Introduction

Issue:
Should USA Ultimate extend college eligibility for athletes participating in the 2020 college season as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that cancelled large portions of the 2020 college season?

The current USA Ultimate Eligibility Guidelines allow for athletes to participate in college ultimate for five seasons after participating in their first “Start Date Event.” The College Working Group is proposing an exception to this rule to allow those athletes in their final year of eligibility in 2020 to be granted an additional season to participate in college ultimate.

On March 27, 2020, USA Ultimate formally announced the cancellation / postponement of the remainder of the 2020 college season, including the College Championships. The 2020 season began on January 3 and was scheduled to run through Memorial Day weekend. The final weekend of college ultimate was played March 11-13. In late March, following the cancellation of all college athletic events, the NCAA began to consider an extension of eligibility for their athletes. Soon thereafter, the USA Ultimate College Working Group began exploring what that could look like for college ultimate athletes.

The NCAA elected to provide an additional year of eligibility to all spring sport athletes, regardless of the athletes' year in school. However, they did not extend eligibility for any winter sport athletes whose seasons were substantially completed at the time of cancellation. Furthermore, there are college conferences and individual schools who are electing not to extend eligibility to their spring sport athletes.

The NCAA spring season typically runs from March through early June, while the winter season typically runs from late October or November through the end of March. The 2020 USA Ultimate college season overlaps with both the winter and spring NCAA sports seasons. While much of the early season was completed, the regular season was still cut short, and the college series was unable to begin, eliminating an accessible playing opportunity that is provided annually in

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1 Initial Participation: If more than five (5) years have elapsed between initial participation in any Start Date Event and June 1 of the current year, the player is not eligible.

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April for all college teams. While many college members were able to enjoy some or most of the college season, the ability to play the 2020 season was regionally disparate. Several teams in the northern portions of the country did not play a single game. The USA Ultimate schedule does not line up exactly with the NCAA spring or winter calendars, and the actual ability of our members to play during the 2020 college season was inconsistent based on geographic and other non-competition-related factors.

The College Working Group reviewed the NCAA eligibility decision for guidance. However, the group also recognized there are differences that require an alternate approach and analysis. The USA Ultimate college season does not have significant financial support of universities, roster limits, financial sponsor considerations and sweeping recruiting or scholarship considerations to consider.

With this as background, the College Working Group considered a wide variety of options and distilled them down to focus on three potential solutions:

1. **No Change** (equivalent to treating the college season as an NCAA winter sport);
2. Extending eligibility for all academically eligible rostered players (equivalent to treating the college season as an NCAA spring sport); and
3. Extending eligibility for only those academically eligible rostered players who are in their final year of eligibility (a compromise between the other two extremes).

**Three Potential Options Considered**

**1. No Change** - The College Working Group briefly discussed and agreed that providing no eligibility relief was the least flexible and adaptive option given the state of affairs in the world at this time. While any change could have negative impacts on the administration of the college season, it was the general consensus that not adapting to the environment would not properly serve our members.

Advantages
- Least disruption to future college seasons. The policy behind the current eligibility rules aims to limit high-level experience, post-high school, to only five years to maintain competitive fairness across the division.
- It treats all athletes the same with no perceived unfairness.
- Requires no administrative changes. This maintains continuity in administrative processes and reduces potential error.

Disadvantages
- Is not flexible and is non-responsive
- This decision errs in favor of minimizing the participation of players with the most experience, but does so at the expense of giving these experienced players an opportunity to play that they missed
2. All Academically Eligible Rostered Players Gain an Additional Year of Eligibility - The College Working Group fully deliberated this option. The most significant advantage of this option is it treats all currently rostered athletes the same and is extremely responsive to the current state of affairs. However, this decision has potential long-term negative ramifications that would impact the college division for the next five seasons. The extended negative impact on the administration and fairness of the college division are significant drawbacks that would fundamentally alter the division through the 2025 college season, and perhaps beyond.

Advantages
- This decision is consistent with the NCAA decision regarding spring sports athletes’ eligibility.
- Provides a benefit to the greatest number of members.
- Treats all individual players equally.
- For players who did not play a single event, they would still have their full opportunity to play all five years.

Disadvantages
- Creates a high risk of fundamentally changing the nature of the college division, moving it away from the current experience that so many players love now and will love in the future. Creates a five year window where both fifth and sixth year players continue to exist, and where those players may gravitate towards specific schools and programs for competitive reasons. This creates a risk of developing “super teams” for players and programs that are able to take advantage of this flexibility, as well as their own flexibility and that of certain types of institutions. This starts to look more like the club division than a division for school-based sports and student-athletes.
- Creates greater long-term disparities between types of institutions. (e.g. four-year institutions would not be able to take advantage of this rule.)
- May unfairly advantage those in a stronger socioeconomic situation who are able to take advantage of the potential to pay for a sixth year of school to play ultimate.
- May motivate players to seek loopholes in the academic eligibility rules multiple years into the future. (e.g. seeking out opportunities to join up for multiple years of graduate school.)
- Creates a risk of creating competitive incentives for programs at large universities with graduate programs to focus on recruiting top-end “transfer” talent, rather than focusing on building their programs with incoming talent from the youth divisions.
- Potentially negative impact on incoming freshmen class since additional rosters spots are taken for five years.
- The College Working Group has previously discussed the possibility of changing the eligibility rules to a “five years to play four” and possible “medical redshirt exception”, to mirror college varsity sports. By extending a sixth year of eligibility for all rostered 2020 members, this essentially removes the possibility of exploring this option for another five years.
- From an administrative perspective, it creates potential gray-area appeals stemming from the 2020 season for a period of five years. There could be checking of 2020 rosters through the 2025 college season.

3. Only Extend Eligibility for Academically Eligible Rostered Fifth-Year Athletes - None of the proposed solutions are perfect. However, limiting the eligibility relief to rostered fifth year players provides a response the College Working Group believes is warranted in this situation, and limits the potential long-term disadvantages on the entire division. This compromise not only limits the fallout from 2020 to only 2021, but it also provides athletes in their final year of eligibility one more opportunity for closure to their college ultimate experience.

Advantages
- This is a reaction to the current environment, and provides some action while minimizing unintended long-term consequences.
- Limits potential negative impact and enforceability issues of any decision to a single season.
- May potentially stabilize team leadership for a single transition year. College teams would typically train and transition to 2021’s leadership during spring of 2020, and this solution helps account for the fact teams lost this opportunity.
- Maintains the opportunity for those in their last year of eligibility to have their “moment in the spotlight.” The College Working Group acknowledges the emotional impact a final year of eligibility has on an athlete.
- Strategically focuses the solution on rectifying the biggest challenge: giving players the opportunity to have a final season that otherwise would not exist.

Disadvantages
- Potentially negative impact on incoming freshmen class since rosters spots are taken, but only for one season.
- May unfairly advantage those in a stronger socioeconomic situation who are able to pay for a sixth year of school, but only for one season.
- Four-year institutions would not be able to take advantage of this rule.
- Creates a situation where a limited number of college players have an opportunity for more than five years of post-high school experience. This would unfairly advantage programs that have graduate programs, but only for one season (i.e. 2021).
- From an administrative perspective, there will be gray areas to determine whether a player was on a 2020 roster.
- The College Working Group has previously discussed the possibility of changing the eligibility rules to a “five years to play four” and possible “medical redshirt exception”, to mirror college varsity sports. By extending a sixth year of eligibility for all rostered 2020 members, this essentially removes the possibility of exploring this option for at least one year.
Limitations

There were other suggestions presented to the College Working Group that were not considered here. For example, a petition is circulating requesting academic eligibility requirements be suspended for the 2021 season, in addition to providing start date relief. This is not a reasonable option, as most club sports department policies will not allow non-students to participate in a college season, and those that do allow non-student participation would have an extremely significant advantage.

Without academic eligibility changes, we recognize any eligibility relief we provide does not guarantee a right to participate, and only a portion of those who were granted an additional year of eligibility may have the ability to take advantage of the rule. The eligibility rules, however, are never a guarantee someone can participate; they only allow for the opportunity. Ultimately, this is not a discrepancy we can control.

In addition to limitations from an academic eligibility perspective, any policy that is implemented will only apply to eligible athletes rostered for the 2020 season. The College Working Group does not intend to extend eligibility for all members whose eligibility expired in 2020 (e.g., people who weren’t enrolled at any school, etc.). This, while possible, would extend an unintended windfall that could further imbalance the college division. It also seems unnecessary, as these individuals self-selected out of participating in the college division in 2020.

Recommendation

After reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of the three options, the College Working Group unanimously recommends the extension of eligibility to eligible and rostered players in their final year of college eligibility (Option 3). This option allows all 2020 college players a path for at least one more year of college ultimate, specifically providing fifth-year players with an opportunity to participate in a final season that was otherwise eliminated and minimizes the long-term negative impacts on the division as a whole.

This decision has been made within the context of the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the 2020 college season, and with the assumption that a 2021 college season will take place. As the impact of the pandemic continues to evolve for the country and for USA Ultimate programs and events, USA Ultimate will continue to evaluate those changing circumstances and make decisions with health and safety as its top priority and

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4 We recognize that there are some athletes who were eligible to play, but for one reason or another were not yet rostered in 2020, USA Ultimate will handle these situations on a case by case basis.
its goal to continue to provide high quality playing opportunities for the community into the future.