
Navigating the Journey to Swim in College

Wading Through the NCAA Rules

Understanding the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) rules can be daunting. They are available on the NCAA web site but it can be confusing so I will summarize them here for Prospective Student Athletes (PSA). Not all of the rules are relevant to all sports so I am summarizing the parts that pertain to swimmers. The NCAA acts as the governing body for all sports. There are three divisions within the NCAA which were created to align like-minded campuses in the areas of philosophy, competition and opportunity. In order to keep competition as fair as possible, the different divisions have different rules regarding scholarships that can be awarded and academic eligibility.

Athletic scholarships are classified as one of two types – head count or equivalency:

- Head count sports are those in which the number of athletes on the roster is what matters and only full scholarships are awarded.
- Equivalency sports allow scholarships to be divided so that the majority of scholarships awarded are partial.

Swimming qualifies as an equivalency sport and is usually included in “all other sports” when listing rules and regulations.

Division I men’s swimming programs are allowed to award the equivalent of 9.9 full scholarships and women’s programs can award the equivalent of 14 full scholarships. These are most commonly divided among more athletes and awarded as partial scholarships.

Division II programs are allowed to award the equivalent of 8 scholarships each for men and women.

The NCAA rules cover academic requirements as well as recruiting rules and qualifying as an amateur athlete. I am focusing on the recruiting rules prior to a swimmer signing a National Letter of Intent (NLI) or otherwise committing to attend a particular college here in this article.

In short, in order to be an amateur, an athlete must not tryout or play with a professional team, accept payments or prize money in excess of expenses for playing their sports, or be represented or accept benefits from an agent.

The academic rules for Division I and Division II include minimum GPA’s (typically 2.2 or 2.3) and core courses. This is rarely a problem for swimmers.

In order to be eligible to swim at a Division I or Division II level, swimmers must register with the NCAA Clearinghouse. This can be done as early as 10th grade and takes just a few minutes to complete. Registration requires demographic information, coursework, and certification as an amateur (which

simply involves answering a few questions to make sure the swimmer has not received money for competing or participated with a pro team) and paying a fee of \$80. [Register here](#). The swimmer will receive an NCAA Clearinghouse ID which they must keep as they will need it when completing Recruit Questionnaires and scheduling official visits to colleges. The NCAA Clearinghouse determines the initial eligibility of student-athletes to compete at the Division I or II level by reviewing a combination of their completed high school curriculum and college entrance examination scores.

NCAA rules on recruiting state when contact can occur, how often, etc., based on the athlete's year in school. They vary by type of contact and by Division.

Division I

Questionnaires, camp information, NCAA materials and non-athletic publications can be sent to prospective athletes at any time.

After September 1st of a swimmer's junior year in high school, college coaches can send individual emails, reply to emails and texts from athletes, and send faxes. The swimmer can email the coach at any time but the coach cannot reply prior to September 1st. Recruits can also go on official visits after September 1st. Students can take a maximum of 5 official visits to Division I schools, with only 1 per college.

After July 1st following a swimmer's junior year in high school, college coaches can call a PSA once a week. A PSA can call a college coach at any time but the coach may not return the call until July 1st.

After the PSA has signed a National Letter of Intent (NLI) to compete at the school, phone calls and off campus contact are unlimited.

Unofficial visits can be taken at any time and are unlimited. Coaches can talk to PSA's if they are on campus when they are visiting after September 1st of junior year.

Unlimited unofficial visits are allowed except during dead periods. During a dead period, a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with the PSA or their parents. Coaches may write and telephone a PSA or their parents during a dead period. The dates vary each year but immediately precede the dates for signing a National Letter of Intent in November and April.

Division II

Questionnaires, camp information, NCAA materials and non-athletic publications can be sent to prospective athletes at any time. The swimmer can also contact the coach at any time but the coach cannot reply prior to June 15th prior to the swimmer's junior year in high school.

After June 15th prior to the swimmer's junior year in high school, college coaches can send individual emails, reply to emails and texts from athletes, and send faxes. The swimmer can email the coach at any time but the coach cannot reply prior to June 15th.

After June 15th prior to the swimmer's junior year in high school, college coaches can call a PSA. A PSA can call a college coach at any time but the coach may not return the call until June 15th. There is no limit to the number of phone calls.

Off campus contact can occur beginning June 15th prior to the swimmer's junior year in high school and an unlimited number of off campus contacts is allowed.

Coaches can schedule official visits to campus after June 15th prior to a swimmer's junior year. Students can take an unlimited number of official visits to Division II schools, except during dead periods.

After the PSA has signed a National Letter of Intent (NLI) to compete at the school, phone calls and off campus contact are unlimited.

Unofficial visits can be taken at any time and are unlimited. Coaches can talk to a PSA if he is on campus when visiting but they cannot return phone calls or emails to schedule unofficial visits until the date they are allowed to call/email.

Division III

Questionnaires, camp information, NCAA materials and non-athletic publications can be sent to prospective athletes at any time.

College coaches can also send individual emails, reply to emails and texts from athletes, and send faxes at any time. The swimmer can email the coach at any time.

Off campus contact can occur after the sophomore year of high school and an unlimited number of off campus contacts is allowed.

Coaches can schedule official visits to campus after January 1st of a swimmer's junior year. Students can take an unlimited number of official visits to Division III schools.

Unofficial visits can be taken at any time and are unlimited.

Division I Academic Eligibility

You must complete 16 core courses, including 4 years of English, 3 years of math, 2 years of science. Ten of the 16 core courses must be completed prior to senior year. A minimum 2.3 GPA must be earned in core courses. There is a sliding scale which balances the core course GPA with ACT and/or SAT test scores. A higher GPA requires lower test scores and vice versa to meet this requirement.

Division II Academic Eligibility

You must complete 16 core courses, including 4 years of English, 3 years of math, 2 years of science. The Academy Eligibility requirements for Division II are changing on August 1, 2018 to reflect a higher GPA and the addition of a sliding scale to balance the core course GPA with ACT and/or SAT scores instead of a straight combined score requirement. Prior to August 1, 2018, a combined score of 820 on the SAT or a sum score of 68 on the ACT is required. After August 1, 2018, the sliding scale goes into effect. A minimum 2.2 GPA must be earned in core courses for athletes entering college after August 1, 2018, and a minimum 2.0 for athletes entering college prior to August 1, 2018.

Division III Academic Eligibility

Division III schools provide an integrated environment focusing on academic success while offering a competitive athletics environment. Division III rules minimize potential conflicts between athletics and academics and focus on regional in-season and conference play.

While Division III schools do not offer athletics scholarships, 75 percent of Division III student-athletes receive some form of merit or need-based financial aid.

If you are only considering Division III schools, you do not need to register with the NCAA Eligibility Center. Division III schools set their own admissions standards.

NAIA

The NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) is a lesser known association but performs many of the same functions as the NCAA. The schools governed by the NAIA tend to be “small athletic programs that are dedicated to character-driven intercollegiate athletics.” There are fewer restrictions on the contact between the student-athlete and the coach. The admissions standards are set by the individual schools although students must register with the NAIA to determine academic eligibility and amateur status. The academic eligibility is very straightforward – 2 of the 3 must be met: minimum of 18 on ACT or 860 on SAT; minimum high school GPA of 2.0, graduate in top half of high school class. The individual schools determine the amount of scholarship money that will be awarded and whether it will be classified as academic, athletic, etc. NAIA schools are limited to awarding the equivalent of 8 full scholarships.

NJCAA

The NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association) promotes and fosters two-year college athletics and the schools are divided into three divisions. There are fewer restrictions on the contact between the student-athlete and the coach. A PSA must have completed their junior year of high school in order to go on official visits and/or sign a National Letter of Intent. The admissions standards are set by the individual schools.

NJCAA Division I and Division II schools are limited to awarding 15 scholarships. NJCAA Division III schools cannot offer athletic aid.