

Athletics

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The Athletics Department of the Future

More academic tie-ins. Increased accountability. Less down time. Welcome to college sports, circa 2017.

By BRAD WOLVERTON

In the hyper-competitive world of intercollegiate athletics, where programs vie to win national titles, attract talent, and build the best facilities, keeping a close eye on trends and emerging practices is a necessity. With that in mind, *The Chronicle* asked more than three dozen experts to describe the changes they expect to see in athletics departments in the next five to 10 years.

ACADEMIC ISSUES

Accountability. As institutions continue to pour big bucks into academic-support systems, more athletics departments will follow the lead of the U. of Georgia and fine or suspend players for skipping classes and tutoring sessions. More coaches' contracts will include academic financial-incentive clauses — but scholarship penalties for poor-performing teams will follow coaches when they change jobs.

Jock majors. The threat of NCAA penalties will be too great to warrant anything but "safe" majors for impact players, leading more institutions to establish academic degrees with an inordinate number of elective credits, says Sandy Meyer, assistant director of the academic-support center for athletes at Penn State.

Faculty involvement. Faculty members appear as determined as ever to rein in commercial excesses and academic shenanigans in college sports. That determination will probably spawn increased faculty oversight of athletics departments and could lead to epic battles between faculty members and athletics administrators, says Brian L. Porto, a professor of law at the U. of Vermont who writes about college-sports issues.

Integrated sports programs. Despite Vanderbilt's on-field success after it eliminated its athletics department, nobody seems eager to follow. But E. Gordon Gee, the departing chancellor, thinks more sports programs will look for ways to blend in better with the academic side. Will it mean more athletes spending semesters overseas or majoring in the sciences, where lab time competes with practice time? Doubtful. But more jocks may start participating in student government or rooming with non-athletes.

APR effect. To avoid losing scholarships for low scores on the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate, some athletics departments will spend more time analyzing admissions decisions, monitoring conflicts that might lead players to transfer, and making sure athletes do not exhaust their eligibility without graduating.

ATHLETICS CULTURE

International students. As colleges continue to look overseas for the most talented athletes, teams in more sports will reflect an increasingly global diversity. The trend will test the NCAA's rules on amateurism and lead to fewer scholarships for talented American players.

Off-court behavior. Pro sports teams are coming down harder than ever on misbehaving players, as

shown by the NFL's suspension of Adam (Pacman) Jones, and the trend will seep into colleges, where unethical conduct will lead to more dismissals.

Summer duty. With strict progress toward degree requirements to meet, an even greater number of athletes will load up on credit hours during summer-school sessions, limiting their internship experiences and making athletics departments into 12-month operations.

Co-ed teams. The NCAA will have its first mixed-doubles tennis championship.

Emerging sports. Flag football is the fastest-growing girls' high-school sport in Florida, with more than 4,000 girls playing at 146 high schools, according to *Sports Illustrated*. If colleges are monitoring interest, varsity flag football could be the next big thing.

ADMINISTRATION

Specialization. Programs won't just hire more tutors — they will assign learning specialists to work one-on-one with at-risk athletes, allowing coaches to recruit increasingly marginal students. Departments will create positions with narrower responsibilities, like director of football communications. Some teams will have nearly as many coaches as players.

Smarter office designs. Layouts will accommodate increasing staff sizes and put priority on student-service units. Academic advisers, compliance officials, and sports-medicine staff members will sit near each other to easily interact. "I would put academic-student-services offices right next to AD offices," says Christine A. Plonsky, women's athletics director at the U. of Texas at Austin, "so we are reminded why we have jobs."

Impact of technology. Debates over text messaging in recruiting will seem like child's play, and the NCAA will lose the ability to regulate emerging technologies. Instead, coaches' groups will decide what's appropriate, says Carol Iwaoka, associate commissioner of the Big Ten.

Facility improvements. College arenas will incorporate more elements from professional-sports facilities, like high-quality food services and interactive video monitors for fans, and locker rooms with attractive lighting and flat-screen TV's for watching games.

Minority hiring. Within a decade, college presidents and athletics directors will make more personal commitments to hiring female and minority candidates for top administrative and coaching positions, says Charlotte F. Westerhaus, the NCAA's vice president for diversity and inclusion. "The ceiling we have now — the low numbers of women and minorities in leadership positions — is going to bust," she says.

FINANCES

Shrinking programs. As financial pressures mount, more athletics departments will eliminate sports. The changes will affect not only wannabe big-timers, like James Madison U., which slashed 10 sports this year, but true big-timers as well. Men will be hit hardest, says Todd Turner, AD at the U. of Washington: "The days of adding a men's program are virtually gone."

Personalized marketing. Goodbye, mass mailings; hello, targeted promotions. Programs will increasingly tailor their communications messages to meet the interests of individual fans. "As we ask our fans to pay more for tickets and donations," says Jamie Pollard, AD at Iowa State, "their level of expectation of personalized customer service will only continue to increase."

Female donors. As more female athletes play college sports, development offices will increasingly look to women for donations. Athletics departments will hire more female fund raisers. And programs with strong fund-raising ability will create endowments to avoid draining their reserves every year.

TV money. Television ratings for many pro sports have fallen sharply in the past year, but March Madness remains as popular as ever. Still, NCAA officials are trying to diversify their revenue sources, anticipating that after their 11-year, \$6.1-billion CBS deal expires, in 2012, they won't bring in as much money. Less TV

revenue will mean fewer dollars for every athletics department, creating even more need for outside support.

Ticket revenue. Outside of football and basketball, few sports bring in much revenue, but scores of teams still try to capitalize at the gate. In coming years, many programs will resist that urge. The U. of Louisville's baseball team, which reached the College World Series and plays in an expensive new ballpark, lets fans in free and plans to keep it that way. The university's AD, Tom Jurich, says, "I'd rather have the fans than the extra revenue."

Internet exposure. The better athletics programs will separate the information side of their Web sites, (rosters and statistics), from the content side, (live games), coaches' shows, and athlete blogs, creating "minichannels" of interactive material to better promote their brands.

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