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# What One College Did to Crack Down on Shoddy Transfer Credits

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By [Brad Wolverton](#)

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cademic advisers at Mt. San Antonio College, a prominent feeder institution for major-college athletics departments, had noticed a disturbing pattern among football players.

Many who had tested into remedial-level mathematics classes were skipping right to college algebra by going elsewhere for their credits. Their coaches were encouraging them to enroll in an online program at Adams State University, a four-year public institution in Colorado.

The Adams State classes cost about three times as much as those at Mt. San Antonio, a 60,000-student community college

in California. But to some players, the expense appeared to be worth it, as they could satisfy their community-college math requirements with one online course, often earning an A or a B.

Last summer Mt. San Antonio stopped counting the online classes. It found that several failed to meet the college's minimum math requirements. College officials also found that Adams State was lax in its oversight of examinations, according to emails obtained by *The Chronicle* in a public-records request.

"Their curriculum seems very weak, and they have testing standards that are not up to our level of rigor," Art Nitta, chair of Mt. San Antonio's department of math and computer science, wrote to Matthew Judd, interim dean of natural sciences, in late June.

Rejecting classes from an accredited institution is an unusual step (Adams State is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, a regional accreditor). Even when colleges spot problems with courses on other campuses, they have incentives to let the credits count. Big-time athletic departments [rely on places like Adams State](#) to help them get players academically eligible to compete.

Plenty of overseers could insist on more rigor in the system.

Accreditors have stepped up their oversight of colleges, but few have dedicated the resources to monitor the fast growth of online classes. (The Higher Learning Commission would not comment for this article, saying that it could not discuss specific institutions.)

Of all the people equipped to catch shoddy online classes, admissions directors would appear to have the most tools. They can tell when students take courses out of sequence and detect other suspicious patterns in transcripts. But they don't always have the time or inclination to challenge the abuses. Athletics-compliance directors, whose jobs include certifying players' eligibility, say they sometimes spot questionable credits but often can't do anything about them.

Ryan Squire, a top athletics-compliance officer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says he raised concerns this year about the grades that certain community-college transfers had received in online Adams State classes. He says he approached his admissions staff and was told that the university didn't have the ability to reject the credits.

“They sort of shrug and say, ‘Well, Adams State is an accredited school, and it’s not for us to say we can’t accept those courses because you guys think there’s some issue,’” Mr. Squire said. “They obviously don’t understand our world quite the way we do.”

## ‘I Really Need the Class’

**M**t. San Antonio’s crackdown led to complaints from football players, some of whom were relying on Adams State’s classes to transfer to major universities. Over the past two years, Mt. San Antonio players have transferred to play at more than a dozen big-time football programs, including Boise State, Texas Tech, and Utah.

In early July one player emailed Mr. Judd, seeking a variance from the new policy.

“I am worried about running out of time or missing the opportunity at Nevada,” the player wrote. “I’ve also moved out here and am missing practices so I really need the class approved.”

Another player said he had paid \$700 for an Adams State algebra class, which he said he had completed in early June. He, too, needed the class to earn a scholarship to a four-year institution.

“I will no longer be able to transfer and play football if this math class is not accepted,” the student emailed Dean Judd. Adding to his confusion, the player continued, the university he planned to attend said it would accept the Adams State course as part of a general-studies degree program.

In an interview Mr. Judd said he was not sure if his students were earning high marks in Adams State courses because of inappropriate help or because the classes were just easy.

“My sense is that the classes are just too easy, and they’re not watching the kids very closely,” he said. “When you’re not watching them closely, you don’t really know what’s going on.”

Adams State officials say they have increased their scrutiny of exams, moving toward an electronic-monitoring system. They have also established new protocols to prevent players from completing courses too quickly.

As online classes have grown in popularity, Mr. Judd said, it has become increasingly difficult to know which colleges offer rigorous courses and which don't. But, he said, that should not deter academic leaders from investigating.

"How do you sift through the ones that are completely legitimate and the ones that are kind of a cash cow for the college, or a Mickey Mouse class for athletes?" Mr. Judd said. "It would be a lot easier if there were more legitimate programs out there."

After Mt. San Antonio stopped accepting the Adams State courses, a member of the California college's governing board expressed concerns, according to emails *The Chronicle* reviewed.

In late July, David K. Hall, who is now president of the college's Board of Trustees, emailed Mr. Judd about a player whose National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility appeared to hinge on Adams State credits.

"So what do we do?" Mr. Hall wrote. "Is there anything that can be done to help the kid save his scholarship at his new college?"

Mr. Judd explained that a Mt. San Antonio policy allows faculty members to determine if outside classes meet the college's graduation requirements.

The Adams State math classes, he said, had "significant topics missing from the syllabus" that were important parts of Mt. San Antonio's math curriculum. In addition, he wrote, Adams State's "lax proctoring policy" does not meet Mt. San Antonio's standards.

Days later, Mt. San Antonio denied variances to the two athletes, according to Mr. Judd's emails. But since Adams State is an accredited institution, Mr. Judd wrote to one student, Mt. San Antonio would count the units; they just couldn't be used to satisfy the college's math requirement for graduation.

Mr. Judd says the college plans to be clearer to students in the future about which online classes will count and which ones won't. He says he has also encouraged athletes to listen to their academic advisers—not their coaches—on academic matters.

"Your coach tells you how to block; your academic counselor tells you what classes to take," he said he tells players. "Stop listening to your football coach about your academics."

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