Today, Walter Harrison is recognized as a national leader in developing NCAA guidelines to make sure that student athletes graduate. How did that come about?

In 2002 he answered a call to get more university presidents directly involved in governing the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He agreed to join the board of directors representing the American East Conference, to which the University of Hartford belongs. “None of my colleagues really wanted to do it and I thought, ‘I have been president for four years and I know something about athletics so it is something I should do,’” he says.

He didn’t know at the time that he was embarking on a road that would eventually lead to him winning the 2015 Gerald R. Ford award, the highest honor given by the NCAA.

The story of how Harrison went from sports scholar and enthusiast to a nationally recognized advocate for giving student athletes quality academic experiences and increasing their graduation rates involves a dose of serendipity.

He recalls his first board meeting and “arcane” discussions on things like “the recruiting season for volleyball.” There was also an announcement that a working group on academics had formed and that anyone willing to come half a day early to the next board meeting could join.
“I came and I discovered this group of people I really admired who were devoted to improving the student-athlete experience,” says Harrison. Two years later this group became the Committee on Academic Performance, or CAP. They asked Harrison to be the chair, a role he would perform for the next decade.

Harrison brought some unique perspectives to the table. He did his PhD dissertation on baseball and has an abiding fascination with sport. Also, in his previous role as vice president for university relations at the University of Michigan, he gained insights into different ways minority students gain access to higher education. Athletic scholarships are part of this and Harrison believed strongly that young men and women who come to play on a team should leave with the best possible education that the institution they are playing for can offer.

He also knew that intercollegiate athletics, especially marquee sports like football and basketball, are big business. Winning teams bring revenue and prestige to their institutions. Alumni are deeply invested in their alma maters’ teams on many different levels. Student athletes themselves, as well as their coaches, come with many different motivations. In other words, debates over how athletic departments should conduct themselves can get thorny.

Harrison appreciates and understands this, but he also brought principled beliefs that guided him. “The only moral reason for a university to sponsor athletics is to further the students’ experience at the university,” said Harrison. “Student athletes should be made to learn, not just get a grade in order to graduate.”

The CAP created rules around academic success among athletes and created a bottom line metric called the Academic Progress Rate, or APR. It is applied to teams, as opposed to individuals, and was developed by data specialists as a way of quantifying progress toward graduation semester-by-semester. Teams that fall below a certain standard can be penalized with ineligibility for post-season play, a stinging sanction that can prompt great ire.

“I’m not by nature a data-driven person,” says Harrison. “I’ve always said, ‘I’m a humanist, just tell me how you feel.’” That probably made him the right person to bring the geeks and the do-gooders together in the pursuit of putting teeth into protecting the primacy of learning even in the hothouse of sports.

This didn’t necessarily make Harrison popular. He remembers one year being asked to address the National Association of Basketball Coaches. “I was there to tell them that we were going to begin to measure the success of their students and that as a coach they were going to get a scoreboard on how well they had done.”

It almost turned into a torches and pitchforks moment. “They got really angry,” he says. “One of them jumped up on a chair and turned around to his colleagues and said, ‘Who is that guy up there? He doesn’t know anything about basketball.’ And they started banging.”

Harrison didn’t feel threatened by having all these highly paid coaches yelling at him, but, he says, “You could feel this wave of animosity coming at you. I just stood there and let the whole thing wash over me.”

“When it died down I said, ‘look this isn’t going to do what you think it’s going to do.’ They ended up putting together a committee to work with me and it all worked out very fine. But change is tough.”

The results are what make Harrison feel good, because they have changed so many lives for the better. National averages show that most sports now have graduation rates for student athletes on par with the general student population. “The only sport lagging is football and that’s getting very close,” he says.

The meaning in raw numbers is that as of today more than 20,000 student athletes have graduated from college who, as compared to statistics for 2004 graduation rates, would not have earned degrees. Thousands more are joining them every year. It is one of Harrison’s proudest achievements and the reason he was recognized with the Gerald R. Ford Award.

Looking ahead, Harrison plans to stay active on the Knight Commission, another organization that works to ensure student athletes are treated equitably. He is nearing the middle of a five-year term on its board. A current challenge is to extend the gains in graduation rates of student athletes to under-resourced schools, many of which lag behind national averages.

The reputation Harrison built as a champion of student athletes has had the added benefit of boosting the University’s profile. “People around the country know about the University of Hartford because of my work with the NCAA,” he concludes.
When President Walter Harrison came to the University of Hartford in 1998 he set out to “build sidewalks.”

It’s a metaphor for how he sees the role of a college president. “You look to see where people want to go. Architects call it ‘desire trails’ or ‘desire lines,’” he says. “Then you figure out how to help them get there. It is probably the perfect definition of a leader.”

This image conveyed by the then new University president involves creating connections. Throughout his 19-year presidency, Harrison made it his business to forge bonds between people, especially those of different races, religions, and walks of life. He cites his multi-cultural upbringing as having helped him see that what people have in common is stronger than what divides them.

At UHart, Harrison found an institution that, in his words, “had a strong sense of community, was welcoming, and was a place where people cared about one another.” It was a good fit for the man who insists that everyone call him Walt.

Early on Walt launched a student recruitment drive that boosted enrollment from 4,000 to 4,800 by the end of his first decade in office. (Enrollment in 2016–17 was 6,737.) He made bringing in minority and first-generation college students a priority.

To fulfill this priority, Walt says he and the admission team looked in the direction of neighborhoods with populations traditionally underserved by higher education. They paid special attention to places where African Americans, up and down the socio-economic ladder, live.

“You can look at zip codes and look at what the demographics are, whether the high schools are growing or getting smaller,” says Walt. “When you locate a high school, you recruit a few students. They have a good experience here and then they tell their friends and that information is shared with their friends’ siblings and so on.”

Using population data to guide resources for attracting students isn’t news to people today, but “it wasn’t very common 19 years ago,” he says.

The fruits of that strategy are evident today. With a student body that is about 38 percent African American, 25 percent Jewish, and nearly 5 percent Muslim (thanks in part to international students), the University has one of the most diverse campuses in the Northeast. “We tied ourselves to a growing segment of the population and are reaping all the benefits.”

During his first decade, the University raised $175 million in a capital campaign and built or significantly renovated more than a dozen buildings, including a residence hall, major academic buildings, and student life centers. Walt also shepherded the conversion of an abandoned Cadillac dealership near campus into the Mort and Irma Handel Performing Arts Center, an action expected to anchor a wider urban redevelopment plan in the North End of Hartford.

Along the way UHart became the first private university in the country with two public magnet schools on campus. And Walt says he set out to methodically build the University’s reputation for