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OTHER VIEWS

COLLEGE SPORTS

Make academic integrity part of recruiting process

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www.knightcommission.org

Somehow, our culture has developed an obsession with the college choices made by a handful of students. Those students are not National Merit Scholars. They are blue-chip high-school athletes, and the frenzy surrounding the process of recruiting them is reaching a fever pitch this week.

On Feb. 8, newspapers across the country will devote pages and photos to football players in elaborate "Signing Day" ceremonies, which mark the first day players can sign agreements to attend a specific college and receive an athletic scholarship. Rivals.com projects that it will have 75 million page views on Signing Day alone, more than three times the daily average of CNN.com, the most popular online news website. At least one university has gotten in on the act by establishing its own pay-per-view Internet show, "Signing Day Live."

As the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics heard during its most recent meeting, the recruiting process has moved away from the academic realm of our institutions

and into the commercial realm surrounding college sports. From this process, prospects learn that their choice of college is critically important to an ominous mass of spectators and that they themselves are little more than a bundle of statistics neatly packaged into a one- to five-star rating.

This is a trend that should be troubling not only to college presidents, faculty and athletics personnel but also to parents, high school coaches and anyone who cares about the personal development of these students. Colleges need to consider ways to reclaim the recruiting process for higher education and prevent these students from being treated as a commodity.

Colleges cannot control fan interest nor can they regulate the media reporting recruiting news. However, colleges and the NCAA can control the ways in which athletes are recruited. Coaches are usually the sole source of information about a given college, leaving a recruit with little way of knowing what life is like on campus, or how he or she will fit in.

For example, in too many cases, recruits visit campuses on game day, not on Monday or Tuesday. Univer-



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sity admissions offices often have little contact with recruited athletes, and some recruits do not even fill out formal admissions applications. Not only do athletes have difficulty learning about the full reality of college life, but colleges have a hard time learning about the athletes their coaches are recruiting.

Colleges, along with their athletic conferences and the NCAA, can

begin to address these issues by finding additional ways to bring academic, admissions and athletic officials together during the recruiting process.

The need to have an integrated approach to recruiting college athletes was a theme for many panelists at the Knight Commission's most recent meeting. An essay published by the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education elaborates on this issue. The essay — available on our website at www.knightcommission.org — resulted from a high-level meeting of coaches and administrators last summer to consider issues in recruiting.

Colleges also might want to consider a model in place at several universities in which admissions applications for at-risk prospects are brought before a faculty committee and head coaches are required to explain why he or she believes the prospect will be successful. The process has led to greater transparency and understanding in the recruiting process between faculty and coaches.

On Feb. 8, we will hear claims that certain institutions achieved the top recruiting classes in the country by virtue of the number of stars each

prospect has been able to garner from various "experts" and websites, but the true measure of success will be assessed on each campus. How many of the signed prospects are admissible and eligible? How many are prepared for the academic rigors of college? How many will remain enrolled and achieve a degree? How well were the university's ethics and values upheld in the recruiting process?

Academic integrity has been one of the key issues in reforming college athletics since the Knight Commission's founding in 1989. Ultimately, ensuring it is a matter of campuses coming together and eliminating the needless divides between academics and athletics so that the educational principles are integrated into everything the athletics department does. The recruiting process is one that needs additional attention.

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