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Athletics Programs Scramble to Streamline Budgets in Difficult Times

By LIBBY SANDER

Don't let the glitz of this year's bowl games fool you. It's a frugal new world for many college athletics departments, where everything from bottled water to major capital projects is on the chopping block.

The potential savings come in myriad forms, athletics officials say: Traveling in vans instead of buses, or buses instead of airplanes. Staying in hotels that offer free breakfast. Scheduling games strategically to cut back on lengthy trips. Purchasing new uniforms every four years instead of every three. And so on.

"There's a real opportunity now to get refocused and streamline some of the craziness we've gotten ourselves into," Tim Curley, athletic director at Pennsylvania State University, said during a standing-room-only session on the economy at the National Collegiate Athletic Association's recent annual meeting in National Harbor, Md.

His hope, he said, was that "we can put our competitive hats aside and look at the fiscal realities all of us are faced with."

As 3,000-plus athletics officials roamed the halls of the convention, they were not just looking at the fiscal realities — they were practically consumed by them.

Athletic directors and other officials at public institutions said they were nervously awaiting state budgets in the coming months to see just how deeply they will have to cut expenses in the next fiscal year.

Officials at tuition-driven private institutions, where athletics plays a key role in overall student recruitment, said they were anxious about the financial impact of luring just five or 10 fewer athletes next year.

And even athletic directors at some wealthier private colleges said their endowments took such a hit in recent months that they felt they were worse off than officials at institutions that have smaller

long-term savings.

Pragmatic Responses

The consensus among administrators, regardless of their situation, was clear: We've had a good run. Now let's tighten our belts.

"We've already been told, 'Expect to have less next year,'" said Gregory A. Christopher, athletic director at Bowling Green State University, in Ohio. The warning prompted Mr. Christopher and his staff to take a hard look at their top priorities. The winners? "Scholarships and operating dollars," he said. "Those are the two things that affect your competitiveness the most."

Team travel costs are one of the biggest drains on athletics departments' budgets. At Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, a 20-percent to 25-percent increase in travel expenses — and jumps for some trips as high as 50 percent — forced officials "to get even more creative to cut costs in other ways," said Lisa Sweany, Grand Valley's senior associate athletic director.

Recruiting expenses are also in the cross hairs at Division III institutions, which do not offer athletics scholarships. This is happening, officials say, even as it becomes more difficult for coaches at those institutions to lure cost-conscious students.

"Recruiting's been a little bit tougher," said Christine Worsley, associate director for athletics at the Rochester Institute of Technology. "Parents — yes, they're looking for the best school. But a lot of their decision is based on economics."

Ms. Worsley recently received a memorandum from her athletic director instructing her to visit a representative of an online recruiting service — another way to recruit athletes, minus the expensive travel — at the NCAA convention.

But even large, high-profile programs like the one at Penn State are not immune from economic pressures, Mr. Curley said. Utility costs in Pennsylvania have increased between 40 percent and 100 percent, he said. And travel expenses continue to rise, a particular liability for an institution like Penn State, which is situated at the far eastern edge of the Big Ten, a Midwestern conference.

New Revenue Streams

As many athletics officials seek ways to cut back on their expenses, a top NCAA official said that they should also look for ways to increase their revenue.

With fund raising and allocations from state governments

slackening, Division I athletic directors should consider increased commercial activity as a way to boost income, Wallace I. Renfro, an NCAA vice president, said in the "state of the association" speech. (Mr. Renfro is a top adviser to the association's president, Myles Brand, who did not give the speech this year because he is undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer.)

Selling the rights to present and distribute sporting events is one way to boost revenue in difficult economic times, Mr. Renfro said, mentioning a "limitless" array of new-media outlets as potential customers. Other ways include marketing merchandise with team logos, having a coach endorse a commercial product, and selling signage in an arena or stadium. And all of those could be done without exploiting individual athletes, he said.

But Mr. Curley said he felt that the current fiscal climate provided a chance to promote some long-overdue changes in college athletics — possibly at the conference or national level — that could save money and benefit athletes.

The "nontraditional" season for teams that compete during the fall finds many teams traveling to distant locations like Arizona or Florida to practice in warmer weather. That can be a great expense for athletics departments, Mr. Curley said.

"Do we really need to have a nontraditional season?" Mr. Curley said in an interview. "We've got kids going 365 days a year. Maybe this is an opportunity to give them a little downtime."

For John Harper, athletic director at Bridgewater State College, in Massachusetts, just traveling to the NCAA's annual meeting required effort. "I had to beg to come here," said Mr. Harper. For budgetary reasons, his college all but banned out-of-state travel.

"I haven't had a salary increase in three years," he said. "But you know what? That's OK. I have a job."

Even the smallest steps can save a few thousand dollars, some officials said. For Bridget Belgiovine, athletic director at Wellesley College, simply eliminating the athletics department's delivery of bottled water made a difference. Though it certainly isn't the only cost-cutting measure she will have to take in coming months, it's a start.

"Do we need the Poland Spring water? No," she said. "We can get a Brita."

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