

April 17, 2020

VIA EMAIL

Kevin Lennon [Vice President of Division I]
National Collegiate Athletic Association
P.O. Box 6222
Indianapolis, IN 46206

Dear Mr. Lennon:

This letter is to provide comment to the NCAA with respect to the findings of LEAD1's Federated Sports Working Group (working group), which, over the past several months, explored the possibility of a regionalized scheduling model for Division I college sports. As you know, LEAD1 is the association that represents the athletics directors of the 130 member universities of the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). This past fall, LEAD1 created the working group comprised of selected member athletics directors as well as other senior athletics staff to evaluate whether certain sports could move to regionalized competition. The working group explored both regular season and postseason scheduling as well as possible cost-savings measures to increase overall student-athlete welfare.

Executive Summary

While we created this working group months before the COVID-19 pandemic with an eye toward exploring potential travel efficiencies due to the current conference geographic footprints, perhaps now, more than ever, due to the crisis, we believe that a potential "federated sports" model warrants immediate consideration given the uncertainty that now exists with respect to finances in our industry.

Thus, with the exception of football and men's and women's basketball, we would like to discuss a national scheduling effort for all Division I college sports where the NCAA, institutions, and conferences could collaborate and coordinate using scheduling optimization technology. This collaboration process would increase overall travel efficiencies by identifying nearby institutions to play each other, while, at the same time, allowing institutions to maintain independence in creating their own schedules to the extent they desire. As explained below, we would also like to explore the possibility of athletics departments having an increased role in this process.

Working Group Goals and Process

With respect to the possibility of regionalized competition, the working group considered five main goals including: (1) as aforementioned, reducing travel costs given current conference geographic footprints and uncertainly with respect to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) preserving non-revenue sports given the current financial climate (i.e., arms race) in college sports; (3) increasing student-athlete welfare by minimizing missed class time, reducing travel time for student-athletes so they will not be as tired from travel, allowing for possible increased number of scholarships and the possibility of institutions affording to sponsor more sports; (4) allowing for greater flexibility with respect to institutional scheduling; and (5) creating greater rivalries and fan interest by playing more local teams.

The working group analyzed the practicalities of regionalized competition within the framework of one fall sport (women's volleyball) and spring sport (baseball) [these sports were chosen as initial "test" sports; football and men and women's basketball were excluded from consideration due to respect for existing broadcasting relationships]. In doing so, the working group gathered feedback from their respective coaches and administrators as well as various coaches associations and scheduling experts both with respect to the regular season and postseason. For both sports, the working group considered the possibility of creating bracketed regions (based on geography) for the entire regular season and then either having "traditional" conference tournaments or regionalized tournaments (with the possibility of multiple "tiers" (such as upper and lower tiers) with respect to the postseason.

Some of the main considerations with respect to such regionalized competition included: (1) seeding the postseason tournament (e.g., depending upon the region, how to boost RPI; how would a team qualify for the conference tournament; would there be a new rating scale that values in-region opponents; would both tiers (upper and lower) each qualify for the postseason tournament); (2) maintaining the benefits of the current conference structure, which would allow certain conference rivalries to continue (plus some conference structures currently do not require air travel); (3) ensuring that schools that are more dispersed in terms of geography have enough teams to play in a regionalized model; and (4) with respect to outdoor sports (i.e., baseball), considering the implications of weather and climate (possible increased travel and operating costs for outdoor sports because regionalized competition may not be possible in northern climates in the early spring).

Working Group Suggestion: Discussing the Creation of a National “Opt-in” Scheduling Model

To maximize the number of travel efficiencies during the regular season, with the exception of football and men and women’s basketball, the working group would like to discuss a national scheduling model (where schools can choose to “opt-in” to the extent they desire) with respect to both conference and non-conference scheduling and the continuation of “traditional” conference tournaments with respect to the postseason for all Division I college sports. To do so, the NCAA, conferences and institutions could coordinate their existing scheduling practices in order to build multiple schedules in one single environment. The working group has found that the process of building schedules in the same environment has already been employed for certain sports across several conferences in the industry.

Moreover, given that institutions generally prefer to independently build their own schedules, this process would serve to provide information with regard to where certain travel efficiencies (i.e., potential travel costs and time savings) exist and then based upon that information, as aforementioned, schools could collaborate and create their own schedule to the extent they desire. At the same time, because coaches typically schedule games based upon their preexisting relationships with other coaches, and given the challenges that now exist due to the COVID-19 crisis (coupled with the already existing need for greater scheduling efficiencies), we would like to explore the possibility of athletics departments having an increased role in this process. This would ultimately provide institutions with greater oversight in the scheduling process (as opposed to coaches merely relying on preexisting relationships).

In this vein, overlaying multiple conferences (and sports) in the same space would increase the number of travel efficiencies. As an example, if a university (for any particular sport) located in the Mid-Atlantic traveled to play an institution in the Midwest on a Friday, it would make sense from an efficiency standpoint for that Mid-Atlantic university to play another (a second) Midwest institution that Sunday. If, however, the second Midwest institution had already scheduled a game that Sunday (whether conference or non-conference), that efficiency opportunity (a second game on the same trip) would be lost.

On the other hand, an alternative model, such as a strict form of regionalized bracketing, which, as mentioned, the working group considered, could create unintended consequences such as the possibility of increased travel costs for individual schools. For example, the two closest Big Ten institutions to Indiana University are the University of Illinois and Purdue University, however, both are in separate football divisions within the conference. Therefore, a model that is too specific (with regard to geographical lines of demarcation) would not necessarily allow for the closest institutions to maximize the number of playing opportunities.

Within the framework of a national scheduling model, seeding the postseason would also be critical. Rating Percentage Index (RPI), a metric used to rank sports teams based upon a team’s wins, losses and strength of schedule has been primarily used for seeding purposes. As more data has become available (industry-wide), however, there are additional metrics that could help account for any disparities in scheduling. For example, current ranking metrics exist (not commonly employed due to the reliance on RPI) that could compare one team’s 25 wins and six losses with another team’s 20 wins and 11 loss record and algorithmically decide the “better” team based upon available data. At the same time, scheduling optimization technology could also be used to examine travel efficiencies in the postseason.

Conclusion

In short, there is a critical need to decrease collective operating costs among all sports. Maximizing efficiencies in scheduling, while providing individual institutions with the ultimate decision in creating their own schedules, would provide an opportunity for the college sports industry to reduce meaningful costs (without necessarily decreasing opportunities for student-athletes). In this regard, because institutions are now considering their fall schedules and due to the evolving nature of the pandemic, we recommend prompt engagement with the NCAA, conferences and all institutions as this is a very time-sensitive topic. We thank our co-chairs and their committee members for this effort on this issue

Sincerely,

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