And Then There Were Three: The NCAA’s Struggle for Reorganization and the Emergence of Division III Athletics

Matthew Katz1 and Chad Seifried2

1Miami University; 2Louisiana State University

It was a cold January morning in Chicago when delegates of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) arrived at the Palmer House for the 1973 Annual Convention. After a long day of debate, Ross Smith stood up to offer words that had a resounding effect on the immediate and future course of the NCAA. Smith, a long-time athletic administrator from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and president of the Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC; 1972–1974) was notable because his bloc of roughly 200 institutions determined the fate of a proposal addressing large-scale reorganization. In his statement to the Convention, Smith suggested that he “would like to make it very clear, that we subscribe to the goals of reorganization and to the need for a plan to achieve these goals.” However, Smith concluded, “this plan does not in our opinion provide an acceptable process whereby the entire membership of the NCAA can achieve its respective goals.” Smith’s comments essentially sealed the fate of a revised two-divisional proposal on reorganization and shifted the future development of the NCAA and its member institutions toward a three-divisional format.1

The largest vote in NCAA history took place minutes after Smith’s speech concluded and predictably the reorganization proposal was defeated. By a count of 218 (i.e., for) to 224 (i.e., against), the vote failed to receive the necessary two-thirds majority and the question of reorganization remained unsolved. For the next seven months, NCAA leadership worked to redraft their failed proposal and to gain the support of the collective membership. In August of 1973, a special NCAA session was convened and the issue of reorganization was realized through the addition of 148 “for” votes, which surpassed the necessary two-thirds majority needed for passing the proposal.2 The information below describes the story of the largest and possibly the most substantial reorganization attempted by the NCAA and features how revenue, competition, and self-determination drove member schools to seek out a new governance arrangement that allowed them to operate without the checks and balances offered by the previous NCAA organizational arrangement. Specifically, the two proposals in 1973 and the men who drafted them are examined to...
understand how a group of diverse institutions came together to transform the NCAA into its present three-divisional format. Finally, this review centers on the dialogue and influences NCAA members shared to attain their ambitions for three divisions and the rationale for why that was the next logical step in intercollegiate athletics.

Many previous scholarly efforts have identified the reorganization of 1973 as a pivotal or watershed moment in the history of the NCAA but none have offered a detailed analysis about the path of that reorganization effort. As an example, works such as Allen Sack and Ellen Staurowsky’s *College Athletes for Hire*, John Thelin’s *Games Colleges Play*, Murray Sperber’s *College Sports Inc.*, and Andrew Zimbalist’s *Unpaid Professionals* traced the roots of modern college sports corruption to the reorganization effort of 1973, but most of their focus centered on the various proposals addressing the implementation of renewable scholarships and evolving freshman eligibility and admission standards. As other notable works like Michael Oriard’s *Bowled Over*, Ron Smith’s *Pay for Play*, and John Sayle Watterson’s *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* also recognized the importance of the NCAA’s general reorganization in 1973. However, they provided little specific discussion about the reorganization effort. The story below will serve to explain in more detail how the 1973 reorganization occurred and how it reflected the growing differences between schools.

**Early Steps and Outside Influences Toward Reorganization**

When the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) was officially formed in 1906, its stated goal was to “protect young people from the dangerous and exploitive athletics practices of the time.” Changing its name to the NCAA in 1910, the organization held its first championships in 1921. Subsequent championships were formed in which all participating members of the NCAA were grouped together into one large playing field. For roughly 50 years, all participating institutions regardless of their size, budget, or other considerations remained in this single large “Pangaea-like” division. Although budgets and other considerations prevented competition from ever being truly equal, legislative and structural power was balanced, as all institutions shared control of each other’s behaviors and activities.

As the 20th century reached its midpoint, the growing chasm between small and large schools resulted from several significant historical developments of the era to create severe fragmentation within the NCAA. For example, with the resumption of intercollegiate athletics following World War II, many of the land-grant institutions across the United States enjoyed a rapid growth in enrollment and funding. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (i.e., the G.I. Bill) provided financial compensation for returning servicemen to attend college. Returning veterans accounted for roughly 70 percent of all male enrollments following the end of World War II; the national enrollment in higher education increased from 1.3 million to over 2 million after WWII. The 1959 *Annual Report from the Administrator for Veteran Affairs* uniquely highlights the 1947 enrollment surge attributed to 1,208,952 veterans, which represented seven out of every ten men in college. Suitably, Sidney Burrell concluded that the GI Bill led to “the most important