

## No. 1 in Louisiana

Ragin' Cajuns® lead the way with top graduation rate

**L**OUISIANA'S RAGIN' CAJUNS® earned a No. 1 ranking in the state earlier this year.

Student-athletes who enrolled in UL Lafayette for the 1998-99 school year had the highest graduation rate of the 13 Division 1 schools in Louisiana, the latest NCAA Graduation Success Rate report showed.

Sixty-six percent of the student-athletes admitted to UL Lafayette that year had earned degrees by August 2004. That's more than double the graduation rate of the university's general student body for that same period, which was 32 percent. Only student-athletes who received athletic financial aid, such as scholarships, grants or tuition waivers, were included in the report.

Tulane University's student-athletes had the second highest graduation rate, with 65 percent earning degrees, followed by McNeese State University, with 56 percent, and Northwestern State University, with 52 percent.

In the Sun Belt Conference, Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns' 66 percent graduation rate earned them third place, for the same time period. Denver was on top, with an 83 percent graduation rate, followed by North Texas, with 67 percent.

The NCAA report states that 62 percent of student-athletes in the nation's Division 1 and Division 1-A schools who enrolled in the 1998-99 school year graduated within six years.

This is the second graduation rate report issued by the NCAA. It is the

first accounting that considers a six-year window for graduation.

David Walker, UL Lafayette's interim athletic director, said Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns' graduation rate is impressive. "But we want to improve those numbers."

The Graduation Success Rate is part of the NCAA's academic reform efforts. (See related story, page 37.)

Danny Cottonham is director of UL Lafayette's Student-Athlete Academic Center. He and two other full-time academic counselors, Lane

graduation – from us. We will say it to them often to let them know that's what we expect from them," Cottonham said.

"In the past, it was the 'Big E' word – eligibility. But we want to talk about the 'Big G' word because if we can talk about graduation, then eligibility is not going to be a problem. If a student-athlete is making progress toward getting his or her degree, and is doing so on time, then eligibility is never an issue."

The NCAA has new standards to keep student-athletes on track to graduate within six years. A freshman must complete 24 hours of course work and have at least a 1.8 gradepoint average. By the end of his second year, he must complete 40 percent, with a minimum 1.9 GPA. Those numbers rise to 60 percent, with at least a 2.0, and 80 percent, with a minimum 2.0, for the third and fourth years, respectively.

"There's not a whole lot of margin for error or laziness or even for being undecided about a major," Cottonham said. "For a lot of our kids, it means summer school is going to be in the picture."

"The university is trying to appropriate more money for student-athletes to go to summer school. It's also trying to find more resources in their fifth year to help them get their degrees.

The NCAA will allow a university to help a student-athlete who has completed eligibility and is in his or her fifth year. We can give that student a scholarship through his fifth year, provided he doesn't become a professional athlete. It's in our best interest to try to help that student graduate."

### STUDENT-ATHLETE GRADUATION RATES FOR NCAA DIVISION 1

SCHOOL	STUDENT-ATHLETES
<b>UL LAFAYETTE</b>	<b>66</b>
Tulane	65
McNeese	56
Northwestern	52
Grambling	50
LSU	49
Louisiana Tech	44
UL Monroe	42
Southern University	42
Nicholls	38
Southeastern	36
Centenary	33
New Orleans	29

Luneau and Christy Alford, constantly stress to student-athletes the ultimate goal of earning a degree. They begin to deliver that message in a student-athlete's freshman year.

"We believe it's part of our job to make sure they hear the 'Big G' word –

Cottonham noted that the majority of Ragin' Cajuns who have turned pro before graduating have returned later to finish their degree requirements. "They understand the value of a college diploma."

Student-athletes receive a Sun Belt

Conference medallion during commencement. "It comes from the Sun Belt Conference but it's presented by the institution that the student-athlete attended. It has become a very proud moment for me because I get to present the medallions and

make a little speech. I remind them that most of them have been successful in a sport but it was a team sport. This medallion is an individual award. Regardless of how much support or encouragement they received, they had to earn this on their own." ■

## Best Yet

Almost half of Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns® earn a 3.0 GPA or higher

**H**OW DID UL LAFAYETTE'S TEAMS fare in the classroom for Fall 2005?

Better than ever.

For the first time since UL Lafayette began keeping records, every Ragin' Cajun® team earned a cumulative grade point average of 2.5 or higher.

Almost half – 49.7 percent – of UL Lafayette's 346 student-athletes and student support staff finished the Fall 2005 semester with a 3.0 GPA or better. A total of 22 earned a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Women's tennis had the highest GPA of all sports, a 3.43, while the best GPA for a men's team was earned by cross country, a 3.15.

"We've found that there's a healthy competition among sports. Teams are vying for a higher ranking," said Danny Cottonham, director of UL Lafayette's Student-Athlete Academic Center.

Also, a team's GPA can be a powerful recruiting tool. "If your team has a 3.0 GPA and better, and you can say that to a mom and dad when their son or daughter is being recruited, that's a plus. It tells them that we are mindful of the real reason why a student-athlete is at UL Lafayette and that's to get an academic degree," he said.

Student-athletes' GPAs are of particular concern to the NCAA, which has implemented measures intended to ultimately improve their graduation rates. (See related story, page 36.)

Through its Academic Progress Rate formula, the NCAA keeps track of current student-athletes' grades. It awards two points for each student-athlete who meets academic-eligibility standards and remains enrolled at the same school. The APR is determined by dividing the total points earned by a team by the total points possible. If a team's APR doesn't add up to at least 925, it may lose a scholarship. That

UL STUDENT-ATHLETES GRADE POINT AVERAGES	
MEN	
Cross country	3.15
Golf	3.11
Baseball	3.10
Track and field	2.73
Tennis	2.62
Football	2.58
Basketball	2.50
WOMEN	
Tennis	3.43
Soccer	3.32
Volleyball	3.15
Cross country	3.12
Softball	3.07
Track and field	2.99
Basketball	2.52

925 score foretells a 60 percent graduation rate, according to the NCAA.

Cottonham said the NCAA's decision to penalize teams by cutting scholarships may not be popular with all coaches. "But I think it's a positive thing because it really does help us focus on why kids are here. We know that every student-athlete is not going to play professional sports. But we should take advantage of the opportunity to help every kid earn a degree. If we do that, then I think we're a better institution for it."

The NCAA's concentration on boosting student-athletes' academic performance dovetails with UL Lafayette's efforts. For instance, the university hired an additional full-time academic counselor

in 1998, and another in 2000, for the Student-Athlete Academic Center. UL Lafayette implemented selective admissions in 1999, which established academic entrance requirements for all first-time freshmen, including student-athletes. Those standards have been strengthened gradually.

Cottonham said UL Lafayette coaches stress – more than ever – performance in the classroom as well as on the court or playing field.

Tony Robichaux, head coach of Louisiana's Ragin' Cajuns baseball team, decided that a fourth coach allowed by the NCAA – a volunteer coach – should concentrate on helping players attain higher grade point averages. When volunteer Chris Domingue joined the baseball coaching staff four years ago, the team had a 2.4 GPA. For the Fall 2005 semester, the team GPA was 3.1.

For their part, the center's academic counselors monitor players' progress throughout a semester. If a player is having trouble with a subject, they will assign a tutor to help.

There's a study hall in the Conference Center on campus for student-athletes. It's being upgraded with the assistance of donors such as Charles and Elaine Dill of Abbeville, La. This past October, the couple pledged \$10,000 annually, for three years, to be used by the Student-Athlete Academic Center. Cottonham said the first priority is purchasing new desktop computers.

A Student-Athlete Academic Fund has also been set up.

Cottonham noted that players need laptop computers when they travel to out-of-state games so they can retrieve class assignments and communicate via e-mail with instructors. "We need to put student-athletes in a more competitive situation, not only on the field of play, but in the classroom." ■