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Division III Seeks Harmony Between Field and Classroom

By [BILL PENNINGTON](#)

The [N.C.A.A.](#)'s Division III, a group of mostly small colleges that prohibit athletic scholarships, has long been viewed as a model of the amateur ideal. But rampant growth has swelled the membership to 420, making it by far the National Collegiate Athletic Association's biggest division, with enrollments ranging from 400 to 40,000.

The diversity has bred discord, and now the alliance is preparing to split in two, a recognition of how fractured the membership is over issues like money, national championships and the appropriate mission of athletics in higher education.

The dispute would be more suited to the major college sports landscape, except that Division III is home to many of the nation's top small colleges, and that brings an even bigger stake to the debate: the impact a split could have on academic rankings used by prospective students and their parents.

The result could be a new Division IV or a sub-division with a lesser designation. At many Division III institutions, athletics is a leading admissions recruiting tool that has been credited with raising retention rates. Any real or perceived de-emphasis of sports could diminish applicant pools or cause prospective students to decline admission offers — major factors used in the powerful U.S. News and World Report rankings.

Already, conferences are aligning themselves in various coalitions, although some prominent conferences involving athletic and academic elites, like Williams College in Massachusetts and [Washington University](#) in St. Louis, seem resistant to change. Hundreds of colleges could face awkward decisions, choosing between athletic or academic peers.

"It's going to be like a middle school dance where everyone is watching to see who moves from one end of the gym to the other first," said Dick Rasmussen, the chief executive of the University Athletic Association, a group of eight academically respected institutions that have also won dozens of Division III national championships. "Once you start to see who is dancing with whom, the philosophical underpinnings to this whole thing might get stretched.

"Who is where might become more important than what is where. Then, what happens when someone you didn't want to come to the dance ends up dancing on your side of the gym?"

The schism in Division III has been apparent for more than a decade with the camps divided over how zealously institutions should pursue nationally prominent, winning athletic programs. Finally, at the group's national convention last month, its leadership formally recognized a reformation movement by establishing two committees to recommend the models for a split.

“The status quo in Division III is not a workable option,” said John Fry, the chairman of the Division III President’s Council and the president of Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. “We must have fundamental change in the structure of the division. The tent has been stretched far enough.”

Fry said examples of how the division might be reorganized would be revealed later this year for debate at the next national meeting, in January. A vote deciding how, or whether, to split the division would follow in January 2009.

Which Division III institutions would go where is unresolved. But tentative concepts on reorganization were proposed at the convention.

One division would require institutions to play a large number of sports, perhaps as many as 18, and would restrict athletic departments in the sensitive areas of recruiting, the lengths of playing seasons and number of off-season practices. The other division would be more permissive in its recruiting, practice and competition rules, and require as few as 6 to 10 sports so that members could more easily focus on high-profile sports.

These models reflect the philosophical rift between the old guard — private, traditional Division III institutions — and newer, often larger, publicly funded schools with a different approach to athletics. Typical examples from the differing camps include:

¶The [University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point](#), a state institution, with an enrollment of 8,800 and 16 varsity sports. Stevens Point has been particularly successful in a few sports, having won two of the past three Division III men’s basketball championships. The Stevens Point women’s basketball team won the national championship five years ago and made the Final Four two years after that. The women’s ice hockey team has been to the N.C.A.A. Final Four two out of the past three years. The baseball team was recently ranked fourth in the nation in a preseason poll, and the men’s swim team also went to the N.C.A.A. Final Four last year.

¶Colby College, a founding member of Division III from Waterville, Me., with 1,871 students and 32 sports. The college is competitive but not dominant in what is by far Division III’s most restrictive league, the New England Small College Athletic Conference, which, for instance, does not let its football teams play in the postseason. Colby has abundant on-campus athletic facilities and one team national title, in women’s crew in 2003.

But it will not be as simple as segregating institutions with diverse athletic or institutional outlooks. A look the current Division III men’s basketball rankings reveals how messy breaking up might be. Stevens Point is ranked No. 2, but one of Colby’s conference partners and another small institution, Amherst College in Massachusetts, is the top-ranked team.

If the division splits along the lines expected, Amherst would probably go with its conference members to the traditional category and would forfeit playing against the most competitive, national-level basketball programs and the spotlight that goes with it.

Now multiply the angst of that choice by 30 sports and hundreds of institutions.

While it is a given that the New England colleges will stick together — they are among the most acclaimed small colleges in the country — a split of Division III would probably break up other athletic conferences and splinter the academic benefits by association that those groupings currently yield.

Talk of reorganization has already caused public- and private-sector rifts, been likened to class warfare and stranded in the middle of the debate other institutions who wonder why change is necessary at all.

At many Division III colleges, including the top academic institutions, varsity athletes make up a third or more of the student body. Division III coaches, like their major-college brethren in Division I, spend countless hours recruiting athletes. Recruiting top students to a Division IV could be more difficult.

“My coaches have already told me, ‘Forget it, it would be such a negative to be in a sub-division,’ ” said Ronald D. Liebowitz, the president of Middlebury College. “Personally, I doubt students would stop choosing Williams, Amherst or Middlebury because we’re in a Division IV. But I know others feel differently.”

At Cortland State, a campus of 6,000 in the [State University of New York](#) system, 700 recruited varsity athletes are on campus. It would seem unlikely for Cortland State to join the more restrictive N.C.A.A. classification expected. “We look at our coaches as admissions officers,” said Erik J. Bitterbaum, Cortland State’s president. “Over 70 percent of our student body played high school sports. You have to be very careful how you treat athletics. We would never do anything to create the impression we’re giving it less than our full support.”

In recent years, the traditionalists, led by the North Coast Athletic and Centennial conferences, who have allies in the Midwest Conference, the Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and the New England conference, have been associates in a reform movement. More than 20 people interviewed said at least 150 institutions would join them.

“We are not lone voices calling out in the wild any longer,” said Richard J. Cook, the president of Allegheny College, a North Coast Athletic Conference member. “A lot of people now see the wisdom of like-minded institutions working and playing together.” But predicting unanimity among conferences and even within institutions is hazardous.

Lisa Melendy, the acting athletic director at Williams College, said that at last month’s convention she was seated with several other athletic directors from her New England conference who are viewed as reform-minded traditionalists.

“When the leadership started telling us about the inevitability of a split, we all looked around and said, ‘Who decided we had to split?’ ” Melendy said. “We like the way things are. It’s a big group, but we can handle it. I like the diversity, instead of just playing the same New England or Eastern schools.

“When push comes to shove, I still think the membership won’t want to split.”

Institutions ultimately will choose which category to join, and a tussle over the grouping that gets to call itself Division III has already started. The traditionalists say they were there first and should remain. The nonreformers say they did not force the changes and that the traditionalists can go to Division IV if they are

unhappy. Majority may rule.

Some, like officials at Williams, a top-ranked academic institution with perhaps Division III's best athletic program, worry about the stigma of being associated with a Division IV.

"At the convention, there were people walking around saying, 'I'll never join a Division IV,' " Melendy said. "No one wants to be in Division IV. The name has such a substandard sound. It sounds like you've been demoted."

At the American Southwest Conference, a grouping of 16 colleges in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas, Amy Carlton, the commissioner, wondered why the proposed models for a split would not take into account the size of an institution's endowment.

"Don't these more restrictive proposals come down to how deep your pockets are?" Carlton said. "We might want to play in the more restrictive group, but we don't have the big endowments those Eastern schools have. When you've got 600 students, how are you supposed to pay for the extra sports teams that are required?"

Ultimately, the presidents of colleges and universities will make the decisions on how, and whether, to segregate Division III.

"It will sort itself out because those leaders will look for affinities, not differences," said Myles Brand, the N.C.A.A. president. "It's a natural evolution."

No one wants to tackle the prickly subject of what to call the new divisions. A Division IV could be avoided with a Division III-A and Division III-AA. Others have proposed using proper names for the divisions. And some administrators suggested there would be enough discord that the N.C.A.A. should be prepared not just for a Division IV but also a Division V.

The outcome is too hard to predict.

"What if they give us the models and no one decides to leave?" Carlton said. "What if 420 people pick one division? What do they do then?"

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