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Common Sense in Responding to ...

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I am amazed whenever reading media reports about athletic programs cutting sports programs as a preferred mechanism in responding to financial crisis, especially when such decisions include eliminating women's sports thereby creating a platoon of angry athletes and parents eager to pursue Title IX litigation. Even if the cuts don't include women's sports, there is the response of supporters of men's sports to consider. Generations of alumni, not only former players but fans, come out of the woodwork pledging never to give the institution another dime and creating a media and alumni relationship nightmare. Athletic directors and college presidents should know better. There is a model athletics industry approach to reducing costs that does not require cutting any sport and could result in both an equal opportunity athletic program that would meet Title IX standards and the competitive success of sports the institution wishes to emphasize. Following is a brief description of best practices re: imposing expense reductions with a cautionary preface that all decisions must result in compliance with Title IX legal mandates. Complying with federal law is not optional. These actions represent a sequential step-by-step approach which doesn't stop until the goals of gender equality, financial stability and conference or national competititiveness among a limited number of teams are all achieved.

STEP ONE: Impose no cuts to a limited number of sports in which the institution seeks to experience conference or national success, ensuring that sports selected result in an equal proportion of male and female athletes receiving preferred treatment. Every effort should be made to insulate men's and women's priority sport programs from any budget cuts in the event of financial exigency. The success of these programs depends on the ability to hire an exceptionally skilled coach, provide the team with the maximum number of scholarships to attract high quality athletes, provide coaches with sufficient recruiting dollars to scout and bring talented prospective athletes to campus, provide a travel budget to play against the teams against which competitive success is desired, and provide athletic facilities, equipment and services equal to those provided by other programs against which these sports are competing for the best players. These sports most likely represent extraordinary assets that have been developed after years of investment and emphasis. These assets may be generation of revenues that contribute to the support of all sports, contributions to campus spirit and culture, promotion of the institution's brand that may influence prospective student enrollment or a rich legacy of sports success resulting in alumni and community pride. Don't throw the proverbial "baby out with the bath water."

STEP TWO: Do Not Eliminate Any Men's or Women's Sport. Eliminating any existing men's or women's sports should not be considered because such action will incur the wrath of generations of alumni who played those sports, thereby creating a fundraising liability that has implications beyond the athletic department. Further, many Division I institutions and most Division II and III institutions, depend on robust athletic program recruiting to provide a degree of insulation from institutional financial difficulties based on declining enrollment. These schools recognize that most athletes are not receiving full athletic scholarships and are paying their own way. At a significant number of institutions, coaches are acting as admissions recruiting assets who are working to attract full-paying new students. Avoid the proverbial "shooting yourself in the foot."

STEP THREE: Increase Relationship Building Efforts with High Wealth Donor Prospects and Do Not Make Personnel Cuts Among Development Staff. All administrators and head coaches should be immediately required to engage in relationship-building and development initiatives targeting the top 10% of current and prospective donors. The athletic director, head coaches and development office personnel should schedule personal meetings with top donors in each sport to encourage early and significant gifts to address the financial crisis. No cuts should be made to the staffing or budget of the development/fundraising unit. Increasing and maintaining fundraising and other revenues is absolutely critical.

STEP FOUR: Impose a Moratorium on Capital Projects (construction and renovation). New construction and renovation should be undertaken only if mandated to remedy gender inequities.

STEP FIVE: Focus on the Largest Expense Line Items First for Budget Reductions. The top three athletic budget expenses should be tackled first for budget cuts: salaries, scholarships, and travel, in that order and in the following manner:

Salaries. Salaries are the largest expense item in any budget. The following actions should be taken in the following order:

1. Voluntary early retirement should be a first consideration because replacements will be hired at lower salaries compared to retirees who are most likely at the top of the salary scales because of

seniority and experience.

2. Voluntary across-the-board low fixed percentage salary reductions – all positions – should be considered next. Such small across-the-board salary reductions of all staff may ensure that no full-time employees need to be eliminated and no one person or group of employees takes the brunt of a salary reduction. Priority sports coaches and staff could be included in such reductions because the low percentage cuts have a minimal every day impact on those earning higher salaries. Also, if and when budget conditions improve, salary augmentations can more easily be initiated to replace such losses with such actions being applied to priority sport salaries first.
3. Next, layoffs of non-critical full-time positions that could be replaced by third party non-benefit part-time contract labor (non-critical clerical staff, administrative, and lower tier non-priority sport assistant coaches in that order) should be undertaken. This replacement with part-time labor yields significant savings because health and pension benefits are offered to these employees.

Scholarships. Scholarships are usually the second largest operating expense in athletics. Reducing the number, restricting numbers of out-of-state scholarships or eliminating scholarships completely in selected non-priority sports should be considered.

Travel. Limiting non-conference team travel of lower priority sports to in-state competitions, implementing restrictions on the number of overnight trips in lower priority sports, prohibiting spring break trips to warmer climates, reducing recruiting travel for lower priority sports, and eliminating all non-essential administrative staff travel should all be considered.

STEP SIX: Across the Board Sport Operating Budget Reductions. Consideration should be given to implementing fixed percent across the board cuts in sport operating budgets. Small fixed percentage cuts can be tolerated by most sport programs, even priority sports programs, and applying such cuts to all programs may lower the fixed percentage amount. Consideration should be given to including even priority sports in such cuts because these larger operating budgets better tolerate small fixed percentage reductions, especially if these budgets are somewhat inflated.

STEP SEVEN: Implement or Restructure Competition/Financial Support Tiers. If all sports are currently treated equally regarding the provision of financial support that gives them what they need to legitimately compete and experience success at a conference or national level, impose variable tiers of financial support that allow only the priority sports to have a reasonable chance at conference or national competitive success, a second tier that might reasonably allow state level or smaller geographical area success and a third level that might be nothing more than a club sports approach in which competitive success is not important. Maybe two tiers might yield sufficient financial savings. See Connee Zotos' *Conducting a Tiered Sports Program for College Athletics* for a guide to creating a tiered sport athletic program that meets Title IX muster. If the athletic program is already tiered and financial stress is anticipated to continue over the long term, a special committee should be appointed to reassess the current tier structure to either increase the number of financial tiers, reduce financial expenditures within each tier or in lower tiers, move more sports into lower tiers, create a non-scholarship tier and/or evaluate more stringent tiering rules that reduce expenses.

STEP EIGHT: Consider Changing the Institution's Conference or Creating a New Conference. If sufficient savings cannot be realized using the above suggested steps, changing conference membership to more geographically proximate members or to conferences which impose more strict

financial limitations on members or creating a new conference with like-thinking members who wish to impose greater restrictions on program costs should be considered.

STEP NINE: Consider Moving the Entire Athletic Program to a Lower Competitive Division. If Steps One through Eight have not been successful in stabilizing the financial position of the athletic department to the extent required, the institution must face the reality that it has chosen to achieve athletic program success in priority sports at a competition level that simply cannot be supported by the financial resources available to the institution. Under such circumstances, the entire athletic program should be moved to a lower NCAA competitive division. This does not mean that the institution cannot continue to experience success in its priority flagship sports. It just means that it will seek to do so in a new conference and in another competitive division in which it might even be more successful at sustaining consistent levels of excellence.

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