

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

**September 29, 2009**

Balancing Act May Help Division II Define Itself

By [KATIE THOMAS](#)

University presidents in Division II of the [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#) sometimes joke that they experience “ticker envy,” a yearning for the visibility that comes with a spot on the [ESPN](#) ticker.

For years, colleges and universities in Division II were defined by what they were not. They were not Division I, with its outsize athletics budgets and national news media attention. They were not Division III, with its reputation for rigorous academics and a ban on athletic scholarships.

“We didn’t know who we were,” said Chuck Ambrose, the president of Pfeiffer University in North Carolina and a former chairman of the Division II Presidents Council. “We didn’t know where we were headed. We suffered from a middle-child syndrome.”

Now, members of Division II say they hope they have found their niche by offering a haven from the kind of big-time college athletics that are increasingly seen as overly commercial and exploitative. Under a proposal expected to be approved at the N.C.A.A. convention in January, Division II members plan to shorten the seasons in 10 sports, as well as cut back practice time in football. Supporters say the move sets Division II apart by heading in the opposite direction of Division I, which in recent years has lengthened the football season and has allowed basketball teams to play more games. Trimming seasons will ease the stress on students by having them miss fewer classes and giving them more time to participate in campus life. But skeptics say the cuts are motivated by the desire to cut finances.

“I think it’s 95 percent fueled by the economy,” said Kelly Higgins, the athletics director at Fort Lewis College in Colorado. Higgins is concerned that the loss of home basketball games — and the thousands of dollars in revenue they bring — will negate potential savings.

In addition to [reducing the number of competitions](#) in basketball, soccer, baseball and other sports, the proposal would also reduce the seasons in four sports by allowing students to report to school about a week later than they currently do. Football would not lose any games, but players would begin their preseason practice one week later. The proposal would also establish a weeklong “dead period” around Christmas in which athletes could not participate in practices or

games. [Division I is also considering schedule cuts](#), although they are more limited. A proposal sponsored by the Atlantic Coast Conference would cut one game from the women's basketball season, and a similar proposal is in the works for men's basketball, although it first must be reviewed by Division I's board of directors.

Bob Fortosis, the athletics director at Eckerd College in Florida and a member of the Division II management council, acknowledged that the Division II proposal was rooted in a desire to cut costs, but that the motivation was also to give students more time on campus. Division II's effort to redefine itself dates to the summer of 2005, when about 150 university presidents and chancellors met in Orlando, Fla., to discuss why several members were leaving for Division I. They hired a marketing expert, devised a slogan — “I chose Division II” — and wrote a positioning platform focused on highlighting the balance that Division II offered between athletics and academics.

“There's some authenticity to what's happening in Division II that you may not see at some universities,” said Tim Selgo, the athletics director at Grand Valley State in Michigan and the chairman of the Division II management council. “Yes, we play highly competitive athletics, but we don't want our student-athletes' time consumed by their intercollegiate athletic experience.”

Even so, Division II athletes spend nearly as much time playing sports as their counterparts in Division I, [according to a 2006 N.C.A.A. survey of athletes](#). While Division I men's basketball players spent an average of 36.8 hours per week on athletic activities, for example, their counterparts in Division II spent 35 hours a week on the same activities. In football, Division II players spent more time on athletics, an average of 37.1 hours a week compared to the 35.3 hours by Division I players in the Football Championship Subdivision. (The Division I Football Bowl Subdivision, however, logs 44.8 hours a week.) That commitment did not surprise Ronnye Nelson, a running back at Georgia's Valdosta State University, the 2007 Division II national champions.

“I think that it's all the same,” he said. “Football is football.”

Nelson's path to Valdosta was not as simple as the division's slogan implies. A star quarterback from Albany, Ga., Nelson said he spoke to several Division I universities but that interest waned after he tore his anterior cruciate ligament in his senior year. In the end, Nelson decided to attend Valdosta because it was close to home and “they win a lot.”

The decision was more straightforward for Maddie Dickinson, a junior goalkeeper at Seattle Pacific University, the 2008 Division II soccer champions.

“D-I has a great reputation and it would be great to play there, but it definitely wasn't what I was about,” said Dickinson, who is from Vancouver, Wash., a three-hour drive from Seattle. “It was

about where I was comfortable, and where home was.”

Like every division of the N.C.A.A., Division II has seen its numbers grow in the past decade as institutions migrated from the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, a body similar to the N.C.A.A., and as some Division III universities moved to Division II. Between 2000 and 2009, membership in Division II grew to 288 active members from 264, a 9 percent increase. However, during the same period, several Division II members moved to Division I, which has grown 5 percent since 2000. That number is considered artificially low because during that period Division I issued two moratoria on new members. The University of Northern Colorado moved to Division I after an analysis revealed the university was spending nearly as much on sports as comparable Division I universities.

“Division II status tends to kind of feed into that sense of being almost second class,” said Kay Norton, the university president. “I think there is a connection, I really do.” This year’s freshman class was 6 percent larger than in 2007, the year the university became a full member of Division I. Officials say many factors contribute to enrollment, but “we do have a higher profile,” Norton said.

Norton said she saw Division II’s rebranding efforts as positive. But when asked whether perceptions had shifted, she said, “Not yet.”

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |
