



A project of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation  
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## **Call for Proposals**

The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, an initiative of the John S. & James L. Knight Foundation, requests proposals to model alternative approaches to competition structures in selected National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I sports.

This initiative proceeds from the Knight Commission's 2014 study, Exploring a Division I Model Federated by Sport, which was conducted to assess interest in whether different structures in various sports might offset the challenging effects of some conferences' newly enlarged geographic footprints.

[See: [http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/2015\\_01\\_07\\_kcia\\_study\\_release.pdf](http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/2015_01_07_kcia_study_release.pdf) and [http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/2015\\_division\\_I\\_model\\_study\\_report.pdf](http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/2015_division_I_model_study_report.pdf).]

This study revealed substantial interest from presidents, athletics administrators and head coaches in exploring new models that, by organizing sports differently, could address the concerns of rising costs and increased time away from campus for athletes.

Not surprisingly, the survey also revealed uncertainty about the details of any new models, including potential impacts on conferences' "brands," conference media contracts and the Division I governance structure that requires representation based on membership in multisport conferences.

Considering all these issues, the Commission believes that moving forward from the current generalized discussions requires modeling that will assess the costs and benefits of specific alternative models of competition and of more federated approaches that might treat sports differently.

### **Problem Statement**

The NCAA's 351 Division I member institutions are organized primarily into 32 "multi-sport" conferences with approximately 100,000 athletes, as well as a limited number of single sport conferences in some sports. The NCAA [conducts Division I National Championships for 26 sports](#) and [National Collegiate Championships \(for all-divisions\) in another 10 sports](#). The [College Football Playoff LLC](#) operates a national championship, separate from the NCAA, for 128 FBS football teams.

These Division I conferences now have unprecedented disparities in financial resources and expenditure patterns that are illustrated in the [Athletic & Academic Spending Database for NCAA Division I](#). Median spending data for Division I FBS conferences show that the [spending per athlete ranged from \\$58,000 to \\$190,000](#) in 2013. Division I programs without football or with FCS football teams in the FCS subdivision spending was much lower, around \$40,000 per athlete.

The amounts and sources of the revenues of athletics programs in these conferences also vary significantly. Those spending the most generate tens of millions in media revenues, ticket sales and donations, while the majority of Division I members rely on student fees and institutional funding to support their athletics budgets. [See [“Where the Money Comes From”](#) on the database].

While funding and spending disparities have always existed, they have become particularly stark over the last five years with the infusion of new media revenues to the five most highly-resourced conferences. The launch of the College Football Playoff in 2015 and the influx of its \$500 million annual revenues, shared primarily by those same conferences, further widened these disparities.

As a result of the vast differences in financial resources and approaches, and at the request of these five conferences, the Division I membership restructured its governance process to allow these five conferences legislative autonomy in certain areas. The key feature of “autonomy” is that a sufficient majority of the five conferences’ members now can provide for changes in rules that affect their conferences, especially with regard to athlete benefits, without seeking approval from the remaining conferences. The conferences outside of the five “autonomous” conferences may then decide individually whether to adopt these changes or to decline to do so.

In addition, over the years the basis of conference affiliations has evolved from seeking academically similar institutions in the same regional footprint to seeking institutions that bring new television markets for football and men’s basketball. The importance of conference affiliations has been reinforced by other changes that require Division I multisport conference membership (i.e., “core” conferences): governance representation and voting on legislation, Division I membership criteria, access to the Division I men’s basketball championship, and access to the NCAA’s distribution of revenues.

In order to be recognized as a multi-sport conference eligible for the aforementioned benefits, a conference must sponsor a minimum number of championship sports, maintain a membership continuity of six Division I institutions, and meet some sport specific scheduling requirements.

Division I institutions have institution-level criteria that include sponsoring a minimum numbers of sports, making minimum expenditures of athletic financial aid, and competing in all sports only at the Division I level.

NCAA championships formats in most team sports have been modeled after the men’s basketball championship format, which provides automatic qualification for conference champions and at-large bids for remaining highly-rated teams. An important part of the criteria used to select at-large teams, and to seed all teams, is the team’s strength of schedule, which might require a national scheduling approach for a team’s non-conference schedule.

At least two consequences of this combination of developments are especially important:

1. Both larger conference footprints and RPI-driven non-conference scheduling have increased travel in many team and non-team sports, which adds substantial costs and takes athletes off campus more often and for more time.

2. The five highly resourced conferences' vastly superior financial position and their ability to act autonomously to expand athlete benefits exerts significant pressure on all other institutions to "keep up" since they all compete for the same championships.

For both these reasons, some administrators have begun to publicly discuss the options available in the current structure: for example, reducing the number of sports offered; [increasing reliance on institutional funding to support current programs](#); and/or reducing numbers or levels of athletic financial aid awards. The proposed modeling is intended to further these discussions by providing concrete examples of other options that could be considered.

### **Request for Proposals Overview**

The Knight Commission seeks proposals that will examine the costs and benefits of specific sport-federation models or other alternative competition structure approaches.

Proposals may address as many or as few sports and/or approaches as desired, but should test specific models in depth rather than a number of models in the abstract. For example, the final report will be expected to demonstrate concrete, clear metrics as to financial savings and/or reductions in athlete time demands from an alternative model or models such as, saving each school in a specific conference \$100,000 annually in travel costs; reducing athletes' travel days by one-third in a specific sport; or changing a national championship format that reduces the emphasis on national strength of schedule.

Further background on possible issues and approaches is provided in Appendix A.

This opportunity is open to individuals or organizations from a wide variety of perspectives, including academic fields such as sport management/governance, economics/finance, and business and practitioners such as national governing bodies, coaches associations, and league offices or college athletic departments.

### **Awards and deadlines**

- A total of up to \$20,000 will be awarded through this challenge program, either to one project or to multiple projects that together are within this limit.
- Complete proposals are due May 20, 2015.
- An announcement of awards will be made by June 5, 2015.
- Research projects shall be completed and submitted to the Knight Commission by October 5, 2015.

### **Proposal requirements**

The narrative of the proposal should be no more than 2,500 words (or ten double-spaced pages). Authors' names shall only be printed on the cover page. An abstract of 250 words or less is also required. The cover page, abstract, and references are not included in the word or page count. Use of APA submission guidelines, see <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/>, is preferred but not required.

### **Proposal narrative**

Successful proposals will state clearly:

1. The specific sport, rules, structure or problem to be addressed and variables to be affected; the possible issues for replicating the model in other sports or situations; and any relevant considerations for applying the model in a gender-equitable way.

2. What tangible cost and/or time savings or benefits are expected, the metrics by which they will be measured, and the possible issues in maintaining changes over time.
3. The process to be used to produce the alternative models. For example, processes could include convening a roundtable of experts to consider alternative approaches and producing a white paper with recommendations, or using statistical modeling.
4. Related issues that might need consideration, such as Title IX implications or whether changes in NCAA rules would be required.

### **Budget**

A proposal may not exceed \$20,000 in requested resources. A proposed budget must be included. Any matching funds or support funds should be explained.

Research awards may be used for salary support, travel, data collection, research assistant support, equipment, and miscellaneous expenses such as software and books.

### **Process of review**

A committee of Knight Commission members and consultants will review each proposal, with the cover page and authors' names removed. Proposals will be reviewed in terms of how clearly the narrative addresses the issues set out above, how effectively the budget will use the resources requested and the proposal's likely overall contribution to further consideration of these issues by the larger Division I community.

### **Awards**

Awards will be provided in two periods. Half of the award will be provided within one month of the initial announcement. The other half of the awarded amount will be provided within one month of the receipt of the final research project.

### **Submission instructions**

Please send a single document in Microsoft Word format containing the proposal with all of the above information to [Orleans@knightcommission.org](mailto:Orleans@knightcommission.org). Those submitting proposals will receive an email within one week confirming the receipt of their proposal.

For questions or more information:

Please contact the Knight Commission's consultant, Jeffrey Orleans at [Orleans@knightcommission.org](mailto:Orleans@knightcommission.org).

## **Appendix A – Additional background to RFP**

These notes illustrate the kinds of situations and changes that alternative models might address. They are intended as examples, not as an all-inclusive list.

### **A. Competition structures: Multi-sport conferences, single sport conferences, regional alliances**

1) National team sports (other than football and men's and women's basketball) are sponsored by most multi-sport conferences (and almost exclusively by all-sport conferences). Many have full round-robin conference schedules. These sports might have more regionalized non-conference schedules; conference alignments that are different from and more geographically compact than those that have developed in multi-sport conferences for men's and women's basketball; and/or regional competitive alliances that might include two or more conferences. These sports include men's and women's soccer, baseball, softball and women's volleyball.

2) Non-national team sports are sponsored by less than half of Division I institutions and often use single-sport conferences and/or affiliate, sport-specific memberships in multi-sport conferences. Current arrangements, especially those using affiliate memberships, often have developed haphazardly as conference memberships have changed and individual schools have added or dropped sports. These sports might have more geographically compact single-sport membership alignments or regional competitive alliances that include two or more conferences. These sports include field hockey and men's and women's ice hockey and lacrosse.

3) National individual sports usually are sponsored by multi-sport conferences with either conference schedules or meets and a conference championship, or only a conference championship with schools making up their own regular-season schedules. These situations might consider regular seasons that have different, geography-based groupings from the schools across multiple conferences. These sports include men's and women's cross-country, golf, swimming and diving, tennis, and indoor and outdoor track and field.

### **B. NCAA Championship Formats**

1) NCAA championship structures in all sports use some variant of a "Ratings Percentage Index" (RPI) that relies significantly on each team's and conference's non-conference strength of schedule in awarding at-large bids and in seeding both automatic qualifiers and at-large teams. Models addressing these issues could propose NCAA championship structures that give more credit for conference, regional and/or balanced home-away scheduling, and/or that focus less on the role of national "strength of scheduling" formulas.

2) Alternative models might consider championship structures for some sports that diverge from the current Division I, II and/or III championship formats.

3) Division I rules require Division I schools to sponsor all sports at the Division I level and to compete for the national championship at that level. Rules do not allow Division II or III teams to compete in Division I conferences or championships unless they are "grandfathered" in specific sports, and the various division sport RPI formulas penalize individual Division I teams for scheduling Division II or III opponents. Models addressing these issues might focus, for

example, on exceptions for sports that are not counted in meeting a school's minimum Division I or conference sport sponsorship requirements, or in determining the "sport sponsorship" part of the Division I revenue distribution formula.

### **C. Scholarship requirements and limits**

The models might also include consideration of changing scholarship limits in one or more sports, or of changing Division I requirements for the minimum amounts of athletically-related financial aid that schools are required to award overall.