# 2026 NCAA DIVISION I WOMEN'S BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP
# PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES FOR ESTABLISHING THE BRACKET

There are three phases in the process:

I. ***Select*** the 37 at-large teams;
II. ***Seed*** the field of 68 teams; and
III. ***Place*** the teams into the championship bracket.

## General Principles for Selection, Seeding and Bracketing

The basketball committee will abide by the following principles:

- A committee member ("member") shall not be present during discussions regarding the selection or seeding of a team the individual represents as an institutional or conference administrator.

- At no point in the process shall a member vote for a team the individual represents as an institutional or conference administrator.

- A member shall not answer questions about the team the individual represents, except for factual questions (e.g., dates of injuries, status of injured players). A conference administrator is permitted to answer general questions (i.e., relative strengths of teams within a conference) about teams in the conference the individual represents. An athletics administrator is permitted to discuss other teams in the individual's conference only when asked.

- All votes will be by secret ballot.

- Principles must be followed by the committee during selection, seeding and bracketing of the championship field. **Selection, seeding and bracketing principles are not considered in priority order.** All principles must be adhered to throughout each of the three processes. The committee will make every effort to apply "additional considerations", provided they do not cause a violation of the principles.

Among the resources available to the committee are complete box scores, game summaries and notes, various computer rankings, head-to-head results, chronological results, Division I results, non-conference results, home and away results, results in the last twelve games, rankings, polls, injured and available/unavailable reports and the coaches' regional advisory committee rankings.

***The NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Principles and Procedures for Establishing the Bracket document is included in the comprehensive review of the Division I Women's Basketball Championship, conducted annually by the Division I Women's Basketball Committee. This document was approved by the Division I Women's Basketball Committee, August 2025 and will be in effect for the 2026 championship.***

## I. Selecting At-Large Teams

The committee shall select the 37 best teams to fill the at-large berths.

To be selected as an at-large team, a team must have an overall record of .500 or above.

There is no limit on the number of teams the committee may select from one conference.

### Procedures for Selecting At-Large Teams

1. Prior to selection weekend, each committee member will receive an "initial ballot" comprised of two columns listing all eligible Division I teams in alphabetical order.

   Each committee member will submit the ballot by a designated time on the first full day of the selection meeting.

2. In the first column, each committee member shall identify not more than 24 teams that, in that member's opinion, should be at-large selections in the tournament based upon play to date, regardless of whether the team could eventually represent its conference as the automatic qualifier.

3. In the second column, each committee member shall identify all teams that should receive consideration for at-large berths. There is no minimum or maximum limit in the second column.

4. A member need not vote for a team that has earned automatic qualification at the time the initial ballot is submitted.

5. Any team receiving all but three of the eligible votes in Column 1 shall move into the tournament field as an at-large selection.

6. The committee will form an "at-large nomination board" consisting of an alphabetical listing of all teams that:

   a. Received more than four votes in either of the columns of the initial ballot but, did not receive enough votes to move onto the at-large board.

   b. Did not receive more than one vote on the initial ballot, but was subsequently recommended by more than one member prior to closing initial nominations.

   c. Won or shared the regular-season conference championship or conference divisional championship.

7. The process for creating the initial "at-large nomination board" will then be closed.

8. A team may be removed from the nomination board if it receives all but three of the eligible votes.

9. A team may be added to the at-large nomination board at any time provided it receives at least four eligible votes.

10. Verbal nominations are permitted.

### Remaining Ballots

1. The committee will evaluate those teams on the at-large nomination board.

2. Each committee member will submit a list of the best eight teams from the nomination board, not in rank order, to be added to the at-large field.

3. The eight teams receiving the most votes comprise the next at-large ballot.

4. Each committee member will "rank" the eight teams, using a cross country scoring system (e.g., first or best is valued at one point).

5. The four teams receiving the fewest points shall be moved into the tournament field as an at-large selection. The other four teams will be held for the next ballot.

6. The "list" eight, "rank" eight, "move" four process will be repeated until all at-large berths have been filled.

7. If a team fails to move onto the at-large board for two consecutive at-large ballots, it shall be returned to the at-large nomination board.

8. A team may be removed from the at-large field and returned to the at-large nomination board if it receives all but three of the eligible votes.

### Additional Considerations

- At any time during the process, the chair may suggest that the committee begin reviewing teams that should be eliminated from the at-large nomination board. A team may be removed from consideration if it receives all but two of the eligible votes.

- At any time, the chair may call for a review of teams on the holding board. A majority of eligible votes can remove a team from or add a team to the holding board. Teams that have been removed from the holding board will return to the At-Large Nomination board.

- The number of teams eligible to receive votes may be increased or decreased by the chair if circumstances warrant. Further, the chair has the option to revise the number of teams to be moved onto the at-large board from four to two.

- At any time, the chair may call for a cross-country vote of all remaining teams on the at-large nomination board.

- At any time during the process of selecting the at-large teams, the committee may elect to begin seeding the teams.

## II. Seeding of Teams

The committee will create an s-curve (i.e., rank of the teams 1 through 68) which is used as a reference to assess competitive balance across the four regions. Once the s-curve is finalized, it remains unchanged while placing the teams into the championship bracket.

The bracket-placement principles may preclude a team from being placed in its "true" seed, in accordance with the s-curve.

### Procedures for Seeding Teams

1. Each committee member will submit a list of the best eight teams, not in rank order, from teams that are in the tournament as automatic qualifiers or at-large selections.

2. The eight teams receiving the most votes of the eligible votes comprise the next s-curve ballot.

3. Each committee member will "rank" the eight teams, using a cross country scoring system (e.g., first or best is valued at one point).

4. The four teams receiving the fewest points shall be moved into the s-curve, in rank order. The other four teams will be held for the next ballot.

5. The "list" eight, "rank" eight, "move" four in rank order process will be repeated until all teams have been seeded in the s-curve.

6. After a team has been voted into the s-curve, it may be moved to a different position by a simple majority of eligible votes.

7. The committee is not obligated to seed the lines in chronological order. For example, at any time, the committee may use the procedures to determine the fourth quadrant of teams in the s-curve.

### Additional Considerations

- At any time, the chair may call for a review of teams on the holding board. A majority of eligible votes can remove a team from or add a team to the holding board. Teams that have been removed from the holding board will return to the Not Seeded board.

## III. Principles for Placing Teams into the Championship Bracket

The committee will attempt to achieve relative balance in the bracket and provide comparable competition, while abiding by the remaining principles. Balance does not mean equal. After all teams have been placed in the bracket, the committee will formally adopt the bracket.

- By order of the s-curve, the committee will assign each team to a regional and first-/second-round site by taking into account distance from site, mode of transportation and accessibility by fans.

- The committee will assign all four teams in each bracket "group" (seeds 1, 16, 8, 9), (seeds 4, 13, 5, 12), (seeds 2, 15, 7, 10), (seeds 3, 14, 6, 11) to the same first-/second-round site. The first-/second-round sites that feed into a regional site may be in different geographic areas from the regional.

- The number one overall seeded team will be assigned to a regional pod with game days on Friday and Sunday.

- Each of the first four teams selected from a conference shall be placed in different regional pods if they are seeded on the first four lines.

- Teams from the same conference shall not meet prior to the regional final if they played each other three or more times during the regular season and conference tournament.

- The committee will attempt to keep conference teams from meeting until the regional final round.

- If the committee is unable to balance the bracket after exhausting all possible options, it has the flexibility to permit two teams from the same conference to meet each other after the first round.

- The last four at-large teams on the overall seed list, as well as teams seeded 65 through 68, will be paired to compete in the First Four games on Wednesday and Thursday following the announcement of the field. (If allowed, the last at-large team on the seed list will be paired with the second-to-last at-large team on the seed list. The other First Four games will consist of the third-to-last at-large team on the seed list playing the fourth-to-last at-large team on the seed list, as well as seed 65 versus 66; and seed 67 versus 68).

- First- and second-round sites will be awarded to the top 16 seeded teams that submit a bid that meets the requirements for hosting.

- In the event that a top 16 seeded team does not submit a bid, or the bid does not meet requirements for hosting, the committee will select a host from the remaining submitted bids that meet the requirement for hosting. In order to adhere to the bracketing principles, it may not be possible to select the next highest seed to host.

- The First Four games will be assigned, one to each of four First- and Second-round sites, based on the bracket placement of teams participating in the First Four games.

- For the regional competition, a team may not be assigned to play in any arena in which it has played more than three regular-season games, not including conference post-season tournaments.

- A team, outside of the top four seed lines, may be moved one bracket line from its true seed line (e.g., from a No. 13 seed line to a No. 12 seed line) when it is placed in the bracket, if necessary to meet the principles.

## Procedures for Placing Teams into the Championship Bracket

1. The committee will place teams in the bracket by order of the s-curve.

2. Place the teams seeded 1-4 in each of the four regional pods pairing the No. 1 seed's regional pod against the No. 4 seed's regional pod and the No. 2 seed's regional pod against the No. 3 seed's regional pod. Place the Nos. 2, 3, 4 seeds in each regional pod.

3. After the top four seed lines have been assigned, the committee will review the relative strengths of the regional pods by adding the "true" seed numbers in each regional pod to determine if any severe numerical imbalance exists. Generally, no more than five points should separate the lowest and highest total.

4. In bracket line Nos. 5 through 16, the committee will use seed number to determine balance of the bracket.

5. After all teams have been placed in the bracket and the bracket assignments have been checked to ensure that the principles have been met, the committee will formally adopt the bracket.

## Additional Considerations

After adhering to all principles for placing teams in the bracket, the committee will take into consideration the following items:

- If possible, avoid rematches of regular-season games in the First Four games and first- and second-rounds.

- Any principle can be relaxed if two or more teams from the same conference are among the last four at-large seeded teams participating in the First Four games.

- Avoiding rematches of previous years' tournament games in the first- and second-rounds.

- After examining the previous two years' brackets, the committee shall attempt to avoid moving teams or conferences out of its natural region or geographic area an inordinate number of times.




The NCAA Evaluation Tool (NET) for women's basketball is the contemporary sorting tool used to measure a team's quality and help evaluate team resumes for selection and seeding in the NCAA tournament. NET ranking is determined by who you played, where you played, how efficiently you played and the result of the game.

The women's basketball **NET includes Adjusted Net Efficiency** and **Team Value Index**. Adjusted Net Efficiency is a measure of a team's overall performance during the regular season, determined by the difference between offensive efficiency (points per possession) and defensive efficiency (opponents points per possession). It also accounts for strength of opponents (as measured by their adjusted net efficiency) and location (home/away/neutral) of the games (against Division I opponents only). Team Value Index is the results-oriented component of the NET, ranking more highly those teams that played and beat other good teams, factoring in opponent, location of the game and winner.

The NET is one of many criteria used by the Division I Women's Basketball Committee in the selection of the 37 at-large teams and seeding of the 68 teams which make up the bracket for the Division I Women's Basketball Championship.

**Wins Above Bubble (WAB)** is a results-based metric that measures the quality of a team's résumé. WAB shows how many wins a team has compared to what a bubble team would average against the same schedule. Each game has an individual value and does not factor in margin of victory or efficiency, only results.

Criteria used by the Division I Women's Basketball Committee to evaluate a team includes (alphabetically):

- Bad losses
- Common opponents
- Competitive in losses
- Early performance versus late performance
- Head-to-head outcomes
- NET ranking
- Observable component
- Overall record
- Regional rankings
- Significant wins
- Strength of schedule
- Wins Above Bubble ranking (added for 2025-26)

During selection weekend, the committee members independently evaluate a vast pool of information. It is these subjective opinions, developed after watching hundreds of games, investing many hours of personal team (or game) observations, review and comparison of objective data, plus discussions with coaches and campus/conference representatives, that dictate how each committee member ultimately votes on the selection of the 37 at-large teams, seeding and bracketing of the teams that make up the 68 team championship bracket each year.

The NET rankings will be provided daily starting in early December 2025, continuing throughout the upcoming 2025-26 season at https://www.ncaa.com/sports/basketball-women/d1 and https://extra.ncaa.org/solutions/rpi/SitePages/Home.aspx.

| S-CURVE | | | | LINE NO. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | **1** |
| 8. | 7. | 6. | 5. | **2** |
| 9. | 10. | 11. | 12. | **3** |
| 16. | 15. | 14. | 13. | **4** |
| 17. | 18. | 19. | 20. | **5** |
| 24. | 23. | 22. | 21. | **6** |
| 25. | 26. | 27. | 28. | **7** |
| 32. | 31. | 30. | 29. | **8** |
| 33. | 34. | 35. | 36. | **9** |
| 40. | 39. | 38. | 37. | **10** |
| 41. | 42. | 43. | 44. | **11** |
| 48. | 47. | 46. | 45. | **12** |
| 49. | 50. | 51. | 52. | **13** |
| 56. | 55. | 54. | 53. | **14** |
| 57. | 58. | 59. | 60. | **15** |
| 64. | 63. | 62. | 61. | **16** |
| 65. | 66. | 67. | 68. | **First Four** |