

APR now a household acronym in Division I

By Michelle Brutlag Hosick

When the first Academic Progress Rates were released publicly in spring 2005, Middle Tennessee's football team ranked dead last in the sport, more than 100 points below the benchmark for immediate penalties. President Sidney McPhee immediately took responsibility.

Middle Tennessee football student-athletes made a commitment to improve their team's APR under head coach Rick Stockstill (right).



“I didn’t blame the football coach or the athletics director,” he said. “The buck stopped with me.”

In many ways, that’s precisely the reaction Division I was hoping for when its leadership created the team-based snapshot of academic performance that incited improvement and sanctioned slackers. They wanted presidential accountability and support for this latest – and perhaps most emphatic – version of academic reform.

Now that the division is on the verge of releasing its fifth data set in May, members appear accustomed to the APR as a way of life, and most have taken steps to meet its demands.

It hasn’t been easy. One NCAA member at a recent meeting described the comfort level with APR as an annual reduction from its “very painful” infancy to its “relatively painless” present. That’s in part because Division I presidents are taking matters seriously.

In the case of Middle Tennessee, the school – inspired by McPhee – developed a plan that changed the culture of the entire athletics program using university resources and bolstering academic support. Five years later, the football team’s APR is 990. One of the biggest improvements Athletics Director Chris Massaro sees is the daily conversations he and his coaches have with university personnel and student-athletes.

“This is really a university-wide partnership that has worked,” Massaro said. “It has helped athletics to have more trust in the general university structure, and the university administration to have more trust in what athletics is trying to accomplish. We both came to the table willing to work, and we’ve seen tremendous results.”

Massaro credits head football coach Rick Stockstill, who took over the program in 2006 with only 71 scholarships available and saw the APR fall even more before finally climbing for the 2009 season.

Stockstill meted out the same kind of discipline for academic infractions as he would for penalties in a game. He didn’t accept excuses for missing class or being tardy. He would punish the entire team for one student-athlete’s misstep.

“I might run the whole team if a guy missed class, just like if one of them got a penalty in a game, it moves the whole team back,” he said. “I developed a very team-oriented philosophy on and off the field.”

Stockstill’s hard-lined approach and the department’s new emphasis on academics – instilled because of the APR – worked. Other coaches saw what happened to football and didn’t want their teams to experience the same difficulties. They began recruiting student-athletes who had a chance to succeed academically at Middle Tennessee, and the school began supplying resources to help them achieve that goal. Massaro made academics a priority with all his coaches, who in turn made academics a priority with all their student-athletes.

The entire culture changed – and it’s not limited to Middle Tennessee. The Academic Performance Program and its APR anchor have changed Division I athletics.

At San Jose State, Assistant Athletics Director for Academics Eileen Daley said the APR exposed areas that “could no longer be ignored,” including academic advising, eligibility tracking, the lack of recruiting guidelines for “at-risk” student-athletes and the need for accountability among coaches. With new administration and new coaches, the school has restructured its approach to academic expectations.

“The APR has held each institution to a higher academic standard and held them accountable for graduating student-athletes,” Daley said. “We are now seeing a balance between the importance of athletics and academics (in Division I).”

Donald Cook, athletics director at Sacred Heart, has seen a change at his school as

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well. The Pioneers re-evaluated scholarship policies in equivalency sports after experiencing an “APR scare” in wrestling. Instead of “nickel and diming” their equivalency allotment across as many kids as possible, the institution decided that creating a bigger incentive for a few kids would be more effective academically. He found the new policy also got parents more involved in their kids’ academic careers, since parents don’t want their kids to fail academically and lose a large scholarship.

Similar to Massaro at Middle Tennessee, Cook said the APR has become a common topic of conversation in the halls of the Pitt Center – and within the division as a whole.

“It’s highlighted the attention (academics) have always needed, but the APR has hit us over the head with a sledgehammer,” he said. “The process itself, its very nature, forces everybody to pay attention to how our athletes are doing in school. Everybody is helped as a result of that. It helps everywhere.”

Cook and others believe that the change has been a positive one for the whole division. More resources are devoted to academic support – personnel, facilities and services – at institutions across the country, even those that haven’t had to make the changes in the wake of a poor-performing team. Massaro said Middle Tennessee hired two additional staffers for academic support. Texas-Arlington went from

a one-person shop with a part-timer to a full-time staffer who oversees three others.

Jermaine Holmes, the director of student-athlete academic-support services at Virginia Tech, said the APR hasn’t changed the goal of academic-support services – they’ve always strived to retain and graduate student-athletes – but it has changed the way the units are viewed within the athletics department.

“The APR creates an environment in which coaches are held accountable for student-athlete success. APR also ensures that coaches support the goals and activities of academic-support units,” Holmes said. “APR has put teeth into what support units have done for years – developing student-athletes holistically, with the ultimate goal of enhancing student-athletes’ academic success, persistence and graduation.”

For some in the membership, among the best things about the APR and the Committee

on Academic Performance (which administers the program) are the APR’s flexibility and the committee’s willingness to make changes. During the years, the committee has adjusted the APR for professional-sports departures and transfer students in good academic standing, and given credit for meaningful improvement.

When the APR was originally developed, some people thought it could be kept relatively simple, but CAP members quickly realized the complexities of a diverse membership and had to adjust the paradigm accordingly. While the current system is more complicated, it hasn’t lost its primary principle of fairness.

Pete Carlon, athletics director at Texas-Arlington, said he appreciates the understanding committee members have shown. The Mavericks had some APR problems in baseball, but they hired a new coach and have begun to turn the program around academically while also showing promise on the field.

“There are a few unintended consequences (with the Academic Performance Program), but it’s a work in progress. The committee will be addressing those,” Carlon said. “It has already impacted the culture of Division I athletics to a great extent. If they continue to be understanding with respect to the unintended consequences, the impact will continue to grow.”

As will the accountability, from presidents on down.