



DIVISION I DIALOGUE

NJIT President Robert A. Altenkirch, Vice President for Advancement Charles R. Dees, Jr., and Athletics Director Lenny Kaplan recently shared their thoughts about elevating the university's athletics program to Division I in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). They were interviewed for NJIT's alumni magazine by Assistant Athletics Director for Sports Information Timothy Camp.

Camp_For readers who may not be familiar with the differences among NCAA Divisions I, II, and III, what are some of the major distinctions?

Kaplan_Division III, where NJIT competed for many years, has the most member institutions. A key characteristic of Division III is that schools are not allowed to offer athletic scholarships. Even though this division includes elite institutions such as Amherst and the University of Chicago, it also has the fewest formal academic requirements for participating in sports, and the schedules tend to be regional.

Division II, which we joined in 1997, has the smallest membership. Division II schools can offer athletic scholarships, but the minimum and maximum levels of funding specified are lower than for Division I, as is the number of sports a school must sponsor. Typically, schedules are also regional and limited to other Division II teams.

With some 300 member institutions, Division I is the highest level of collegiate athletic competition, and scheduling is national in scope. Most large universities are part of Division I, including Ivy League schools. Division I has the strictest rules for initial eligibility of student-athletes, as well as rules for continuing eligibility that encourage progress toward a degree.

Camp_Where does NJIT stand with respect to the Division I transition for our men's and women's teams?

Kaplan_With the exception of basketball, a school can choose to move one sport in each gender to Division I on a two-year track. We began reclassifying men's soccer to Division I in 2003, with the rest of our program beginning the transition in 2005. The men's soccer team completed the transition in 2005 and became championship eligible. The women's soccer team will be championship eligible in 2007. The process for reclassifying an entire athletic program, which can include basketball, is longer, and we began that process in 2005. Our other Highlander teams will complete the reclassification process and become championship eligible starting in the fall of 2009. However, you will see significant changes in who we play across our program beginning in September 2006, when our teams will play Division I schools. Men's soccer, which started the process earlier, has played only Division I opponents since 2004.

Camp_For our university, what are some of the major benefits of moving to Division I?

Altenkirch_I think the most significant is athletic alignment with our academic peers. Everything we do at NJIT should be done well. It's a mismatch to have an academic program that strives to compete at the highest level and not do the same in athletics.



Competing on the national level raises the visibility and stature of a school. Most collegiate sports events shown on television involve Division I competitors. This helps to recruit not only athletes but students in general. The student-athletes we recruit from out of state have friends they talk to, who are not athletes. For example, we now have soccer players from New Hampshire and Texas, areas where NJIT has not been a household name. This builds visibility for NJIT among potential students in those parts of the country, and benefits students and graduates by making employers more aware of our school.

Division I competition fosters greater enthusiasm among alumni, and greater media attention. Playing schools such as Boston University, Army, Bucknell, Lafayette, Long Island University and the University of Maryland just naturally generates more interest. It will motivate alumni and friends to come to our campus more often, to pay more attention to stories in the newspaper, and to the sports news crawl on ESPN. Ultimately, this builds a stronger bond between grads and their alma mater.

Camp_*So the move to Division I has significant implications for alumni relations?*

Dees_As Bob says, the move to Division I can create more excitement around our athletics program and strengthen alumni connections to NJIT. When you compete for national championships, alumni become more interested and enthusiastic, and they pay more attention to what's going on at their alma mater. Eventually, it will pay other dividends. It's been shown that a winning athletics program does not have an immediate impact on fund-raising. But it does instill pride among alumni and a desire to participate in the life of their school that, over time, have a positive financial effect.

A highly visible national athletics program also generates enthusiasm among people who have not attended a school, but who follow a particular sport. This can establish a connection with individuals who are prominent locally and even nationally, opening the door to many forms of support.

Camp_*What are some key day-to-day, organizational aspects of transitioning to Division I?*

Kaplan_Three of the most significant are increasing scholarships and personnel, and improving facilities. We're moving ahead in all of these areas. We've added full-time support staff and coaches in sports that include men's and women's soccer, basketball, swimming and fencing. We are increasing scholarships incrementally and anticipate achieving the NCAA Division I minimum in 2006.

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As for facilities, Lubetkin Field, our soccer home on campus, compares favorably with any soccer venue in the region. Last October, despite eight straight days of heavy rain, we were able to play in the worst of it. In fact, we've worked with Seton Hall to relocate some of their home games here, including nationally important ones. Our agreement to play at Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium in Newark easily puts us at the top in the country for collegiate baseball venues. The renovations under way at our Fleisher Athletic Center will make that facility very attractive to the top teams we will be competing against. And it's important to note that most of these improvements have been made with private contributions, not public money.

Camp_*What sort of feedback have you been receiving from outside the university?*

Kaplan_Very positive. Consider the progress that the men's soccer team has made. In addition to rave reviews of our field, people in our Atlantic Soccer Conference and at other schools in the region have been impressed by our improvement in just one



year of playing at the top level. Last year, only Maryland, ranked third in the nation, scored more than three goals against the Highlanders, winning 4-0. We held 11 of our 17 opponents to zero, and others to one or two goals. In 2004, eight opponents scored at least four goals against NJIT. We cut our 'goals against' by more than half, from 62 in 15 games in 2004 to 30 in 17 games for 2005. We also improved our own scoring output and had five ties and six one-goal losses, which shows we are not far from having a lot of success. We're even more encouraged by the fact that anywhere from six to eight freshmen started every game, and many other key players, including our goalkeepers and leading scorer Eddie Romero, were sophomores.

We're making tremendous strides in positioning ourselves to move forward.

Our other programs have also been more competitive in Division II, and we have been in a growing number of postseason competitions, which bodes well for moving on to Division I. With eight wins in 2005, the women's soccer team set a new record and was a strong third in its conference at 7-2-2. As a result, they got their first postseason berth and we hosted the ECAC Division I Championships here in November.

The women's tennis team, which got an NCAA Division II berth in 2004, was undefeated last fall in conference play and had only two losses overall. One was a 4-3 loss to Division I Lafayette, which won the rest of its matches against regional Division I teams with scores like 7-0 and 6-1. Our baseball team has also won regular-season championships at the Division II level. We're making tremendous strides in positioning ourselves to move forward.

Camp_ *What is the biggest challenge in making the transition to Division I?*

Altenkirch_ I think it's getting across the idea that people need to have a little patience. This is a process, not an event. Take the men's soccer program and the goal differential Lenny mentioned. There's been steady improvement. But we're still building our teams, and that will take several years. We're also being prudent financially. This will not be a luxurious program that tries to cut the time to success with extravagant spending. It will be a well run organization that uses resources effectively.

Camp_ *Where will our athletics program be and what will it mean for NJIT, say, five years down the road?*

Kaplan_ We will have a very competitive regional program, up there with schools like Princeton, Rutgers and Seton Hall. We will also be nationally competitive in several sports.

Dees_ From the perspective of alumni relations and advancement, we will see a growing core of supporters not only for athletics, but for other events sponsored by NJIT, and they'll be more willing to open their checkbooks from time to time.

Altenkirch_ In addition to giving us the very significant benefits of national visibility, I see Division I status establishing NJIT as Newark's hometown university. Our baseball team is already a draw at Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium, and our basketball team may be playing at the new arena in downtown Newark. The move to Division I has the potential to build a relationship between NJIT and Newark as exciting as the connection between a number of national universities and their local environment. ■

NJIT sports on the Web: www.njit.edu/athletics