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Students' Dreams of Big-Time Sports Unnerve a Wary Faculty

At U. of California at San Diego, an itch for Division I collides with a financing falloff

By Libby Sander

San Diego

A debate is stirring here on the seaside campus of the University of California at San Diego, and to the surprise of many professors at this studious, research-oriented place, it's about whether to join the highest echelon of college sports.

Their dismay is not just about the costs of such a move as the university struggles to absorb its share of nearly \$1.3-billion in statewide budget cuts for California's public colleges. The prospect of moving to the NCAA's Division I is also prompting some faculty leaders to confront a deep-seated suspicion of sports, leaving many to wonder whether the campus's brainy reputation is enough to stave off the Division I itch.

Last month the NCAA lifted a four-year moratorium on new members in Division I, putting UCSD and others in a position for the first time since the recession hit to contemplate the benefits—and the risks—of elevating their intercollegiate sports programs.

The Tritons don't even have an invitation from a Division I conference, an NCAA requirement for moving up. But that technicality hasn't stopped a group of undergraduates, tired of a subdued campus life and hungry for a sports-driven sense of community, from moving ahead in their quest to acquire Division I cachet. They want to hold a campuswide election this year that would authorize the university to boost quarterly student athletic fees, possibly by as much as 50 percent, in the event that a Division I conference comes calling.

"There's more to college life than just academics. It's the experience," says Anish Bhayani, a senior in computer engineering who is working with student-government leaders to bring the athletic-fee increase to a campus vote. Big-time sports, he says, is "a big thing that UCSD is missing."

In the five years before the NCAA's 2007 moratorium, 20 colleges applied to join Division I, bringing its total membership today to 347 institutions. Since the moratorium lifted, one more, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, has applied.

But the road to Division I sometimes leads to mixed results. The University of California at Davis, for instance, began its move eight years ago, bolstered by student fees. But in 2010, just three years after completing its transition to Division I, statewide budget cuts forced the Aggies to eliminate four sports.

It's not unusual for institutions outside the prime-time orbit of college sports to rely heavily on student fees to pay for their athletic programs. But that financing structure has its pitfalls: Fees aren't always enough to support fast-growing ambitions. And some critics have questioned the ethics of policies that impose fee increases based largely on referenda that often have low voter turnout.

Here in San Diego, the students' campaign troubles some faculty leaders who also question the premise that their university's reputation is somehow lacking. The institution is hardly languishing in obscurity, faculty say, having brought in nearly \$1-billion in research money last year, placing it among the top research institutions in the country.

Still, the specter of a Division I athletic program has raised a host of questions: How would an increase from the \$118 per quarter that students now pay in sports fees play out on a campus where 40 percent of undergraduates receive Pell Grants? Would institutional funds be used to pay for the NCAA's \$1.4-million application fee for Division I? And is an expanded sports program an effective salve for a community still smarting from several racially charged incidents last year?

Ivan Evans, a longtime professor of sociology here and chair of the university's newly revived chapter of the American Association of University Professors, says he doesn't foresee the university's affording a Division I program over the next decade. He also questions whether big-time sports would liven up campus life, and fears that a move to Division I "would unleash dynamics that would conflict with the university's historical emphasis on pure research and academics."

He and other faculty members are left to ponder the subtext of the students' goal: Does a leading research institution with 28,000 students, highly ranked academic departments, and a dependable

ocean breeze really need a high-profile sports program to put it on the map?

'A Reasonable Jump'

Absent from the conversation about Division I is the university's chancellor, Marye Anne Fox. Ms. Fox, who plans to step down at the end of this academic year, has not commented publicly on the university's exploration of a move that, at most institutions on the low end of the Division I budgetary spectrum, as UCSD would be, has required a financial commitment from university coffers in addition to student fees. She has said only that such a decision is up to the students, who first raised the issue and would have to pay for it. (Ms. Fox declined an interview request from *The Chronicle*.)

The university's athletic director of more than a decade, Earl W. Edwards, acknowledges that the students' timing, given the university's budgetary situation, is "not the best." Still, he says that a move to Division I, especially since the university has no football team, would hardly be the "quantum leap" that wary faculty think it is.

"There's no denying that there will be some real increases in the financing," Mr. Edwards says. "But it's nowhere near the level of what we consider big-time athletics. So while it's a jump, it's a jump that, to me, is a reasonable jump given who we are as an institution."

In an attempt to quiet students' pleas for football, university officials recently commissioned a lengthy report from an outside consultant on the costs associated with adding that sport and moving up to Division I. The report, which was released in March, nixed altogether the idea of starting a football program, concluding that the projected start-up costs of \$21-million to \$34-million were prohibitive.

But the report did suggest that a move to Division I made sense. Doing so would require the university to nearly double its current athletic budget, from about \$7-million to \$13-million, with additional growth in subsequent years. A majority of the added cost would come from an estimated \$3-million for athletic scholarships.

Unknown in this equation are the intentions of the Big West Conference. Home to four other athletic programs in the University of California system, and with a geographic footprint that would keep travel costs reasonable, the Big West is the only Division I conference the university would consider joining, Mr. Edwards says.

There was a brief moment late last year, as the league searched for a 10th member, when it looked as though the university, internal dissension aside, had a window of opportunity. Ultimately, the Big West went with an established Division I program, the University of Hawaii-Manoa. UCSD now waits, calculating how it would make such a move but with no immediate signal that it will soon be doing so.

Still, fluidity at the very top of Division I's conference structure has kept the Big West's commissioner, Dennis Farrell, and Mr. Edwards optimistic that a match might be still be possible.

San Diego remains "an intriguing opportunity" for the Big West, says Mr. Farrell, who adds that he thinks the Tritons belong in Division I. "Things can change with a telephone call these days," Mr. Farrell says. "The one thing I learned a long time ago is, you never say never."

Money and Identity

That's a difficult philosophy for some faculty here to take in—especially those who, unlike many students, consider the absence of a major sports program to be among the university's greatest assets.

"This is a tough call," says Robert Edelman, a history professor who has taught here since 1972. He says the Tritons' athletic department is, in many ways, what all other programs should aspire to: "It's good, it's not overemphasized, it's not corrupt, it's run efficiently." But the campus doesn't have the vibrancy that its founders envisioned more than 50 years ago, and he says he's not surprised that some students are clamoring for a change.

Wariness of sports appears to be embedded in the university's institutional DNA. For a brief period after its founding, in 1960, there were no intercollegiate sports. In time, a modest athletic program was established and went on to thrive in the 1980s and 1990s in the NCAA's Division III. (Its athletic director during that time, Judith M. Sweet, went on to become an executive at the NCAA after leaving San Diego, in 2000.)

Even after the university moved to Division II, in 2000, faculty insisted that athletic spending be kept in check, and no athletic scholarships were given. That changed in 2007, when the NCAA required Division II programs to award a minimum of \$250,000 in aid to athletes. To appease the faculty, athletics officials started a policy of awarding a flat \$500 to each of the university's 500 or so athletes, contingent upon a minimum grade-point average.

The Tritons—whose mascot is a fierce Poseidon—have produced more than 1,000 all-American athletes in their brief history, and collected 30 team and 140 individual national titles.

Athletes compete in well-appointed facilities on the northern edge of the campus, but their digs are hardly isolated from the academic core of the university: Just a few feet away from the main athletic complex looms the San Diego Supercomputer Center, an immense building that provides technological infrastructure for UCSD scientists whose research requires extensive data support. And just across the way is one of the institution's six residential colleges for undergraduates.

Most observers agree that from a competitive standpoint, the program has outgrown Division II. The timing of this growth spurt, though, is hardly the best. So far, budget cuts here have included the shuttering of at least four campus libraries, a reduction in support staff, and a hiring slowdown for open faculty positions.

Students have taken a hit, too. Tuition has nearly doubled over the past three years to make up for the rollback in state support. The effects have been palpable on many undergraduates at the university, where 60 percent receive need-based aid. Several faculty members say they've noticed an increasing number of their students struggle to stay in school each quarter.

Still, the students leading this campaign say they don't want economic difficulties to preclude a vote on raising athletic fees. Alyssa Wing, president of the university's student government, says the economy shouldn't "stifle" a move to Division I.

"The state budget crisis is never really, in my eyes, going to disappear in the near future," she says. "If students say no, then we know the answer. But I want to at least allow that conversation to take place."

In coming months, she plans to meet with athletics officials, administrators, faculty, and other students to work out the details of a possible proposal for a fee increase. The key, she says, is to find an amount that would give athletics the money it needs without exceeding what students are willing to pay.

There are several procedural hurdles to clear before a referendum can take place on increasing athletic fees, and the vote's results are subject to final approval from the chancellor and the university system's Office of the President.

Ms. Wing says she thinks the earliest that a vote could occur would

be early in 2012, during the winter quarter. If and when that vote does happen, only one-fifth of the university's undergraduate population needs to cast a ballot for the results to be valid, and a simple majority wins.

It's a formula that troubles Adam J. Burgasser, an associate professor of physics.

"If the majority of students say, yes, we're willing to double our athletic fees, is that enough moral authority to burden the minority of students who might just barely be making it, and this is going to put them over the edge?" he wonders. "I don't know the answer to that."

"The bigger question is, what's the purpose?" says Mr. Burgasser, who was a champion diver for the Tritons in the mid-1990s and has fond memories of competing for the university. "Is rallying everyone around the sports program really addressing the thing you think is missing?"

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mbelvadi 5 hours ago

Ms. Fox says it's up to the students? Since when do we let a single 4-year cohort of undergraduates make a decision that will profoundly influence the finances and reputation of our institutions for many decades to come? If they wanted Division 1 sports, they should have chosen a school that has it - there are according to the article over 300 of them and it's not a tightly held secret which have it and which don't. But no, they wanted UCSD's academic reputation. They are just not in a position to understand that there is a correlative relationship between the academic reputation they wanted and the lack of Division 1 status. That's why the "adults" run the institution. I wish the faculty of UCSD the very best in fighting off this lunacy.

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archman 4 hours ago

Wasn't there an article that came out earlier this year reporting that the vast majority of college athletics programs cannot be financially self-sufficient?

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



jcas3309 3 hours ago

"The Balance"

As a previous CFO of a mid-major division 1 institution, the difficulty in balancing the investment in academics versus athletics versus research is challenging. Is it appropriate for one cohort of students to determine future fees for students? Does this really affect the academic/research reputation of the institution? How does the university fund future increases in the budget due to the move to division 1? These and many more questions will be asked, analyzed, and answered. In the end, it shouldn't be what the majority of the faculty think, the majority of the students think – it has to be what's best for the institution, its national prominence, the student experience, and the budget! I do not envy the process, the data gathering, and especially the open forums/feedback from the campus community on the proposal. Good luck UCSD.

F. John Case
FJ Case Consulting, LLP
Chapel Hill, NC

Like Reply



greeneyeshade 1 hour ago

I've heard all the arguments in favor of athletics over my 40 years in higher ed. One is that athletics raises the visibility of an institution in an unquantifiable way and ultimately benefits a university's fund raising efforts. Example: Dave Letterman's love affair with his alma mater's athletics endeavors. How many people would have never heard of Ball State before Letterman's public mention of that institution? How much contribution-encouraging pride did that raise in Ball State's alumni? Probably a lot.

The thing about UCSD is that they are already well known and highly respected for their research successes and capabilities and their academic excellence. Would a Division I-A athletics program help that reputation--or, in fact, actually "hurt" it?

Like Reply



justanotherucprof 1 hour ago

It is time for the University of California to end the practice of allowing students to assess fees through elections. It is too easy to charge new fees to future students for things that "sound good" (athletics, sustainability, diversity, etc.) but don't advance the core mission or efficiently address even the immediate goals. And these fees get bundled into the total student cost, where they compromise the institution's ability to charge adequately for the core educational costs that the state has decided it will no longer fund. The fees also never adequately cover the indirect costs (e.g., new administrative and legal costs associated with Division I athletics), forcing a diversion of funds from the classroom. Letting students make this kind of decision probably seemed harmless in the days when fees were low and the state was committed to supporting all educational costs, but it is no way to run a university that is trying to thrive in today's far more hostile environment. If the Regents can unilaterally eliminate this practice, they should do it immediately. If they need legislative support, this would seem a natural time to ask lawmakers to help control these runaway costs. Then, within a fixed student fee envelope, students can be asked to help determine priorities for allocation of a limited resource, rather than being asked what goodies they want to throw onto the pile for future students to fund.

4 people liked this. Like Reply



clthometownboy 52 minutes ago

Students at my alma mater now pay more in student fees (many of which were approved by student vote) than I paid to attend the school as a full-time student. Many of the student approved fees are earmarked for the school's new football team. I am amazed by students who complain about the price of higher education but approve fees for nonessential items.

2 people liked this. Like Reply

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