

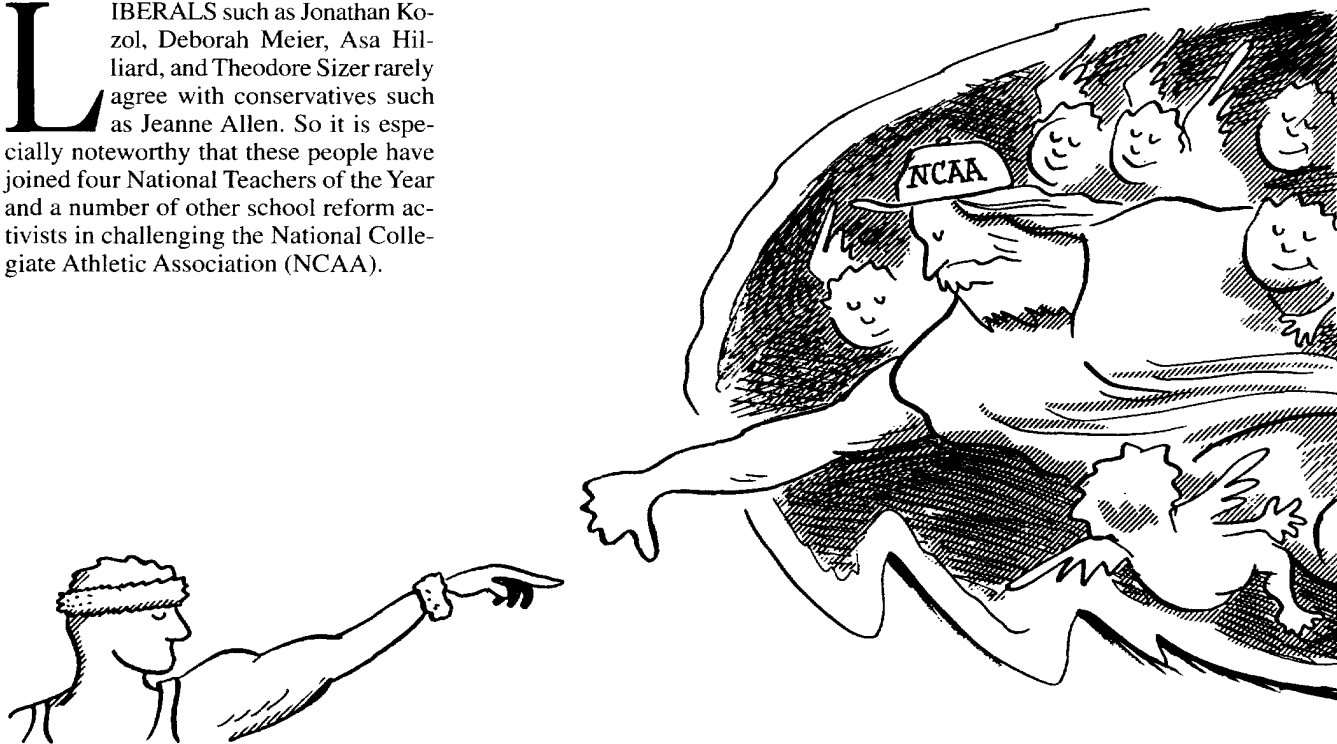
The NCAA

Major Barrier to High School Reform

BY JOE NATHAN

Mr. Nathan blows the whistle on the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

LIBERALS such as Jonathan Kozol, Deborah Meier, Asa Hilliard, and TheodoreSizer rarely agree with conservatives such as Jeanne Allen. So it is especially noteworthy that these people have joined four National Teachers of the Year and a number of other school reform activists in challenging the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).



Over the past five years, the NCAA has frustrated thousands of students and educators. Ironically, the NCAA has made life especially difficult for many educators who are trying to reform schools to increase student achievement. As a recent *New York Times* editorial explained, "The NCAA should be promoting educational innovation, not obstructing it."¹ It's time

for the story to be told.

The NCAA, a very large national organization that runs university sports, is not used to challenges. Its most recent annual report showed that in 1997 it had more than \$247 million in revenues.² The organization was established, in part, because college and university officials wanted a relatively level playing field for athletics. Of

course, the admissions standards of Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and Duke are not

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the same as those of Florida State, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Nebraska, or the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Nevertheless, some university officials felt that it would be a step forward if they could standardize at least some procedures for dealing with current and prospective university athletes.

About a decade ago, a handful of professional athletes noted that, while attending universities on athletic scholarships, they had developed strong athletic skills but could barely read. This revelation brought calls for reform and heavy pressure on the NCAA. Some members of Congress questioned whether the NCAA was capable of handling the responsibility for university athletics.

The NCAA responded by creating an Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse. It established certain grade-point and test-score minimums that high school athletes had to achieve in order to be eligible for a university athletic scholarship. When this process was originally established, freshmen were not eligible to participate on varsity teams in major sports. However, faced with intense pressure from some coaches in such high-profile sports as football and basketball, the NCAA changed its rules and now permits freshmen to play on varsity teams. This change led to even closer scrutiny of high school students and their coursework.

Clearly, some high school courses are not especially rigorous or demanding. No one debates this. But the NCAA could have joined national testing and assessment authorities, as well as the high school community, to develop better ways of assessing what high school students actually know and can do. For example, the NCAA could have recognized the importance of writing in college and could have worked with the appropriate authorities to develop a valid, reliable test of writing.

Instead, the NCAA developed a list of "standards" that high school courses had to meet. What students know and can do didn't seem to matter. Being a National Merit Scholar or a class valedictorian or posting very high grades and test scores wasn't enough for the NCAA. High school students who wished to be collegiate athletes had to take enough NCAA-approved courses.

In a mailing to high school principals in February and March of 1998 the NCAA noted that, among other things, acceptable high school social studies courses could spend no more than 25% of their time on

humanities, criminal justice, contemporary issues, or community service. Does the NCAA require universities to offer and athletes to take courses meeting such standards? No. The NCAA also insisted that independent study courses in English, social studies, math, or science would not be acceptable as core courses — regardless of what the students who took them know and can do. What happened as a result of such policies was tragic and defied common sense.

Student Victims

The NCAA has compiled quite a list of student and educator victims. Let's begin with a few of the students.

- The NCAA prevented Chris Rohe, who compiled a 3.97 high school grade-point average, had high test scores, and was a member of the National Honor Society, from playing football at the Air Force Academy during the 1996-97 school year. Why? The NCAA rejected one-third of a required 10th-grade English class.³

- Amber Hofstad, a National Merit Scholar, was prevented from running cross-country at Michigan Technological University until halfway through her freshman year because the NCAA questioned the way some of her Advanced Placement courses had been listed on her transcript.⁴

- Dan Zien, a suburban Milwaukee student who won honors in the Junior Olympics, compiled a B-minus high school grade-point average and had solid SAT scores. However, the NCAA refused to allow him to participate in track as a freshman at Indiana University. Why? It rejected a single English course he had taken, although the same course was accepted from other Wisconsin high schools. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article noted that "an expert with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction says he has heard similar or worse complaints from almost every high school athletic director in the state."⁵

- The NCAA ruled that Rebecca Burt, a young woman with a strong academic record, was ineligible to accept a track scholarship on the basis of a single "tech prep" science class. As a result, she had to drop out of college. An editorial in *USA Today*, discussing this and other cases, ran under the headline "NCAA's Too-Tight Rules Hurt Deserving Students."⁶

- The NCAA tried to prevent a high school valedictorian from participating in college sports, simply on the basis of cours-

es taken. This student had been appointed to one of the nation's military academies. The reporter from the *Detroit News* who uncovered this case began his story, "Ninety thousand dashed hopes. That's how many graduating high school seniors hoped to be playing sports in college this year, only to find they were academically ineligible." While not all these students have excellent academic records, the *Detroit News* reporter raised many troubling questions about the way the NCAA rejects students, often not accepting a single course the students have taken.

- The NCAA has argued in court that it does not have to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The U.S. Department of Justice disagrees. The Justice Department has found that current NCAA rules specifying courses and standardized test scores for student athletes with learning disabilities are in violation of the ADA. The Justice Department has told the NCAA that it should compensate a number of these student athletes and modify their eligibility status.⁸

- The NCAA currently faces lawsuits from students with learning disabilities, including Chad Ganden, a swimmer now at Michigan State University, who was denied full eligibility because of special education courses he took early in his high school years. By the time he was a high school senior, Ganden was doing well in *honors courses* at a highly regarded suburban high school. But because of the special education courses he had taken earlier, he was not allowed to compete in his freshman year.⁹

- The NCAA denied full eligibility to two student athletes who were in the top 10% of their Philadelphia high school graduating class, had taken college-preparatory courses, but had standardized test scores that fell below the NCAA cut score. Using college admissions tests in this way is a violation of the guidelines for test use issued by the test-makers themselves. Last January, the students filed a class action race discrimination lawsuit against the NCAA.

- In the fall of 1997, Yale accepted Jennifer Rosholt as an "early decision" student. Rosholt, an excellent tennis player, had earned a 3.77 grade-point average at a well-regarded private school and had well-above-average college entrance test scores. While her record impressed Yale, it was not good enough for the NCAA, which, as of early spring 1998, had declared Rosholt ineligible.

ble for college sports, despite months of correspondence and phone calls from her parents and her school counselors.¹⁰

• In 1996 Misty Hollingshead graduated from North Thurston High School in Olympia, Washington, with a 3.56 grade-point average. She was a member of the National Honor Society all four years in high school, she was class president for four years, and she had strong college entrance test scores. A highly regarded volleyball player, Misty also took 43 quarter-hours of college work during her senior year in high school, as permitted under the state of Washington's "running start" law. However, she and her parents went through months of anguish because the NCAA challenged the amount of credit Hollingshead was awarded under the Washington law. Ultimately, Hollingshead was allowed to accept her scholarship. But because of the questions, her younger brother, also an honor student, did not participate in the "running start" program, and the family wonders whether another child, also an honor student, should participate. Misty's mother Sandy, a Washington educator, wrote:

We were stunned by the rigidity and lack of common sense on the part of the Clearinghouse, and at their arrogance and unwillingness to give us answers concerning the process they had used in making decisions about our daughter. . . . It's crazy for an organization to have the power that they do to override and overrule educational statutes set forth by a state legislature, and to not really have to answer to anyone for their actions and decisions. I think the colleges have created a monster that's devouring some of the brightest and the best of their potential student-athletes, a system that is weeding out the cream of the crop right along with the bottom of the barrel.¹¹

Educator Victims

Such stories about student victims go on and on. What about educators and schools victimized by the NCAA? One place to begin is with Elk River High School in Minnesota. Educators there developed a course in which students interviewed community members and wrote about what they learned. On the basis of the course title, "Essential Communications," the NCAA declared this course inappropriate for college preparation, thus making several honor students ineligible for athletic partici-

pation as freshmen. In its three-sentence memo to the district superintendent, the NCAA made three grammatical errors: "Thank you for you [sic] fax regarding 'Essential Communications.' Do [sic] to the vocational aspect of this, we are unable to approve this course as a core course. Therefore, the decision remains unchange [sic] for student named above."¹²

Bob Rodrigues, a suburban Pittsburgh teacher who was named "1997 Outstanding Secondary Teacher of the Year" by the National Council for the Social Studies, has spent frustrating months trying to gain NCAA approval of carefully developed interdisciplinary courses. He has won many awards and a Council for Basic Education fellowship, but the NCAA has repeatedly rejected his interdisciplinary courses. As this article was being completed, Rodrigues phoned to say that the NCAA had rejected his course titled "Leadership/School to Career." Is this a college-preparatory class? Sixteen of the 20 students are Rodrigues' former Advanced Placement students. Mike Bonacci, the principal of the school, wrote:

After having had too many experiences calling, submitting curricula, resubmitting curricula, and receiving different answers to the same questions because one can never talk with the same Clearinghouse representative, it makes my guidance counselors and me wonder whether the NCAA Academic Requirements Committee knows anything at all about curricula and those components of a planned course which qualify it as a core course.¹³

Bonacci isn't the only angry principal. The NCAA tried to block a New York student from participating in basketball, rejecting his principal's contention that he had taken an acceptable number of mathematics courses. At the time the NCAA acted, according to the judge in this case, the NCAA's own rules said that it would respect the judgment of principals about whether courses met NCAA specifications. However, the Clearinghouse overruled the principal.

Who are the people who wield such power? A Connecticut district court overruled the NCAA in one of the cases, noting that the director of the NCAA's Clearinghouse had revealed in testimony that, to his knowledge, none of the people on his staff "is or ever was a school principal or a teacher who had experience in de-

signing courses."¹⁴

Joyce Caufman, a veteran Colorado school counselor, recently described her frustrations with the NCAA.

The same course would be approved for one student and denied for another student — same course, same school, same year! . . . I have referred, only half-jokingly, to the people who evaluate the transcripts as chimpanzees because it certainly appears that they perform the task as a "response" activity which requires no judgment. When it takes us as educators months of study and research to add or delete a class from our curriculum, having a temporary employee of the NCAA make these decisions in nanoseconds is ludicrous.¹⁵

Some high school reformers, such as TheodoreSizer, have proposed that graduation from high school should be based on demonstrated skills and knowledge, not on the accumulation of credits. In an eloquent, visionary report, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recommended identifying a "set of learnings . . . in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate" and creating "a Personal Plan for Progress for each student."¹⁶

But when innovative high schools in Georgia and Minnesota implemented such programs, they ran into trouble with the NCAA. A Roswell, Georgia, student was declared ineligible because his high school had adopted a performance-based approach. Betsy Stafford, a 20-year veteran of public education who is a counselor at Roswell's Independence High School, noted, "It's astonishing. We move toward requiring demonstration of knowledge before students graduate. You'd think colleges would applaud. Instead, the NCAA rejects our best professional efforts."¹⁷

In a case that has attracted national attention, a Minnesota student, her family, and her charter school spent months battling the NCAA. Hope Grover is an outstanding softball player who scored 31 on her American College Testing (ACT) Program admissions test, a score that placed her in the top 10% of the nation's high school students. While still in high school, she earned more than 75 credits at the state university, maintaining an A-minus average. However, the director of the NCAA Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse wrote to her school, "The self-paced, performance

The NCAA is inappropriately attempting to dictate the curriculum for U.S. high schools.

based approach are [sic] not acceptable methods for the purposes of NCAA Initial Eligibility."¹⁸

Since the entire state of Minnesota is moving toward a high school graduation system that is based on demonstration of skills and knowledge, the Minnesota State Board of Education has challenged the NCAA.¹⁹ Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal, co-directors of the Annenberg Rural Challenge, funded by the Annenberg Foundation, have also written the NCAA urging the organization to stop trying to dictate course content.

As this article was being completed, the nation's state attorneys general decided to create a panel to investigate the NCAA. They were responding to complaints from educators and parents across the country.

Some have questioned the NCAA's right to create such standards. The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) recently wrote that the NCAA "is interfering with states' academic reforms. . . . The NCAA is far behind the curve of education reform efforts. . . . The NCAA relies on the traditional and increasingly outmoded Carnegie unit — seat time — when many states and thousands of school districts are moving to assess student achievement through outcomes . . . and are experimenting with other innovations such as block scheduling and charter schools which are far beyond the static and limited purview of the NCAA."²⁰ Brenda Welburn, executive director of NASBE, and staff member David Griffith are among the education community's most tireless critics of the NCAA.

Others have joined NASBE in protesting. Charles Rooney of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) has worked hard to change NCAA procedures. Meanwhile, in 1996 the NCAA demanded that every high school fill out a questionnaire for each new English, social studies, math, and science course. Initially, the American School Counselors Association saw nothing wrong with this. Indeed, one of its members appeared on an NCAA-sponsored national teleconference to praise the NCAA for its interest in students. However, the Minnesota School Counselors Association contacted school counselors around the nation and helped formalize counselors' massive frustration with the NCAA. Counselors noted that it

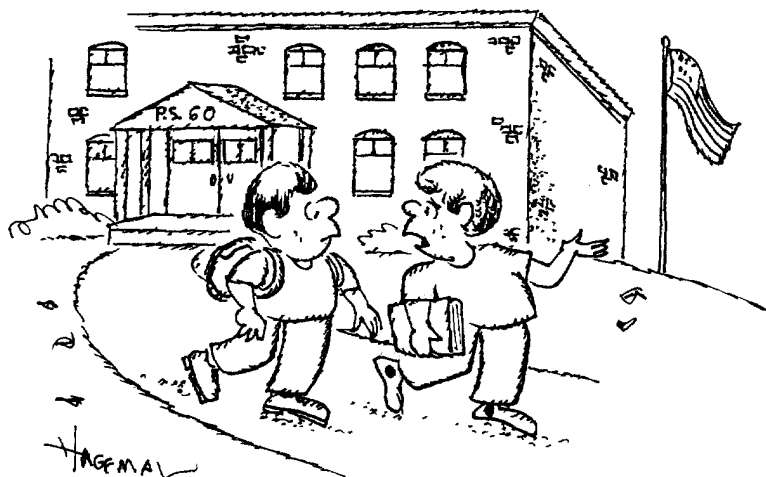
could take months to get an answer from the NCAA and that, when it finally came, the decision frequently made no sense. Walter Roberts of the Minnesota School Counselors Association took a leading role in helping to write a resolution, adopted by the American School Counselors Association, which challenged the NCAA's actions. And the Minnesota Association of School Administrators has urged the American Association of School Administrators to challenge the NCAA.

Individual high school principals around the country have joined the effort to challenge the NCAA. Greg Firm of Cascade High School, Everett, Washington; Michael Bonacci of suburban Pittsburgh; Terry Downen of Eau Claire North, Eau Claire, Wisconsin; Judy Conger of Community High School, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Al Zenor of Crookston High School, Crookston, Minnesota, have written letters to members of Congress and to their own professional organizations, citing the NCAA's abysmal treatment of outstanding student athletes and its inappropriate rejection of well-designed courses.

John Lamuel, associate executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has met with NCAA officials several times. He feels that "they have come a long way. [But] they have a way to go."²¹

The intentions of the NCAA's initial eligibility process are *worthy*. The approach is *wretched*. The NCAA is inappropriately attempting to dictate the curriculum for the nation's high schools. In this country, state and local boards of education, not the NCAA, establish graduation requirements and the content of each course. The K-12 education community welcomes collaboration with higher education, but dictates, especially from those with no legal authority over K-12 education, are not welcome. The NCAA should reexamine and reject proposals for revisions in its initial eligibility process that seek to dictate the high school curriculum.

Fundamentally, the NCAA has arrogated to itself the authority to pass judgment on high school curricula at the nation's more than 20,000 high schools and to use college admissions test scores in ways not supported by those who created the tests. The NCAA has neither the right nor the capacity to act as a national school board. Current problems with the NCAA Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse are an inevitable consequence of the NCAA's



"I'm not counting the days until summer vacation. I don't do math unless I'm forced to."

massive and misguided undertaking. The NCAA can and should play a useful and constructive role in the academic lives of student athletes. However, that will require the NCAA to rethink its actions and focus more attention on the academic work of student athletes while they are in college.

But there is some progress to report. Two years ago, parents and high school educators had trouble getting NCAA officials to talk with them at all. The NCAA preferred to deal only with college officials. Today, the NCAA is talking with high school educators and parents, although weeks can go by before the NCAA responds to a query.

The requirement that high schools answer lengthy questionnaires about each new course in English, social studies, math, and science has been dropped. The NCAA has sent high schools a list of standards. It is asking the schools to review these standards and tell the NCAA which courses meet them. However, the NCAA still retains the right to overrule principals.

Recommendations

While some progress has been made, a growing number of educators and political leaders continue to challenge the NCAA's efforts. In a recent letter to the organization, more than a hundred of the nation's leading authorities on high school reform, including four National Teachers of the Year, offered the following recommendations:

1. The NCAA should abandon its efforts to dictate course content to American high schools. By the 1999-2000 school year, the NCAA should halt its inappropriate reliance on college admissions test scores. Instead, the NCAA should work with national testing and measurement authorities, some of whom are employed by NCAA member universities, to rethink ways to assess high school students' skills and knowledge.

2. The NCAA should increase scrutiny of its own members by tightening academic requirements for student athletes who are already on college campuses, imposing stricter "continuing progress" rules and punishing colleges and universities that fail to educate student athletes. The NCAA should also reconsider the issue of freshman eligibility.

3. A national independent commission should be created, and it should hold public meetings. Half of the members should

represent higher education, and half should represent — be appointed by — those legally responsible for setting K-12 curriculum standards at the state and local levels. Over the next nine months, this commission should:

- invite students, parents, and educators who have experience with the initial eligibility process to testify before the commission and to speak at the 1999 annual NCAA meeting. The commission should hold at least five open hearings around the nation, allowing a variety of people to present their experience, research, and recommendations.

- reexamine the way NCAA assesses student preparation for higher education.

- review the research on the limitations and strengths of standardized tests.

- consider other, more appropriate ways to assess what high school students know.

- review current NCAA policies regarding academic standards that student athletes are expected to meet while they are in colleges and universities, in terms of both course content and required grade-point average.

- develop and present recommendations throughout the nation prior to the 1999 annual NCAA convention.

- consider reinstituting the policy of making freshmen ineligible to participate in major sports, at least until they have successfully completed a quarter or semester at an institution of higher education.

4. The NCAA should publish and make widely available minutes of committee meetings and internal staff memos from the last three years that relate to the initial eligibility process, including those relating to the Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse. The NCAA should also provide research about the impact of its initial eligibility process on students, including students from a variety of backgrounds.

5. The NCAA should accept the U.S. Department of Justice recommendations with regard to compensating students with disabilities who have been inappropriately treated in the initial eligibility process. The NCAA should consider offering compensation to other students whose lives and educations have been disrupted, despite otherwise acceptable work, because the NCAA rejected one or more of their courses.

These recommendations will help ensure that future educators and students do not become victims of ill-advised, inap-

propriate NCAA actions.

Some have asked what attracted me to this battle. There are two things: first, respect for the young people who, despite their hard work, have been victims of the NCAA; second, admiration for the many high school educators who are trying to improve high schools, only to see their efforts rejected by the NCAA.

Would you care to help? If so, please contact me to join one of the most interesting — and unexpected — battles for high school reform in the last decade.²²

1. "The NCAA's Eligibility Standards," *New York Times*, 23 December 1997, p. A-12.

2. *1996-97 NCAA Annual Reports* (Overland Park, Kan.: NCAA, December 1997), p. 42.

3. Peter Applebome, "NCAA Effort to Raise Academic Standards Leaves Many Top Students on Sidelines," *New York Times*, 23 October 1996, p. B-12.

4. Tamara Henry, "NCAA Eligibility: Game of Frustration," *USA Today*, 18 February 1998, p. 8-B.

5. Marie Rohde, "On Your Marks . . . Stop," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 17 March 1997, p. 1-B.

6. "NCAA's Too-Tight Rules Hurt Deserving Students," *USA Today*, 29 October 1996, p. 12-A.

7. Fred Girard, "Tougher NCAA Standards Under Scrutiny," *Detroit News*, 15 December 1996, p. E-1.

8. Dan Sutherland, letter to Kevin Lennon, director of member services, NCAA, 17 October 1997.

9. Steve Wieberg, "Justice Department: NCAA Violates Disabilities Act," *USA Today*, 30 October 1997, p. 1-D.

10. Henry, p. 9-B.

11. Sandy Hollingshead, personal communication, 20 February 1998.

12. Quoted in Applebome, op. cit. I have a copy of this memo and am willing to share it with interested readers, who may contact me at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, 234 Humphrey Center, University of Minnesota, 301 19th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455.

13. Michael L. Bonacci, letter to the NCAA Academic Requirements Committee, 11 September 1997.

14. *Phillip v. NCAA*, 1996 WL 870689 (D. Conn.).

15. Joyce C. Cauffman, letter to Walter Roberts, 23 March 1997.

16. *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996), p. 11.

17. Betsy Stafford, presentation to a press conference at the NCAA annual conference, Atlanta, 10 January 1998.

18. Cavin R. Symons, letter to Dee Grover-Thomas, principal, Minnesota New Country School, 27 February 1997.

19. Jeanne Kling, "NCAA as Reform Obstacle," *Education Week*, 18 February 1998, p. 37.

20. Brenda Welburn, "Nation's Education Boards Issue Policy Statement Critical of NCAA's Eligibility Procedures," press release, National Association of State Boards of Education, Alexandria, Va., 15 December 1997.

21. Interview with John Lamuel, February 1998.

22. Interested readers may contact me by e-mail at Natha001@hhh.umn.edu or by sending a letter to Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, 234 Humphrey Center, University of Minnesota, 301 19th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455. 