

# NCAA Media Conference

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**Julie Cromer**

**Greg Sankey**

**Press Conference**

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all for joining us today. My name is Michelle Hosick. I'm with the NCAA. Before we begin I would like to send our thoughts to Damar Hamlin, his family, and the entire Bills organization.

Thank you, again, for joining us. Today we have the Transformation Committee Report press call. I have with me Julie Cromer, Athletics Director at Ohio. She is co-chair of the Transformation Committee with Greg Sankey, Commissioner of the Southeastern Conference.

We will begin with some opening remarks and then have some Q and A. Julie.

JULIE CROMER: Michelle, thank you. Thank you, everyone, for joining us this afternoon.

We're very proud to at last be able to publicly share the NCAA Division-I Transformation Committee's full slate of recommendations. Just for background, the Division-I Transformation Committee was actually borne out of the adoption of the NCAA's new constitution about a year ago in early 2022.

The new constitution gave each of the NCAA's three divisions far greater powers of self-governance and the Division-I Board of Directors then appointed our Transformation Committee to look at Division-I today from every conceivable angle.

The instruction we received was clear. We were to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations that will modernize Division-I to better serve the needs of both current and future student-athletes. And I think you'll hear this from Greg as well, but it's important to note that while our report marks the end of the work of this particular Transformation Committee, it's not nearly the end of the NCAA's transformation.

That is to say this is a milestone, not a finish line. The work of transforming the NCAA must continue, and it will be a perpetual effort.

We believe the recommendations in this report will prove to be transformative, but transformation needs to be a mindset shared by leaders throughout our division, not a stand-alone project that is just delegated to one particular team or task force or that has an end date of a due date for a public report.

Over the past year our 21-member committee brought in an array of key stakeholders and outside experts who helped to shine a light on the complexity of the issues we considered, and this included student-athletes, commissioners, athletics directors, presidents, senior woman administrators, coaches, legal experts, faculty, and others invested in the future of our enterprise.

Before we go into our specific elements and recommendations, I would like to offer broader context on our priorities. Over the course of this committee's work together we've examined a range of issues with big and challenging questions. For instance, we had to start by asking ourselves whether Division-I as it is currently constructed can continue to exist as a single entity.

While public perception of Division-I tends to be narrow and shaped by our biggest, most well-known athletics departments, Division-I actually is incredibly diverse as most of you know. So whether it's Ohio University in the Mid-American Conference or one of the universities that Greg represents in the SEC, from flagship state universities to HBCUs to smaller private colleges, the priorities and capabilities and constraints of more than 350 Division-I member institutions and counting vary widely.

And after extensive consideration, we decided to preserve what we've called a big-tent approach. Those of us that helped administer and oversee college sports, those of you who cover college sports, the fans that follow college sports, and most importantly the student-athletes that participate in college sports all agree that there's a certain magic to college sports that cannot easily be described.

We think the big tent, a large, diverse Division-I is part of that magic, and it's worth working through the issues we see today to keep it intact.

However, in order to make the big tent work in a modern context, we need to develop a set of common expectations rooted in the needs of today's Division-I student-athletes, and you'll see the framework for those membership standards in this report.

These standards will keep the dream of Division-I championships alive for the greatest number of teams and the largest group of student-athletes, while also raising the bar for student-athletes' collegiate experiences. Throughout this process we also recognized equity as a key

priority. And in the recommendations you will see we have sought to design a system that prioritizes equity and is responsive to equity considerations.

From how championships are organized, amplified, and rewarded to the benefits universities can provide directly to each of our student-athletes, we believe that the Division-I we've envisioned in this report will result in significant equity gains.

And, finally, before I turn to Greg, I want to end by saying how much our student-athletes' input shaped these recommendations. The priorities they expressed, especially as it relates to issues such as mental health, were the priorities that we elevated, and I can honestly say no other constituent group had greater influence on our committee work than our own Division-I student-athletes.

I also believe the systems described in this report structurally increase student-athlete representation in very important ways giving student-athletes a more prominent voice in ongoing decision-making across all sports at the national, conference, and local levels.

And now I'll turn it to Greg to talk more specifically about the recommendations in the report and the NCAA's path forward.

GREG SANKEY: Thanks, Julie. I'll add my voice of support to her introduction of our work and consideration to this point.

I'll particularly point out the value of the interaction with our student-athlete representatives, both Kendall Spencer, who served as the individual representative to our committee, but also the breadth of input from Student-Athlete Advisory Committee members, both those current and preceding members who spent a lot of time listening to and particularly interacting with and pushing back and asking questions.

My task today is to speak more directly to some of the recommendations in the report. As Julie has pointed out, we have approached this work from the broadest possible vantage point and have been challenged both externally and internally by members of the Transformation Committee to examine Division-I from every angle.

Within the report you will see a variety of recommendations. Those range from relatively simple changes to some that have a level of complexity and impact that are important and need additional work through the board's leadership or perhaps some of the structure that's been identified, but in recent months our focus has been around three core areas.

Elevating the support for student-athletes' well-being, that forms the first section of the report, and I'll refer to that in just a moment. I think it's important to note that while there may be headlines around NCAA championships, the largest part of this report speaks specifically to student-athlete support.

The second area of recommendations is enhancing the Division-I championships experience for the participants. Those being the young people involved in our athletics programs. And the third section being a fairer, faster, more equitable NCAA.

So that first section beginning at page 5 of the report, elevating the support for student-athletes' mental, physical, and academic well-being is the largest part of our report. The reality is the environment around college athletics has changed faster than the structures, processes, and rules we use to govern college sports.

Our processes have proven to be rigid. We failed to adequately keep up with student-athletes' evolving needs and sometimes their wants and asks of us. That friction has played a significant role in the challenge we face across the NCAA and on our campuses today.

So our goal as a Transformation Committee is not to only to then catch up, but also to figure out a path forward that can help us advance the effort to meet these needs of our student-athletes. And, again, these include the physical, mental, and academic well-being elements of our student-athletes' experience.

This past summer, you may recall, the Division-I Board of Directors approved an array of new benefits as part of our initial set of consideration, what we call decentralization, to allow campuses and conferences to make decisions based on their circumstances. This includes the ability to purchase insurance on student-athletes' behalf, to fund student-athletes' participation in things like preparatory classes or even elite training programs.

That action alone has already made a significant difference in giving student-athletes peace of mind that their universities have their support prepared beyond the playing field, but the report goes further.

We've introduced the new holistic model for student-athletes within the report, which require Division-I schools to insure that student-athletes receive support, such as medical coverage for athletically-related injury that would extend for two years following graduation or completion of their athletics experience; scholarship protections, including those protections around four-year aid agreements, which has been common among a segment of Division-I over recent years; and then direct access to mental health services and resources in line with the NCAA's Inter-Association mental health best practices.

A part of the resource kit that we can use to enact these expectations includes membership standards for Division-I. In fact, that's the most powerful tool at our disposal to insure that we're raising the floor in terms of the support Division-I student-athletes receive. This is a big advancement. And, again, these decisions, these recommendations, have real world impacts.

And as an element of the conversation with our student-athletes, they asked for a common student-athlete experience in Division-I, and part of this effort is to address that specific request.

The second section of the report beginning in page 13 does indeed focus on enhancing the experience around Division-I championships. And, remember, as Julie indicated, the young people in our nation and across the globe in many circumstances dream of participating in NCAA championship events as the pinnacle of their collegiate athletic experience.

We felt too often as a full Transformation Committee that deserving teams don't have that opportunity, and the experience of participating in those tournaments needed to be enhanced. So you'll see that we've recommended expanding championship fields to include the top 25% of schools in sports where there are at least 200 schools fielding those programs in Division-I. Note, that's a nod to the increased membership of Division-I and the desire for access to post-season championships.

We also recommend adjusting the NCAA's budgeting to accommodate expanded fields and to make the experience of participating in an NCAA championship consistently worthy of the effort that it takes to simply achieve that destination.

Finally, the third area we focused on is building a faster, fairer, more equitable NCAA. Candidly, that's a challenge. There are always going to be commentary around each of those descriptors. Every stakeholder we spoke with throughout this process wants to see Division-I governance that moves more quickly, that has greater agility, and takes less of a one-size-fits-all approach. We want that as well.

Whether it's the introduction of sport-specific management committees or the revamping of the infractions process, the recommendations in the report bring us closer to the kind of college sports government we desire to see. There will always be more to be done, and these recommendations are a part of the effort to set the course. Not a finish line, but a foundation from which we can continue this work.

These recommendations also elevate specifically the voice of student-athletes. They more nimble address the specific needs that will be present in each of our Division-I sports, and they insure that our infraction process and our enforcement activity are truly targeted to and punish those who are deemed the bad actors. This is consistent with language introduced by the NCAA's Constitution Committee.

Beyond what's contained in the report, you will note at the end beginning on page 21 there are key issues related to Division-I that need to be addressed. Namely, we need a consistent national framework for name, image, and likeness activity. You'll note that there were adaptations approved by the Division-I Board in October as the Division-I Board retained oversight of name, image, and likeness activity.

But the big picture model to address the needs of a number of our student-athletes at our highest visibility sports, especially in football and men's basketball, provide urgent priorities and ones where we are ready and willing to be a part of creating a workable solution.

Our Transformation Committee received a significant amount of guidance on these topics, and the reality is the NCAA lacks the legal authority to address some of these elements at present. That's part of the reason the transformation of the NCAA does not stop with this report. It shifts to a new phase. The unfinished work of the Transformation Committee will live on inside the NCAA's new Subcommittee on Congressional Engagement and Action.

We also know there's a role to be played by the Division-I Board, by our council, by conferences, and by those representing our campuses. The goal, however, of the Subcommittee on Congressional Engagement is to educate and motivate Congress to work with us to create a clear, fair and stable legal framework for which these important issues can be adequately addressed.

As Julie said, Division-I membership is diverse, and the Transformation Committee has recognized that diversity. The same is true for the mix of stakeholders that have an interest in college sport. We understand there will be support, but there will be opposition, there can be concern, and there will be expressions of where we got it right and other opinions.

There will also be voices calling for more, whether it's in governance, championships, decentralizations, and student-athlete support. That is why this is the beginning to a transformation process that must be ongoing.

We understand that. We're prepared for those conversations. Ultimately, we know the road ahead will continue. It will be a long road, and we believe that these recommendations will prove transformative and part of an important start to the continuing adaptation of college athletics with our student-athletes being the greatest beneficiaries.

With that set of introductions, I think now we're going to open for questions.

**Q. Well, for Greg or Julie, though I guess maybe I'll take Greg first on this because you have talked a lot about through this process that you didn't name the committee, and the definition of transformation was never clearly laid out there, was never clearly defined. So as you sort of put this part of it in the rearview mirror, how do you feel this process has done as far as creating really substantive change? Could it have been done without this committee?**

GREG SANKEY: Well, I look at reality, so it was done with this committee, Ralph. You're correct in elements of my assessment, but I'll go back to some observations I think that Julie and I have both provided over time.

We're going to look at our ability to support student-athletes as a key test. I think we have significantly adjusted and, in fact, pushed for adjustment around the support of student-athletes. I expect elements on any number of campuses that have been introduced will be uncomfortable. Yet, we've heard over and over they're needed.

We also had a specific charge under that heading of transformation. It was fairly narrow. There were five elements: governance, the regulatory system, the impact of direct support to student-athletes, the championship experience. So I think we've well-managed through that, but any reality, particularly in the modern era, it has to recognize the transformation and changes ongoing.

We have a new NCAA president who will begin in March. It was announced just a couple of weeks ago. We now have a set of actions that will be presented to the board, and so the opportunity to take this step in change is in front of the NCAA and specifically Division-I. But, as we say repeatedly, either today in our presentations or in the report that has to be an ongoing effort of transformation. Not simply a committee or a time.

**Q. I wanted to ask about a sort of tension that seems to be apparent in the recommendations in that both of you and the committee has expressed support for the big-tent model and trying to have a very large and diverse Division-I. However, a lot of the modernized expectations, I believe some things -- language similar to that, that you expect these members to provide for student-athletes are probably cost-prohibitive for some members of Division-I as it currently stands and might potentially winnow away at who can afford to be in Division-I. So just given that dynamic, how big would you like Division-I to be, and is there a world where you see it getting smaller as a result of some of the Transformation Committee's suggestions being adapted?**

JULIE CROMER: I'll take that one to start, and Greg, certainly feel free to jump in at the end. I think that's a really thoughtful question, and I think it's a question that's on a lot of people's minds.

We took great care in developing these recommendations to insure that there remains flexibility for institutional philosophy, for institutional resource allocation, and for local decisions to be made on a number of these item. And you'll see, in fact, many of the recommendations are described as deliverables that are reflected in the form of attestation, of confirmation that these services are available.

There's a mention in the report about an appropriate runway for institutions who currently are in Division-I who may need some time to adjust and to amplify and in some ways increase the level of support they're providing already.

And while we could have been much more prescriptive, and I think on down the road that would have in some cases created outcomes that you mentioned in your question, I don't think what we've done today makes it cost-prohibitive to be a Division-I member.

I think instead what it requires institutions to do is to align their investment in the day-to-day support of student-athletes so that they can provide a student-athlete experience that is truly comprehensive, holistic, and meaningful in terms of a Division-I experience.

And that may require some institutions to stretch for certain, but we thought it important enough for those who wish to share in the rewards of full Division-I membership to align their resources accordingly to support their student-athletes. Many of these recommendations can be achieved at a local level through integration of university services.

I think there's only one definitive recommendation today that requires a dedicated access point for mental health professionals for student-athletes. That may be a change for some, but I don't think anybody could argue in this day and age that it's not an important investment. It's a critical investment for our young people. So we really tried to be values-driven in how we aligned those membership expectations and given opportunity for those who currently reside in Division-I to align with that.

**Q. These are recommendations. They're well-researched and timely. It took a long time, but they're recommendations. What sort of approval rate on these would be considered a win, quote, unquote, maybe by percentage? And what is the core here that the board need to absolutely consider? Perhaps something that the NCAA can't live without because we're being shown everywhere for more enhanced head trauma monitoring to attendance in sports to postseason participation. What is the core of this that the board absolutely has to take into account and pass?**

GREG SANKEY: Dennis, I would start with that first section on the student-athlete experience. In a way back to Laine's question, I thought Julie hit it out of the park in her response. I'll just add, introduced to us was the expectation for a common Division-I student-athlete experience, and that was introduced by the student-athletes.

It will never be the same across Division-I, but it certainly guided our decision and I think should guide the board's decision-making. That would put me specifically to the elements of the holistic model. I'm not looking at the exact page right now, but that's a key starting point.

I would suggest the bias on the part of the Transformation Committee co-chairs that the Board of Directors and the supporting elements of the governance structure have the opportunity to bat 1.000 here. We were asked to fulfill a task and provide a report directly to the Board of Directors. Not to other elements of the governance structure, but directly to the Board of Directors, and I think we've fulfilled that. Now the opportunity to act will be at that level and those to whom the task is assigned if there are details to be work out.

**Q. Julie.**

JULIE CROMER: I agree with Greg's comments. I think there's an opportunity to take a step forward in each of these directions. You can try to isolate the pieces, but they're connected.

The primary priority is the student-athlete experience, but we're able to better enhance the student-athlete experience by also following the championships recommendations and by also



restructuring Division-I so that more student-athletes have an opportunity to be at the table in decision-making that is sport-specific as opposed to a more centralized fashion.

So from my perspective I think the board has an opportunity to take a step forward in each of these sections and on each of these recommendations.

THE MODERATOR: I have a question that came into me via email. She is interested in what kind of feedback have you received to date from the Men's Basketball Oversight Committee about the 25% championship participation threshold?

JULIE CROMER: I'm on the Men's Basketball Oversight Committee, and Michelle, if you'll grant me a slight pass on I think the speaking agent policy at the national office. I'll just say we have not wandered into that territory because the recommendation hasn't landed with us yet.

So what I did hear as I a member of the Men's Basketball Oversight Committee and what we did provide to the Transformation Committee is support for a notion of being able to take on greater responsibility in decision-making as a sport oversight committee for the student-athletes and coaches and teams and administrators in universities who are impacted by our decisions.

And I, for one, again, am biased. As Greg mentioned earlier, not only as a member, but as a co-chair. I'm biased towards the outcome, but I think it's a positive step forward in decision-making.

Those recommendations will land with the various sport management committees, assuming they are adopted into a new structure later this spring and summer, and each sport will have the opportunity to take a look comprehensively at what the impact of expanded brackets might be and whether or not it's something they should pursue for their particular championship.

**Q. Kind of elaborating on that, I had a related question to the section of the report on championships, and there's a bullet point that says that the goal is to refine the Division-I revenue distribution program to reflect contemporary D-I values for athletic performance in more than men's basketball. Is that related to the Kaplan Report and some of the gender equity findings that were put forth? And is there any momentum towards including the results of the women's basketball tournament in the revenue distribution and unit allocation model?**

GREG SANKEY: We struggle when we're not on mute. For the last year Julie and I have shared videoconferences where one or the other is on mute, and you can tell who will answer it.

I would indicate that it's an echo of what's been identified over, what, almost two years now about the revenue model. It does not lay a specific template over, but well raises issues that should be considered as part of the continuing conversation around NCAA revenue distribution.

THE MODERATOR: That concludes all of the questions that we have today. Appreciate you joining us. Have a great afternoon.

GREG SANKEY: Thank you.

JULIE CROMER: Thanks, everyone.

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