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## 'Special' treatment for athletes

Little accountability: Only schools know how far they bend admission requirements and how many such students graduate

By Mark Alesia  
[mark.alesia@indystar.com](mailto:mark.alesia@indystar.com)

Former Indiana University football coach Gerry DiNardo doesn't recall any battles to get recruits into school, including the 42 percent of his first class that didn't meet IU's normal entrance requirements.

As at Louisiana State, where DiNardo also coached, he said if players met the NCAA's minimum academic standards, he could count on them being admitted.

DiNardo said there's nothing wrong with these so-called "special admits" -- as long as schools think the players can graduate with adequate tutoring. But he's frank about the situation.

"We know they're not qualified academically," said DiNardo, now a commentator for the Big Ten Network, "so our obligation extends past what it is for a non-student-athlete."

It can be a heavy obligation. Many of the nation's largest universities rely on special admits -- students admitted under exceptions to normal admission standards for reasons including "special talent" -- to stock their football teams, an Indianapolis Star study of 55 universities found. At these schools, the percentage of special admits among students overall is extremely small.

The disparity can be stark: The University of California in 2004 reported that 95 percent of its freshman football players on scholarship were special admits, compared with 2 percent of the student body. Others: Texas A&M in 2004, 94 percent to 8 percent; and Oklahoma in 2002, 81 percent to 2 percent.

<http://www.indystar.com/assets/pdf/BG11724397.PDF>">Click here to see a chart of special admits at the nation's largest public universities.

It is a phenomenon that has gone largely unstudied and unchecked nationally. There are no NCAA limits on special admits, nor are there national statistics on their use, including how many of the students graduate or how far below normal academic requirements some schools are willing to go.

Myles Brand, president of the Indianapolis-based NCAA and former IU president, said he was surprised at the predominance of special admits in football when told of The Star's findings.

There isn't even a common definition for special admits. Some schools that say they have none acknowledge that sports talent can help an academically marginal student gain admission.

Derek Van Rheenen, director of the University of California's Athletic Study Center, which advises student athletes, said his school was strict in accounting for special admits. He decried others for a lack of transparency.

It's "incredibly cloak and dagger," he said. "Just admit what you're doing."

## Schools use 'special admits' to remain competitive

The Star's study, amassed through public records requests and Internet searches, was based on schools' most recent certification report to the NCAA, anywhere from 1998 to 2007. (The reports are staggered among schools and required every 10 years.)

Of the 55 public schools in the six biggest sports conferences, 31 reported having special admits, 16 reported having none and eight either didn't respond or didn't provide information. Private schools are not required to respond to such requests.

Purdue was among the schools that reported having none, though it said athletes with a marginal academic record, as well as other such students with special talents, receive extra consideration.

IU's freshman football class this year has 13 special admits, faculty athletic representative Bruce Jaffee said. That's out of 17 scholarship players, or 76 percent. The percentage of special admits among all IU students isn't available yet, but last year it was less than 2 percent.

The reason for the preponderance of special admits in football is simple: Football is the financial engine for most college athletic departments, and schools need such athletes to compete.

Special admits are also common in other college sports, particularly men's basketball, the other big money-maker. Figures often are unavailable because of small sample sizes and student privacy laws, but former Georgetown coach Craig Esherick knows what it's like to compete athletically at a school that admitted only 21 percent of all applicants last year. (For comparison, IU admitted 70 percent).

Now a professor at George Mason University, Esherick had to make a case for each special admit to a committee. He brought letters of support from the player's high school coaches, counselors and teachers.

"Anytime I went to that well," he said of special admits, "I understood my credibility was on the line."

Esherick also understood another reality: "Coaches have been told many times, 'If you don't win, you're going to get fired.' I was never told, 'If you don't graduate players, you'll get fired.'"

## NCAA's baseline for athletes to play: 2.0 GPA

Admissions standards and processes differ widely among schools. Flexibility appears to be the only constant.

Some schools give extra weight to legacy applicants, sons or daughters of alumni.

"It may be perfectly ethical to be lenient with (someone connected to) a huge donor, because those dollars will help admit others to school," said Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Purdue's dean of admissions, Pam Horne, said she would give extra weight to an applicant from Wyoming, for example, to promote geographic diversity. Athletic talent absolutely carries extra weight, she said.

"We are an academic institution," Horne said. "We're also a broader community where talent in the arts and sports contributes to the campus."

Yet Brand acknowledges that admissions exceptions for special talent go more often to 240-pound

linebackers than to sweet-sounding sopranos.

The NCAA has a sliding scale for freshman athletic eligibility, based on grade-point averages in 16 core courses (such as math, English and science) and standardized tests. There is a minimum GPA of 2.0, which would require an SAT of 1,010. In a nod to what some believe is a culturally biased test, there is no minimum SAT score required. But the lowest possible score requires a GPA higher than 3.55 for eligibility.

That standard is well below what many schools generally require of students.

Brand said the crucial question is "if, with appropriate help, (special admits) can succeed academically." In schools' reports to the NCAA, in which they must explain the process for deciding whether to grant a student a special admit, most echoed Brand.

University of Iowa's standard, for example, is "reasonable evidence that the applicant could earn a degree in five to six years . . . if he or she effectively uses the available academic support and other services."

How low some schools will go is unclear. Aside from the NCAA minimums, no school reported absolute numbers -- SAT, ACT or GPA -- under which a student wouldn't be admitted. That leaves a lot of room for subjective decisions.

USA Today reported in December that Florida International University football coach Mario Cristobal had it written into his contract that the school would admit any athlete based on the NCAA minimum standards regardless of school standards.

Speaking this year at a panel about college football issues, Florida State President T.K. Wetherell said: "It's not uncommon for a coach to come over and say, 'You've got to let this one in. He can go to Washington or Ohio State.' And I'm sure somebody at Ohio State is saying, 'You've got to let him in because he can go to Florida State.' Well, that's probably true on any one given (player), but (coach) Bobby (Bowden) has got a list of 25 of them that he wants. I say, 'Wait a minute. We can't handle 25.'"

Others are more critical of the use of special admits.

Former Notre Dame football player Allen Sack, a University of New Haven management professor and author of "Counterfeit Amateurs," said admitting academically underprepared athletes is dubious at any school "especially if they must give most of their waking hours to highly commercialized college sport."

"If, as it appears, special admits have become a permanent feature of big-time college sports -- without which schools could simply not compete -- it is time to (institute) freshman ineligibility for any athlete that is academically at risk," Sack said.

Because there are no national statistics on graduation rates for special admits, it's difficult to judge the degree to which schools are educating these athletes.

Jaffee said IU had 58 athletic special admits from 1991 to 1998. Of those, 27 graduated (47 percent) within six years and 16 others left IU in good academic standing (28 percent). He called the results pretty decent. Jaffee also said the school's special admit, or "faculty sponsorship," program was recognized during a summer meeting of his Big Ten peers as the "most transparent with the most faculty input."

In their NCAA filings, California and Florida reported that special admits in sports performed as well as other special admits, but they offered no comparison to the general student body. California said all special admits had just below a 2.8 GPA.

## NCAA committee is looking into 'special admits'

The NCAA makes schools accountable for their athletes through the Academic Progress Rate, which measures term-by-term retention and eligibility, and can lead to scholarship losses for individual teams. Also, an NCAA committee looking at special admits, which it calls "at-risk students," is trying to get "a better understanding of the issues involved and the ability to articulate those issues on a national basis," Brand said.

But he and others are steadfast in saying the NCAA has no business telling schools whom they can admit.

University of Hartford President Walt Harrison, chairman of the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance, recalled his time as a vice president at the University of Michigan. "The standard drumbeat at Michigan was that so-and- so is playing somewhere else -- usually football at Ohio State -- and they couldn't get into Michigan," Harrison said. "It's up to Ohio State to determine its own entrance requirements."

Two years ago, an NCAA task force of university presidents recommended that schools establish their own maximum number of special admits for athletes "to alleviate suspicion that student-athlete admissions is based more on the need to recruit winning teams than on academic integrity." An NCAA spokesman said he wasn't aware of any schools that had adopted the policy.

Asked whether an entire football recruiting class of special admits would be OK, with appropriate help, Brand replied, "I suppose that's a logical possibility, but that doesn't sound like a reasonable way to proceed."

## Getting into Vanderbilt with an SAT score of 710

DiNardo gave an example of how the system can work.

The former IU coach started his career at Vanderbilt, a highly selective private school in the Southeastern Conference, widely regarded as the nation's top football conference. He said he had to present most of his recruits to a special committee, but in four years it rejected "maybe one or two guys I really wanted."

One of his recruits had an excellent high school grade-point average -- at a school with a poor reputation because of low attendance rates -- but a lowly 710 on his SAT.

"No way an average student gets admitted to Vanderbilt with a 710 SAT," DiNardo said. "I had letters from the coach and teacher saying he never missed a day of class. He was admitted, he was one of our better players and he graduated. That's the way the process is supposed to work."

Jaffee is chairman of the committee of four faculty members who review athletic special admits at IU. He said that, except at highly selective schools, special admits are by definition people who were rejected because they probably wouldn't graduate under normal circumstances.

"We know the graduation rate is not going to be 100 percent," Jaffee said. "But we sure want to get more than 10 percent."

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