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# Cincinnati loses a men's basketball scholarship

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Cincinnati men's basketball program is under pressure — and this time, it's not coming from the guys on the other side of the court.

This is a challenge from the NCAA:

Pick up the grades and keep more athletes in school or face the consequences.

Just this school year, poor academic performance cost the Bearcats one of their 13 basketball scholarships.

If things don't improve, UC could face even stiffer penalties, including additional lost scholarships, recruiting restrictions and blocks to postseason play.

"I knew what I was getting myself into," said Mick Cronin, who stepped into all of this in March, when he was named men's basketball coach.

"We're starting at the basement."

The pressure UC basketball is facing lies in three letters: APR. Academic Progress Rate. It's a new NCAA measurement of how student-athletes are performing in school and whether they're progressing toward graduation, a main feature of the college-athletics academic reform plan the organization launched two years ago. A team that falls below the NCAA-set minimum APR can run into a host of punishments and penalties.

This year, UC basketball fell below the minimum and temporarily lost what can be a vital incentive to recruiting competitive players: a scholarship.

"It's certainly not a proud moment for your basketball team," UC assistant athletic director Tom Hathaway said.

The UC basketball team's problems appear to be alone among the Division I sports programs in Greater Cincinnati, although the NCAA hasn't released its full report for the 2006-07 school year and won't until late spring, NCAA spokeswoman Jennifer Kearns said. That's when the NCAA also will reveal which schools were penalized for sub-par academic performance.

UC's APR score is known because school officials revealed it to *The Enquirer*— and admitted to losing the scholarship.

So what now?

To try to raise academic performance of the basketball team, the athletic department has devised a seven-page improvement plan that calls for academic advising, increased tutoring services, study sessions and progress reports that are sent to professors twice each quarter. It will take hard work and some time: Assuming that there are no hiccups, no dropouts or players losing academic eligibility, it'll be 2009 before UC is able to reach the minimum APR.

Much of the challenge rests on the shoulders of Cronin, a coach brought in to solve the academic issues of a basketball squad ridiculed for dismal graduation rates and low grade-point averages.

"Here's the way I look at it," he said. "I need to do whatever I need to do to make sure that on their priority list, academics is at the top."

The NCAA launched its Division I Academic Performance Program in early 2005, a sweeping move aimed at the academic reform of college athletics — "reaffirming the emphasis on 'student' in the student-athlete equation," according to literature from the NCAA. The plan uses the APR system, docks institutions for athletes who lose academic eligibility or leave the school.

An APR of 1,000 is a perfect score; teams scoring below 925 face a range of penalties, including lost scholarships.

Those penalties kicked in this year, when the UC men's basketball team had a cumulative three-year APR of 838, Cronin said. UC also had a player on scholarship lose academic eligibility and walk away, an event that triggered the NCAA penalty, said Maggie McKinley, the athletic department's director of compliance and student services.

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The NCAA academic program and its punitive measures have come under criticism from coaches and college administrators who call it confusing and unfair and argue that an institution shouldn't be punished if a student, say, leaves to join the NBA. Some also say the new rules could encourage schools to cheat or cut corners to fit within the requirements. Last year, North Carolina coach Roy Williams told the Washington Post: "When I take a player, I am not going to be concerned about my APR."

But Cronin, while acknowledging that he has little control over a player who wants to leave UC, is less inclined to dismiss the measure — because of it, he's down a scholarship.

"I think it's a factor," Cronin said. "You've got to perform."

The lost scholarship is more of a black eye than a mortal wound to the program, UC officials say. As it is, UC is using only 10 of its allotted 13 (12 after the penalty) basketball scholarships this year, as Cronin looks to rebuild a program fragmented after the ouster of former coach Bob Huggins.

"We knew that there was an issue coming up, and we went ahead and elected to take the scholarship penalty this year, when we still have a scholarship available," Hathaway said. "What this is doing is it's reflecting some of the transition that was going on in the program over the last two years."

In the past two years, after UC booted Huggins and decided not to hire his successor, interim coach Andy Kennedy, six non-seniors left the program, Hathaway said. Each one represented a mark against UC. Even before the leadership changes, though, academic achievement seemed to elude UC's basketball team — fewer than a third of the players who started in 1999 have graduated, according to federal measures.

Upon dismissing Huggins, UC President Nancy Zimpher said she made "no apologies for setting high standards."

That said, UC officials are reluctant to blame the current situation on past coaches or players.

"It's the University of Cincinnati's mess," Hathaway said. "It's not Bob Huggins' mess. We're responsible here."

So it's up to today's leadership in the athletic department — and Cronin, in particular — to try to boost his basketball players' performance in the classroom as well as on the courts. The basketball team won't have a perfect APR in 2006-07 — Abdul Herrera left the team in October — but Cronin said he's inundating his team with talk about the importance of grades.

And the players are hearing it. They say Cronin's message, his emphasis on academics, is relentless.

"Our coach stresses getting a degree more than anything," junior forward John Williamson said. "We're not going to be playing basketball for the rest of our lives."

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