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Call to Curb Athletic Spending Strikes Some as Unrealistic

By KATIE THOMAS

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MIAMI — From stratospheric coaches' salaries to a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots of college sports, university presidents say they are very worried about the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics. Yet they feel powerless to do much about it, according to a survey of 95 presidents released Monday by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, a watchdog group.

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But several people who attended a meeting of the commission Monday said attaining real financial parity was likely to be time-consuming, contentious and nearly impossible. "The concept of a level playing field is aspirational, but I'm not sure it's ever completely achievable," said Wally Renfro, a vice president and special adviser to the president of the [N.C.A.A.](#) "So do I see there's going to be a change in that regard? I really don't."

Disparities between rich and poor athletic programs have been a concern almost since the inception of intercollegiate sports, but many say the gap has widened in recent years as large universities have chased after corporate sponsorships and television deals to finance new facilities and to lure celebrity coaches with multimillion dollar salaries. According to a [Knight Commission analysis](#) of N.C.A.A. data, the top-level programs in the 120-member F.B.S. generate revenues that are 14 times higher than the programs at the bottom level.

"I think the magnitude of the differences within Division I has really escalated in the past

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The Weekender
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10 years,” said R. Gerald Turner, a co-chairman of the commission and president of Southern Methodist. The commission, a group that has pressured the N.C.A.A. to implement academic reform and shift control to university presidents, has identified financial reform as its next priority. “This is really what it’s all about: trying to get a consensus within the membership to come up with a more sustainable model.”

[The survey](#), which was conducted this year and included detailed follow-up interviews with 22 presidents, found some disconnects between the presidents’ desire for change and the financial realities they face. A majority said they supported studying changes in spending across the F.B.S., but given a choice would rather just make more money.

The recession has forced all levels of universities to reduce athletic spending — the survey found that 60 percent of presidents said they had made cuts to athletics this year — but Turner said wealthier ones had fared better. “The economy, I think, has put a lot of stress on anyone in the lower two-thirds,” he said.

Few agreed on how to achieve reform. Presidents, according to the survey report, “don’t see themselves as the force for the changes needed, nor have they identified an alternative force they believe could be effective.”

Turner said the presidents were wary of acting independently, without the backing of either their own trustees or other presidents. “I think it’s a sense of, I can’t do this by myself,” he said. “It’s going to take a broad-based sense of unanimity.”

One challenge is the fact that millions of dollars in football revenue are overseen not by the N.C.A.A., [but by the conferences and the universities that control the Bowl Championship Series](#), which crowns a champion in the F.B.S. Any solution would require the assent of the highest-earning conferences and universities, which are reluctant to part with their revenue. Other actions — like limiting coaches’ salaries — could violate federal antitrust laws. Jim Delany, the commissioner of the Big Ten Conference, likened the situation to asking wealthy universities to share their endowments. “When I look at [Harvard](#) or [Yale](#) and their endowments, I do not see money moving to Haverford or Hofstra,” he said.

Delany also warned of the risks involved in reducing spending. Doing so is likely to raise the ire of donors, university trustees and members of the public. “It is a contact sport,” Delany said. “I’ve found it much easier to generate revenue than to cut costs. I’m being honest with you.”

Nevertheless, a group representing athletic directors recommended a series of cost-cutting measures — including reducing the size of travel squads as well as the number of regular-season games in some sports. “We are prepared to move these forward,” said Dutch Baughman, the executive director of the Division I-A Athletic Directors Association.

Turner and Kirwan said they did not have a vision for what successful reform would look like, apart from the goal of bringing athletics into proportion with the rest of the university. Despite the obstacles, Kirwan said: “I think there is a realism out there that we cannot solve this problem with more revenue. And I think everybody understands that.”

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