

# Educating athletes should be top priority

By Clarence Spigner

The recent revelation of the University's student-athlete graduation rates is welcome news. But the fact that the Intercollegiate Athletes Committee on Academic Performance findings were not released until a local television reporter investigated is disturbing.

One would think the University had something to hide. The

## Commentary

report does not mention race, an enormous oversight given the concern about the exploitation of black college athletes. Sports scholars Harry Edwards, William Rudman and others have pointed out how too many blacks are more likely to see sports, rather than education, as a means of upward mobility.

Moreover, college football and basketball just happen to be major money-making enterprises for the University. Simply counting the seats in Autzen Stadium and McArthur Court and the per ticket price yields a conservative estimate of why athletes are so important to the University.

The graduation rates of athletes and non-athletes were reported to be 37.7 and 40 percent, respectively. Several disturbing questions remain: First, why was the report on student-athlete graduation rates kept secret?

A television reporter was able to attain information that should have been made available to University personnel. I was never told such a report existed after numerous enquires. Confidentiality and the lack of computer analysis are very poor excuses for any university in the 20th century.

The autumn 1989 edition of the University's *Old Oregon* had a two-page article entitled "Sweats and smarts" filled with names, statistics, GPA's and laudatory comments from the Athletic Department staff about the priority of education and sports.

Yet, to attain more objective information is difficult. Thus, a third question is the reliability of the rates in the committee's report. Evidently, student-athlete data was so haphazard, the committee members had to "create their own categories" in order to do a proper assessment.

The efforts of the committee are to be commended, but is this any way to run an educational institution? The point is that a consistency of measurements must yield similar results before the findings can be considered valid.

Fourth, why wasn't race separated out as a variable? Given the on-going controversies regarding the exploitation of the black athlete, one would think race would have been given scrutiny. Yet it seemed the committee had enough to do trying to uncover information on all student-athletes.

Some available data (but not on athletes) can be found in

documents for the Office of the Registrar. "A profile of Students at the University of Oregon," February 1989 edition showed that out of the 196 black graduates enrolled for winter quarter (1.4 percent of the total 13,735 undergraduate population), 120 were black males and only 76 were black females.

Black male undergraduates outnumbered black female undergraduates by 44. White students represented 88.5 percent of the undergraduate population, with white female undergraduates numbering 5718 and white males 5013. White undergraduate females outnumbered white male undergraduates by 705.

Where are all these young black men? Are they majoring in computer science? Business? Psychology? Education? Or are large portions of them playing ball? Moreover, national trends show more black females attending college and graduating (along with their white female counterparts) than black males. But it would appear to be the opposite at the University.

Again, an on-going assessment of student-athletes matriculation and graduation rates would shed some much-needed light on this issue. Also, a replication of the committee's methodology using cohorts beyond 1983 would be very helpful in discerning the quality of education for athletes, especially at-risk black student-athletes.

The quality of education for black athletes may be more important than graduation rates, per se. Data from the Center for Popular Economics show that in 1986, black and Hispanic college graduates had a higher rate of unemployment than their white counterparts. In other words, even with a college degree, blacks and Hispanics had a harder time finding work than whites.

Since very few student-athletes are successful in profes-

sional sports, are they being provided with an adequate education to be functional after college? The social demands of the 1990's dictate that they must. The notion that all the University can do is provide the opportunity for an education is shortsighted and cruel.

This means that if the individual student does not take full advantage of academics while at the same time entertaining the masses in the sports arena, it's his or her own fault. This blaming the victim attitude penalizes the student who is addicted to believing that sports is the path to upward mobility when it is not.

In addition, the University acts to encourage the false belief of the meritocratic nature of sports, thereby maintaining disadvantaged socioeconomic positions.

There are those student-athletes who receive a decent education. But concern for average and at-risk students demands that the University be more forthcoming with academic information. Hopefully, the bill by Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) will force this University to release such information.

The committee's findings, though incomplete, give us somewhere to start. Assuming that the wheel will not have to be re-invented, a methodology should already be in place to evaluate the reliability of the initial graduation rates.

Now the University can go on to evaluate academic needs and tutorial services and not simply rely on selected stories of athletes who are doing well. Objective evaluations can lead to new or revised programs to better serve student-athletes. After all, isn't education rather than sports the priority at the University?

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