



## USOPC College Sports Sustainability Think Tank

Feedback on NCAA DI Presidential Forum Sustainability Survey

Updated: March 17, 2021

**BACKGROUND:** Following an unprecedented year in college sports, the USOPC Collegiate Advisory Council partnered with sport leaders, athletes and coaches to launch the USOPC College Sports Sustainability Think Tank to examine college sport vulnerabilities and explore creative solutions to encourage sustainable, broad-based varsity opportunities. The USOPC Think Tank considered questions posed by the NCAA DI Presidential Forum Sustainability Subcommittee and its insights are outlined below.

### SECTION 1: MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

**Q 1-6, 8:** Questions outline the current components within the DI philosophy statement and related membership requirements [Q1: DI philosophy statement, Q2: sport sponsorship requirements (health/safety, financial commitments, compliance), Q3: football subdivision structure, Q4: sport sponsorship minimums, Q5: scholarship structures, Q6: scholarship requirements, Q8: football attendance].

**Q1-Q4-Q5 USOPC Think Tank Response:** The USOPC Think Tank recognizes the importance of intercollegiate scholastic sports model, which allows individuals to pursue their personal, academic and athletic dreams during a prime development stage in their lives. The high standards offered by schools for both academic and athletic development should continue to be a philosophical priority, provided the standards continue to support “extensive varsity opportunities for both men and women.” The USOPC Think Tank recommends the current sport sponsorship standards be upheld (16 sports for FBS and 14 sports for non-FBS), while recognizing more sport-specific calibration and collaboration is needed to ensure a sustainable model. The USOPC Think Tank believes more efforts to creatively partner and recalibrate sports within each sport ecosystem should be explored before efforts are made to trim expectations and/or opportunities. The USOPC Think Tank noted recalibration efforts could involve more flexible membership standards and/or sport-specific policy flexibility to support low-sponsored and/or declining sports (e.g., opponent flexibility, competitive regionalization, eased access to outside aid, etc.).

**Q7:** To what extent should the DI philosophy statement and commitments reflect participation opportunities in all sports, including Olympic sports? Should this role impact decision-making at the national, conference and local levels? If so, how?

**Q7 USOPC Think Tank Response:** The USOPC Think Tank members believe the longstanding NCAA tradition to sponsor broad-based varsity sport experiences are an important philosophical commitment to uphold – especially for Olympic and Paralympic sports.

- **Footprint:** The strong Olympic and Paralympic performance tradition within the United States is a reflection of the athletes who choose to the collegiate pathway for development due to the strength of competition, but also the opportunity to earn an education. Team USA athletes were surveyed in 2018 and noted their college coach and academic major were the primary drivers for their pathway choice. The participation numbers speak for themselves as collegiate athlete footprints on Team USA include: 80% of the 2016 U.S. Olympic Team, 40% of the 2016 U.S. Paralympic Team, 1/3 of the 2018 U.S. Olympic Team and 1/4 of the 2018 Paralympic Team.
- **Sport sponsorship history:** The average Division I institution sponsors 19 sports and these minimum standards have held for nearly 20 years. The sport sponsorship standards were in flux during the 1980s, as schools adjusted to the absorption of the Association Intercollegiate Athletes for Women. Sport sponsorship settled out in the 1990’s at 14-15 total sports and increased to 16 for FBS institutions in 2002-2003. The rationale for 16 sports was “to enhance the Division I-A subdivision while affording deserving institutions to the opportunity to participate at the highest level of Division I-A competition.”
- Overall, the USOPC Think Tank believes more collaboration is needed to uphold and protect the broad-based college sports legacy and infrastructure to ensure the elite-education based pathway for future generations.

## SECTION 2: FINANCES

*Q 1: "What can be done to ensure spending in athletics aligns more closely with overall institutional spending?" Q2: cost efficiencies; Q3: revenue distribution*

**Q1-3 USOPC Think Tank Response:** The USOPC Think Tank recognizes each sport ecosystem is fragile and requires broader collaboration and sport-specific customization to ensure sustainability. Specifically, the USOPC Think Tank recognizes the need to provide Olympic and Paralympic sports with more policy flexibility to manage their sport-specific costs and generate revenue to remain sustainable. The Olympic and Paralympic sport ecosystems are significantly different than football and basketball, and the USOPC Think Tank agrees efforts to manage all sports the same should be avoided. Specifically, the pandemic has brought to light virtual tools that can aid in recruiting – which reduce the strain on travel and alleviate costs of off-campus recruiting, allowing more time with current student-athletes. Further, deregulation of recruiting policies could also uncover new efficiencies and creative resource options (e.g., national team partnerships, local youth programming, community engagement). These collaborations and resources could directly benefit collegiate Olympic and Paralympic sport operating budgets. The USOPC Think Tank also briefly discussed alternative revenue distribution models and considered incentives for broad-based sport sponsorship, but recognized any changes would result in reallocation of the NCAA's limited funds.

## SECTION 3: GOVERNANCE

*Q1: presidential leadership, Q2: student-athlete voice, Q3: conference voice/services/collaboration, Q4: Autonomy, Q5: external relationships (federal government)*

**Q1-5 USOPC Think Tank Response:** The USOPC Think Tank is grateful for the opportunity to share its early ideas with NCAA DI Presidential Forum Standing Committee in January 2021 and looks forward to continuing to enhance collaboration as sustainability reviews continue. The opportunity to engage USOPC and collegiate leaders served an example of another governance connection that may be worth exploring: formalizing NCAA/USOPC leadership engagements and/or more frequent NCAA/USOPC updates to the respective leadership groups.

In terms of external relationships, the USOPC Think Tank also identified an opportunity to increase collaboration between colleges and national team leaders/athletes to strengthen each sport ecosystem. Currently, national governing bodies are not formally engaged within the collegiate governance process/structure, which limits opportunities to align policies, share costs and strengthen the sport pathway. Further, Olympic and Paralympic sports may benefit from increased collaboration at the youth, college and elite levels, which could provide opportunities for sport stability and growth. Overall, the USOPC Think Tank believes sport-specific stakeholder alignment is important to helping facilitate a strong sport ecosystem.

*Q6: increase efficient management of compliance bylaws/costs, Q7: maintain pandemic flexibility policies*

**Q6-7 USOPC Think Tank Response:** The USOPC Think Tank believes college Olympic and Paralympic sports need more latitude to be creative in their sustainability efforts, in particular as it relates to policy flexibility, collective governance and sport customization. The USOPC Think Tank discussed numerous opportunities where sport stakeholders could align to customize sport-specific policies, reduce costs, provide efficiencies and/or leverage partnerships. Examples discussed by the USOPC Think Tank include potential efficiencies with national governing bodies (events/championships, officiating, sport rules, coordinated scheduling, etc.) and more information on specific ideas be found at <https://www.teamusa.org/thinktank>.

NOTE: The USOPC Think Tank did not discuss questions related to section 4 (legal fees) or section 5 (NCAA programs and services).



**BACKGROUND:** The [USOPC College Sports Sustainability Think Tank](#) recognizes the importance of the intercollegiate scholastic sports model, which allows individuals to pursue their personal, academic and athletic dreams during a prime development stage in their lives. The high standards offered by schools for both academic and athletic development should continue to be a priority for both women and men, and the system should support “extensive varsity opportunities for both men and women” – especially for female and male Olympic and Paralympic sport student-athletes.

**ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS:** The USOPC Think Tank applauds the effort to assess gender equity at NCAA championships and fully supports efforts to ensure all student-athletes have a rewarding experience. The group also encourages those reviewing to think broadly about creative ways to address identified gaps – and believe partnerships should be explored before efforts are made to trim championship expectations and/or opportunities. As such, the USOPC/NGBs stand ready to help assess each Olympic sport ecosystem and to potentially aid in sport-specific recalibration. Partnership efforts could collectively elevate the student-athlete experience and help Olympic and Paralympic sport opportunities strategically grow at the college level. The Think Tank recognizes such collaboration efforts may require the following considerations:

- **Sport sponsorship relationship:** Athletics directors on the USOPC Think Tank emphasized the impact of NCAA championship status and qualification structures on school sport sponsorship decisions. The USOPC Think Tank strongly urges careful consideration of any adjustment to championship access that could negatively impact the sport-specific ecosystem and school sport sponsorship decisions. Currently, NCAA championship thresholds are arbitrarily tied to a total of 50 schools sponsoring a sport (40 for women’s sports with emerging status). For decades, championships have been offered below the 50-school limit, which have provided diverse sport experiences for young women and men nationally.
- **Sport-specific ecosystem review:** The United States has a proud tradition of broad-based college sports opportunities. Schools have the autonomy to sponsor sports suited for their students, campus traditions, cultural expansion efforts and regionality. The USOPC Think Tank believes the championships assessment should avoid blanket assumptions/decisions (cuts, reductions) across all sports as some sports may accommodate adjustments, while others could face severe consequences. Given this variance, the group believes a sport-specific ecosystem review could identify key partners (e.g., USOPC, NGBs, coaches’ groups) and adjustments to ensure sport stability and sustainable championship operations for both women and men. Recalibration efforts may involve flexible membership standards and policy/operational flexibility by sport (e.g., opponent flexibility, competitive regionalization, championship operational/revenue partnerships with youth/college/elite).
- **Sport experience:** Perhaps the sport experience should not solely be measured by the number of schools sponsoring a team and/or total dollars spent, but by evaluating each sport-specific ecosystem and considering the holistic student-athlete experience, diverse/broad-based opportunities, competition structure and stability of the sport development pathway. Healthy sport pathways (combined female/male or gender-specific) could benefit from shared operations, creative resource collaborations and increased sport exposure. These collective efforts can elevate the student-athlete experience - especially through engagements with national teams, local youth programming and fan/sport communities.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Currently, the USOPC/NGBs are not formally engaged within the NCAA championship/sport committee process/structure, which limits opportunities to align policies, share event costs and strengthen the sport pathway. The USOPC Think Tank believes sport-specific stakeholder alignment is important to helping facilitate a strong sport ecosystem/athlete experience.

**USOPC/NGB SUPPORT:** The USOPC Think Tank surveyed college-centric NGBs in fall 2020 and 15 responded with an interest in supporting the collegiate pathway, noting a willingness to explore avenues to aid in NCAA championships. To date, seven NGBs have initiated the ideation process to outline avenues for short and long-term support; the USOPC Think Tank will vet those with NCAA stakeholders this summer.

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**NOTE:** The USOPC Think Tank would like to note the strong collegiate Olympic and Paralympic performance tradition within Team USA: 80% of the 2016 U.S. Olympic Team, 40% of the 2016 U.S. Paralympic Team, one-third of the 2018 U.S. Olympic Team and one-fourth of the 2018 Paralympic Team.