

**Executive Summary of Feedback from the 2026 Division III Issues Forum  
and Division III Presidents Council, Management Council, Student-Athlete  
Advisory Committee Joint Breakfast  
February 2026**

**Background.**

Information was gathered at two events held on Jan. 14 and 15 at the 2026 NCAA Convention.

1. The Division III Presidents Council, Management Council and Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Joint Breakfast, where attendees were asked to respond to the question, “What makes the Division III student-athlete experience unique?” Approximately 88 attendees discussed the question and recorded their responses.
2. The Division III Issues Forum attendees, approximately 1,000, were seated at round tables and asked to submit responses to three prompts.
  - What makes the Division III student-athlete experience unique?
  - Identify possible tensions within the area of the Division III student-athlete experience.
  - Identify possible tensions within the area of membership responsibility and oversight.

At the Issue Forum, each respondent had the opportunity to identify their position and/or which positions/roles were represented at their table. Four hundred and seventeen responses were received. Two hundred forty responses were submitted by a single respondent, and one hundred seventy-seven were submitted by groups of respondents. Feedback from single respondents was very similar to that from group respondents. Given this similarity and the inability to accurately disaggregate the responses, all findings will be reported in the aggregate.

Title	Total Respondents
Director of Athletics	232
Student-Athlete	160
Senior Woman Administrator	122
President/Chancellor	60
Athletics Direct Report	52
Assistant/Associate Commissioner	48
Commissioner	47
Faculty Athletics Representative	31
Associate/Assistant Director of Athletics	27
Intern	6
Compliance Administrator	3
Sports Information/Communications	4
ADID	2
Coach	2
Administrative Assistant	1
Sports Medicine/Athletic Training	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>798</b>

## Findings.

### a. Defining the Division III student-athlete experience.

The question, “What makes the Division III student-athlete experience unique?” was asked at both the Division III Presidents Council, Management Council, and Student-Athlete Advisory Committee Joint Breakfast and the Division III Issues Forum. Responses were very similar across both events and can best be summarized this way:

The Division III student-athlete experience is unique because it prioritizes academic excellence, personal growth, genuine passion for sport, and deep community connection—allowing students to build balanced, meaningful, and self-directed college lives.

#### Key themes in order of the frequency of mentions:

1. Student first, athlete second.
  - Academics are the top priority across all Division III institutions.
  - Students can miss practice for class, study abroad, pursue demanding majors and engage fully in academic life.
  - No athletics scholarships mean academics, not athletics, drive enrollment, and identity.
2. Love of the game, not the transaction.
  - Participation is rooted in passion, not financial incentives, or professional aspirations.
  - Without athletics scholarship pressure, athletes experience less burnout and more joy.
  - Competition remains high, but the motivation is intrinsic.
3. A truly holistic college experience.
  - Division III athletes can join clubs, hold jobs, study abroad, take internships and explore interests beyond sport.
  - The “Power of AND”: students can be athletes *and* musicians, leaders, researchers, activists, etc.
  - Athletics is a meaningful part of the experience, but not the entire experience.
4. Deep community and connection.
  - Division III campuses feel like family — tight-knit, personal, and relational.
  - Athletes feel known, not numbered.

- Administrators, coaches, and professors are accessible and invested in the whole person.
  - Wearing a Division III sweatshirt signals shared identity, not fandom.
5. Autonomy, balance, and flexibility.
    - Students have more control over their schedules and off-seasons.
    - Time away from sport is normalized and supported.
    - Athletes can choose their level of competitive intensity based on team culture and personal goals.
  6. Mental health, well-being and personal development.
    - Less external pressure creates space for healthier relationships with sport.
    - Division III environments emphasize belonging, confidence-building, and life skills.
    - Coaches often see themselves as educators and mentors first.
  7. Competitive but not consuming.
    - Division III honors high-level competition without commercial pressures.
    - No red shirting, fewer stakeholders, and less job insecurity for coaches shift the focus to development over results.
    - Students see success modeled in ways that feel achievable and grounded.
  8. Athlete voice and agency.
    - Division III student-athletes have meaningful representation on committees and in decision making.
    - Their perspectives shape campus culture and athletics policy.
    - This “voice and agency” fosters leadership, ownership, and confidence.
  9. Preparation for life after sport.
    - The model intentionally develops well-rounded graduates ready for careers.
    - Time management, grit, self-advocacy, and balance are built into the experience.
    - Students leave with identities that extend far beyond athletics.
  10. Staying true to the original mission.
    - Many comments highlight the importance of protecting the Division III philosophy amid external pressures (e.g., SCORE Act, Division I influence).
    - Division III is seen as the last stronghold of “true amateurism” and educational athletics.

b. Identification of tensions.

Across both the student-athlete experience and member responsibility feedback, a dominant throughline emerged: a widening capacity gap, due to “gravity issues” that threatens the core values of Division III athletics. Gravity issues can best be defined as circumstances that are situational, affect all institutions and are not areas that Division III can directly fix. Institutions face rising costs, uneven resources and expanding expectations that collectively strain the system.

1. Identified gravity issues.

- Escalating costs and widening resource disparities—both across institutions and within conferences - are creating a structural gap that affects travel, facilities, equipment, staffing, and ultimately the student-athlete experience.
- Facilities are aging, insufficient or over-scheduled, creating conflicts that limit practice time, recovery, and competitive readiness.
- Budget constraints limit the ability to hire, retain, and develop staff, widening disparities between institutions with robust resources and those operating at the margins.
- Acute staffing shortages in athletic training, strength and conditioning and sports communications are compromising health, safety, and operational quality.
- Mental health pressures are rising for both student-athletes and staff, exacerbated by year-round demands and limited institutional support.
- Institutional pressures to add sports or expand rosters for enrollment purposes dilute student-athlete opportunities and push support services beyond sustainable limits.

Respondents consistently emphasized that these pressures collectively erode the quality, equity, and sustainability of the Division III student-athlete experience. These constraints also compound one another, creating a cycle in which institutions struggle to meet expectations while maintaining Division III’s philosophical commitments.

2. Identified points of tension.

The following themes surfaced as meaningful contributors to member frustration and perceived inequities.

a. Inequitable access to national championships.

- The National Power Index (NPI) is influencing scheduling behavior, prompting long-distance travel to secure favorable rankings.

- When combined with automatic qualification and at-large selection criteria, respondents questioned whether the current system creates inequities and undermines the student-athlete experience.
  - Regionalization constraints in bracketing often result in matchups that resemble conference tournaments rather than a true national championship field.
- b. Eligibility rules.
- Red shirting and additional years of eligibility were the most frequently cited concerns.
  - Respondents noted uncertainty around the four-year undergraduate model, the potential for a fifth year of participation and uneven impacts across institution types.
  - These inconsistencies were viewed as affecting competitive equity and the student-athlete experience.
- c. Current Division III legislation.
- Members expressed frustration that Division I legislative models trickle down to Division III without adequate consideration of Division III realities.
  - Expanded non-traditional segments and year-round expectations resulting from recent playing and practice season changes are stretching facilities, staff bandwidth, and the ability to maintain the Division III balance between athletics, academics, and well-being.
- d. Governance process.
- Respondents desire a more nimble, transparent, and consistent governance process, with clearer oversight and communication.
  - A lack of presidential engagement was identified as a root cause of confusion about how decisions are made and how they align with Division III philosophy.