for outgoing transfers who are in good academic standing in spite of the fact that they will not graduate from the institution. As a result, the GSR for NCAA member institutions and NCAA student-athletes as a whole is always higher than the federal graduation rate. For example, while the GSR for NCAA athletes entering college in 2002 was reported as 79 percent (an all-time high), the federal rate for the same cohort was only 64 percent. The NCAA began collecting GSR data with the freshman class of 1995, with data being available for each cohort six years after initial enrollment. Similarly, the federal rate allows a student to complete a degree within a six-year window.

Male student-athletes lag behind females in graduation success (72 percent and 88 percent, respectively for the 2009 GSR). For the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), the 2009 GSR was 66 percent (55 percent using the federal rate). NCAA Interim President Jim Isch expressed “modest concern” regarding the scores for football, which had declined slightly from the previous year (NCAA, 2009, p. 1).

In spite of recent improvements in GSR scores (likely attributable to academic clustering in some cases), African-American student-athletes still lag behind their White counterparts, and the gap is substantial for some football programs. Richard Lapchick, Director of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport notes that in spite of recent improvement “race remains a continuing academic issue even for student-athletes. This is reflected in the gaps between graduation rates for white and African-American student-athletes. This is an issue that we still need to address on our campuses” (Lapchick, 2009, p. 2).

The purpose of this study was to identify and discuss the coaches and programs that have been successful on the field over the past five years, qualifying for bowl game participation, while simultaneously having low graduation rates for African-American players. The contractual incentives for athletic and academic achievement included in the coaches' contracts are also presented for discussion purposes.

## Methodology

The study was limited to successful football programs in the Football Bowl Subdivision from the 2005 to 2009 seasons, which had the same coach in place for a minimum of eight seasons and had a graduation success rate for African-American players lower than 50 percent (average over the five years in the study). Football program success was defined by qualification to participate in a post-season bowl game in a minimum of four of the five seasons in the study.

The eight year minimum tenure for the coach was selected because it established that the coach had been in place for several seasons prior to the first graduation date for the study and had, therefore, recruited a majority of the student-athletes involved. The researchers believed that eight years at one school was sufficient to give the coach ownership of the program, both regarding on-field success (qualifying for bowls) and for graduation rates. The cutoff for graduation success rates for African-American players (50 percent) was subjectively selected because it reflected performance that is considerably worse than the average GSR (58 percent in 2009) for African-American football players at the Division I level.

## Results

Forty-three schools qualified to play in a bowl game in at least four of the five years in the study. Of those, 13 had the same coach for the required eight years or more. Seven of those 13 programs failed to have more than 50 percent of its total African-American players graduate over the five year period. Thus, seven schools qualified for this study: California, Fresno State, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio State, Oklahoma, and Texas. Three of the seven coaches had served for nine years; three others had been at their institutions for 11, 12, and 13 years. Only one of the seven coaches met the minimum requirement set for length of tenure (eight years) to be included in the study. These lengths of tenure supported that the selected group should be considered to "own" the results for their respective teams. Results represent the 2005 to 2009 football seasons and graduation success rates published by the NCAA from 2005 to 2009.

### Athletic Success

As defined by the criteria for inclusion in the study, all the coaches had significant on-field success (Table 1), with six of the seven qualifying for five bowl games over the five-year period. Only Pat Hill of Fresno State missed a bowl game in one of the seasons. Winning percentages ranged from .593 (Gary Pinkel) to .826 (Mack Brown). Four of the seven coaches had qualified for a bowl game in every season coached at their current school. As a result of their consistent production of winning teams, the salaries ranged from just under \$1 million to \$5 million annually. The seven coaches in the study received a total of over \$22.2 million in 2009 in annual salary (DeBarros, Dougherty, Evans, Newman, & Palmer, 2009).

## Academic Failure

Unlike the success these coaches have attained on the field, the leadership these coaches have shown toward academic achievements of their players has been lacking (Table 2). All of the programs had average GSRs under 56% over the five-year period, with four programs graduating less than 50 percent of all its players.

Graduation Success Rate scores for white players ranged from 52 to 74 percent, whereas scores for African-American players ranged from 34 to 49 percent. As a result, there were substantial gaps in GSR between White and African-American players at several institutions. The narrowest gaps occurred at schools with relatively low GSR scores for White players (Fresno State, California, and Oklahoma). Larger gaps, ranging from 26 to 38 percent were evident at Missouri, Ohio State and Georgia. At each of those institutions the GSR for White players was over 73 percent, compared to scores ranging from 36 to 47 percent for African-American players. Texas stood out as having low GSR scores for White players (59 percent), extremely low scores for African-American players (34 percent), and a large (25 percent) gap between the two groups. It should be noted that Texas has had the greatest on-field success of teams qualifying for the study over the last several years, including appearances in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) National Title Game twice in the years considered in this study.

## Contractual Incentives

Beyond base pay, every coach in the study had a contract that stipulated additional money for specified achievements. The top performance bonus for 5 of the 7 coaches in the study was winning the BCS Championship (Table 3). The reward for winning the BCS Championship ranged from \$250,000 to \$1 million. The two other top performance bonuses were for playing in the BCS Championship game (Jim Tressel, \$200,000) and having an undefeated season (Pat Hill, \$100,000). As other studies have

Coach	School	Current Annual Salary	Team Record	Seasons at Current School	Number of Bowl Games at Present School	Bowls last Five years
Mack Brown	Texas	\$5.0M	128-27 (.826)	12 <sup>th</sup>	12	5
Bob Stoops	Oklahoma	\$4.3M	117-28 (.807)	11 <sup>th</sup>	11	5
Jim Tressel	Ohio St.	\$3.7M	94-21 (.817)	9 <sup>th</sup>	9	5
Mark Richt	Georgia	\$3.0M	90-27 (.769)	9 <sup>th</sup>	9	5
Jeff Tedford	California	\$2.8M	67-35 (.657)	8 <sup>th</sup>	7	5
Gary Pinkel	Missouri	\$2.5M	67-46 (.593)	9 <sup>th</sup>	6	5
Pat Hill	Fresno St.	\$963K	100-66 (.602)	13 <sup>th</sup>	10	4

Coach	School	Football GSR	White Player GSR	African-American Player GSR	GSR Disparity Between African-American & White players
Mack Brown	Texas	43%	59%	34%	25%
Bob Stoops	Oklahoma	45%	52%	41%	11%
Pat Hill	Fresno St.	47%	52%	44%	8%
Mark Richt	Georgia	48%	74%	36%	38%
Jeff Tedford	California	52%	59%	49%	10%
Jim Tressel	Ohio St.	55%	74%	42%	31%
Gary Pinkel	Missouri	56%	73%	47%	26%

demonstrated, many top academic bonuses are virtually impossible to reach without a major shift in priorities (Fountain & Finley, 2008). Even in the event that coaches prioritize academics and reach the top academic-based incentive, the addition to their total compensation is minimal, generally worth no more than 3 percent of the total value of the contract.

## Discussion

This study demonstrated that there are several coaches in the FBS who make considerable incomes based on athletic success, while failing to ensure that their student-athletes produce in the classroom and earn degrees. Particularly problematic are the low graduation rates of African-American players and the disparity between their GSR scores and those of their White counterparts. In spite of these academic failings, coaches continue to command greater salaries and reverence on their campuses as great leaders.

According to University of Texas President William Powers Jr., as he explained awarding a \$5 million contract to his head coach, “Mack Brown has built one of the nation’s premier football programs, and he’s brought credit to our university,” and “He has done an outstanding job, and in the time he’s been here, he has generated millions of dollars in new revenue” (Halliburton, 2009, p. 1). The academic success, or lack thereof, of players in general, and African-American players specifically, was apparently not a factor in the contract extension.

When examining the bonuses available for academic and athletic performance, it is clear academics are not a high priority and that these contracts are written with an understanding of good public relations but not necessarily for serious academic reprioritization. For example, Oklahoma will pay Bob Stoops an additional \$100,000 for graduating 100 percent of his players. However, even teams from academic powerhouses like Northwestern and Stanford only produce GSR scores in the high 80s to low 90-percent range (Jackson, 2009). It seems safe to say that Stoops will never collect on this provision of his contract, nor is pursuing it a likely objective of his. If Stoops was able to produce a 100 percent GSR, it would be a far greater feat than winning a national title on the field (which he has already done), considering he has not had a GSR score higher than 52 percent in the last five years. Even if he managed a 100 percent GSR score, he would hardly feel the bump in pay, due to its relative value in his overall contract.

This study supported that until there is meaningful change in priorities in athletic departments, some FBS coaches will continue to reap great financial rewards while having dismal graduation success

Coach	School	Current Annual Salary	Top Performance Bonuses	Top Academic Bonuses
Mack Brown	Texas	\$5.0M	\$450,000 for BCS Championship	\$150,000 for 75% GSR
Bob Stoops	Oklahoma	\$4.3M	\$250,000 BCS Championship	\$100,000 for 100% GSR
Jim Tressel	Ohio St.	\$3.7M	\$200,000 for playing in the BCS Championship	\$100,000 for 80% GSR \$60,000 per quarter for GPA 3.0 or greater
Mark Richt	Georgia	\$3M	\$250,000 for BCS Championship	\$50,000 Top 33% of SEC in GSR & APR
Jeff Tedford	California	\$2.8M	\$1,000,000 for BCS Championship	\$25,000 for GPA of at least 2.8 and APR 950
Gary Pinkel	Missouri	\$2.5M	\$250,000 for BCS Championship	\$100,000 for Unspecified "Academic Goals"
Pat Hill	Fresno St.	\$963K	\$100,000 for going Undefeated	\$60,000 for an APR in the top 50% of Division I

rates. Most disconcerting is that the graduation success rates of African-American players will continue to be an afterthought, in spite of their obvious on-field contributions to these successful football programs. The question remains whether university presidents and athletic directors really have the fortitude to call for legitimate academic standards and true academic leadership from their coaches.

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