

NCAA should punish the University of North Carolina for cheating scandal

By: Editorial Board

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The University of North Carolina has acknowledged that a vast scheme of fake classes operated at the school for nearly two decades.

More than 3,000 students—about half of them athletes—got credit for classes that required no attendance or significant work and were not supervised by a professor. Hundreds of fraternity brothers enrolled in the courses, but the main beneficiaries were football and basketball players. Fake grades were written for fake courses to keep the players academically eligible to participate in North Carolina Tar Heel sports.

According to a report recently released by the university, counselors steered athletes toward Deborah Crowder, Student Services Manager at the university who has since stepped down from her position. Crowder allegedly helped to enroll students, many of them athletes, in “no-show” classes, which were billed as independent studies but rarely—if ever—met, and required minimal work.

The quality of the work done by students was irrelevant. The courses existed solely to boost the grade point averages of struggling students. The extent of the scheme didn't become more broadly known at the university until Crowder retired in 2009 and football players' GPAs started dropping. The scam finally ended in 2011 when media reports spurred the administration to investigate.

How did the scheme last so long? The report blames a lack of scrutiny by administrators. When a university official noticed around 2005 that the department was responsible for supervising 300 independent study projects a year, the employee and the department's head scaled back the phony courses. Nobody asked how one professor could supervise 300 independent projects, each of which should have involved original research.

So the NCAA, which governs college athletics, faces a particular challenge. It has sanctioned universities for various kinds of rule-breaking in athletic recruitment and fraud in academics. It likely has never dealt with an academic fraud that was practiced so broadly and systematically for such a long period of time.

Should North Carolina forfeit every victory in every sport for the nearly two-decade run of this fraud? Schools that competed against North Carolina presumably played by the rules — athletes competed when those athletes were students in good standing.



The NCAA forced Southern Methodist University to cancel an entire season of football in the 1980s after the school was caught in an extended scheme of illicit payments to players. But the NCAA has not since then imposed the so-called death penalty, even in some truly scandalous cases.

The most damaging evidence here is that the North Carolina phony course scheme carried on for so many years and involved so many students, yet didn't come to light until the, um, quarterback of the scheme quit her job. Every graduate who went to school during the phony-class era now faces the embarrassing question: How much of your degree did you really earn?

The NCAA should come down hard on North Carolina.