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The Chronicle Review

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Division III: Too Big for Its Own Good

By DOUGLAS C. BENNETT

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As this year's March Madness fades into memory, let us consider the world of NCAA Division III athletics, which is facing a crisis.

Sitting in Division I's shadow, Division III basketball played its final four on March 16-17. Far from the news-media glare, but with a great deal of passion from players and fans, Amherst College won the men's final, and DePauw University won the women's final — a first for each institution. An occasional Division III basketball player may dream of a professional career, but that's usually a reverie from which he or she quickly returns to focus on academic work and preparation for life after college.

Since the National Collegiate Athletic Association created the divisional structure, in 1973, when Division III comprised 243 institutions, it has grown substantially, with additional colleges and universities still seeking membership. Today it comprises 420 members, making it much larger than either Division I or II, which have 326 and 290 members, respectively.

The sheer size of Division III creates a host of problems. For example, opportunities to participate in postseason national-championship tournaments are harder to come by. Further, among Division III members, it is increasingly difficult to reach agreement on a common set of rules for organizing competition in a way that feels fair and appropriate to all. Year after year, at the annual NCAA convention, there are heated votes in the Division

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III business meeting about issues on which passions run high. Whether and how to allow practice or competition in nontraditional seasons, like spring football, is one perennial point of debate. Whether to allow redshirting — the practice of letting students, usually freshmen, practice with a team for one season without letting them compete, while they finish their physical maturation and learn the team's playbook — is another.

Beneath those issues runs a fault line in the way division members think about how to square intercollegiate athletics with the mission of higher education.

What both unifies Division III and sets it apart from Divisions I and II is a commitment to treat athletics as an extracurricular activity instead of as a moneymaker for the institution or as a student's primary responsibility. Division III colleges offer no athletics scholarships, a policy that helps ensure that their student-athletes understand that education comes first.

What divides Division III are differences in participation rates. At my institution, Earlham College, over 25 percent of our 1,200 students participate in intercollegiate athletics, in the 16 sports (eight men's and eight women's) that we sponsor. Other colleges in the North Coast Athletic Conference, in which we compete, have similar rates of participation. Quite a number of other conferences in Division III also have participation rates across all their members that are 15 percent or higher. On the other side of the divide, many other institutions in Division III see fewer than 5 percent of their students participate in intercollegiate athletics.

It is precisely that difference in participation rates that leads Division III colleges to approach intercollegiate athletics in different ways. There are essentially two approaches, both legitimate, but so incompatible that one division should not try to embrace them both.

When participation rates are low, colleges can safely encourage their athletes to focus on sports, giving them the intense and vigorous athletics experience those students seek. They can do so without unduly influencing the entire campus, because of the relatively small number of students who participate in athletics programs. Such an intense focus has little consequence for the rest of the campus.

At colleges with high participation rates, though, where sports are a common activity among students, officials want their athletes to participate in other activities as well: art, music, theater, community service, politics, and the like.

Take the issue of nontraditional sports seasons. A college with few student-athletes should allow, even encourage, football players to do weight training under a coach's supervision year-round. They should let the players practice together in the spring, and those practices should include use of the ball, equipment, and coaches' supervision. Scrimmages against other colleges — even

occasional games — should be permitted in the spring. Such practices make for a fuller, richer football experience for the relatively small number who are ready for it and seek it.

But colleges with many athletes want to minimize or even forbid nontraditional seasons. If their students are encouraged, and expected, to participate in other campus activities, those extra playing seasons pose a big problem. Permitting off-season training, practice, or competition would discourage student-athletes from having any other extracurricular activity besides their chosen sport. Even if participation in a nontraditional season was officially voluntary, coaches and teammates would surely apply enough pressure that it would *feel* required. Such increased focus on sports would discourage a wider, more-rounded experience for students.

The same difference in philosophy applies to the issue of redshirting. At colleges where the emphasis is on a full and vigorous athletics experience for a few, it makes sense for a student not to have to use a year of eligibility if he or she will not get any playing time. At institutions with many student-athletes, making sometimes difficult choices among activities is an integral part of the student experience.

The matter of postseason play is contentious as well, for the same reasons. Colleges with many student-athletes want to keep the emphasis on the regular season while accommodating only a short postseason. Institutions with fewer athletes, though, want more opportunities to compete in order to provide their students with a more intensive athletics experience.

There are other such conflicts within Division III, and most of them have common roots in the wide disparities in participation rates at member institutions. One faction wants to adopt certain Division I practices — redshirting, for example — that are often what good athletics requires. But for the traditionalists, those practices don't fit with the philosophy on which Division III was founded.

We need to affirm that both approaches are legitimate. Both should be able to find a place within the NCAA. We already have two divisions that allow athletics scholarships. Why shouldn't we also have two divisions that forbid athletics scholarships but have otherwise different approaches to fitting intercollegiate athletics into the undergraduate experience?

Until recently the NCAA has resisted splitting Division III, but now there appears to be a greater willingness to consider the change. The Division III leadership has promised to propose models for either a new division or a subdivision at the next convention, in January.

Mutual frustrations have been building for many years. We will find harmony only if we divide Division III into two divisions or subdivisions, each able to make rules that accord with its own

approach.

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