

ATHLETIC TAIL STILL WAGS THE ACADEMIC DAWG AT UGA

Terrific. I spend all my waking hours defending the academic integrity of my beloved alma mater, the University of Georgia — the oldest state-chartered university in the nation, located in Athens, the Classic City of the South — and now this: The NCAA has issued its yearly report on how many athletes earned their degree within six years of enrolling. Our men's basketball team ranks second-to-last among 318 Division I men's basketball teams with a measly 9 percent graduation rate. The UGA football team was dead last in the Southeastern Conference with a 41 percent graduation rate.

There are a lot of "yeah, buts" in those statistics regarding the years covered by the rankings. The numbers go back to the late '90s, and the current athletes are doing better in today's environment, but the fact that it even happened should embarrass anybody who loves the University of Georgia. But alas, a large number of Bulldog supporters don't really give a damn. The majority of people who show up at Sanford Stadium dressed in red and black each Saturday and woofing their heads off didn't even go to Georgia. Why should they care if any of the so-called scholar-athletes graduate or can even read or write? They just want to win, baby, win.

Perhaps that is why uber-Athletic Director Michael Adams, who also doubles as president of the university, decried the results but said he intended to keep admitting athletes who otherwise wouldn't qualify to attend the University of Georgia, because "We still have to compete in the [Southeastern Conference]." Somehow, I am not comforted by his statement. I suspect the faculty isn't either. I had thought we were in business to provide our students a superior education so they could compete in the real world, not the SEC.

Recall that Adams' brand of logic led him to bring his good buddy from his Pepperdine days, Jim Harrick, to coach the men's basketball team. We all know what a rousing success that was, particularly since we got Harrick's son and noted educator Jim Jr. in the bargain. Young Harrick will go down in the 3Rs Hall of Fame for his famous exam that included a question on how many points does a three-point shot account for in a game. (On second thought, given the basketball team's graduation rate, I must presume that some of the players missed the answer.)

In his enthusiasm to deflect blame from this mess that happened on his watch, Adams and his palace guard took a predictable shot at arch-nemesis Vince Dooley, insinuating that when Dooley was athletic director "the philosophy was 'athletic eligibility,' not graduation. That philosophy has changed." Now, Adams says he misspoke and that he was wrong also in saying that the academic counseling program had been moved out of the athletic department to the provost's office. Dang, being uber-athletic director isn't as easy as it looks.

The sad fact is that the athletic tail still wags the academic Dawg in Georgia. The governor got his shorts in a wad over a negative headline in the Atlanta Newspapers following the Bulldogs' loss to Tennessee, but hasn't said much about the abysmal graduation rates. The Board of Regents is a political joke, and they won't do squat. Newspapers across the state have been harrumphing over the situation in Athens on their editorial pages, but many of these same papers have devoted more column inches to who will start at quarterback on Saturday than to UGA's impressive academic achievements. They know that is what the majority of readers are most interested in. To those of us who care deeply about seeing the University of Georgia continue to prosper where it counts most — the classroom — it is a losing battle.

So, the hell with it. If we are going to continue to dumb down UGA, at least get enough unqualified "scholar athletes" enrolled so we can beat Tennessee, Florida, Auburn, Georgia Tech — and Vanderbilt — all in the same year. Then the effort will not have been in vain. If you agree, I'll get our uber-athletic director working on that immediately.