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EDITORIAL STAFF

Brian Hendrickson
Executive Editor

Amy Wimmer Schwarb
Editor

Michelle Brutlag Hosick
Associate Director

Greg Johnson
Associate Director

Brian Burnsed
Assistant Director

DESIGN

Arnel Reynon
Art Director

Amanda Goehrlert
Designer

Channon Seifert
Designer

Sport Graphics
3423 Park Davis Circle
Indianapolis, Indiana 46235
317/899-7000 • www.sportg.com

PHOTOGRAPHY

NCAA Photos
1553 Platte St., Ste. 300
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800/745-3211 • www.NCAAPhotos.com

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Student-athletes' voices must be heard at all levels

For the first 83 years of the NCAA's history, the Association was officially governed solely by university leaders and athletics administrators. Decisions about the well-being of student-athletes were made with little to no interest in the opinions of the student-athletes themselves.

LETTER FROM THE
PRESIDENT

Times have changed. In 1989, the year the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee was established, the general feeling that student-athletes should be involved in the decisions that govern their lives came to a head. NCAA leadership realized it was time for student-athletes to gain the influence they deserved (see page 112).

Today, the student-athlete voice is an essential part of our processes. Who better to consult on student-athlete welfare than student-athletes? Various models across higher education use the bright minds of students to provide perspective on the issues that affect their lives. We have grown accustomed to seeing students on our boards and in our university governance processes. In my experience as a university president, better decisions were always made when students' voices were included. I always sought the unique and right-minded insights that students continuously brought to the important conversations.



We need to do a better job of cultivating two-way communications with student-athletes, who garner and provide meaningful input that can be put into practice at the highest levels of NCAA governance. But this is not a task reserved for intercollegiate athletics at the national level. The student-athlete

voice also demands prominence at the conference and campus levels. Only a collaborative effort from all three of these entities will produce the kind of influence that student-athletes should have.

On the national level, the student-athlete voice has an active role in Divisions II and III. Every summer, the Division II SAAC has a summit with its Management Council, where student-athletes have an opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns. The Division III SAAC has two votes on its Management Council. Both of these SAACs also debate actively on the floor of the annual NCAA Convention.

In Division I, we need to re-examine how the student-athlete voice is heard, and the Division I Steering Committee on Governance is taking this issue very seriously. The committee is actively working to strengthen the voices of student-athletes to produce more tangible influence than the current Division I SAAC structure affords. There are examples to follow from Divisions II and III, and we must be sure that the voices of Division I student-athletes are woven into the fabric of the division's governance processes. That goal is, quite simply, imperative.

As I travel to campuses across the country, the thoughtfulness and sincere engagement of the student-athletes never ceases to impress me. While their high level of interest and knowledge surely isn't shocking, their broad sense of what's good for intercollegiate athletics is truly invigorating.

Student-athletes have on-the-ground experiences that give them the perception to see the big picture through a refreshing lens of common sense. We talk frequently about our mission to help student-athletes succeed in the classroom, on the field and in life. But to do that effectively, the voices of the student-athletes whose lives we are working to improve need to be taken to heart.

Mark Emmert
NCAA President