

Q & A with Athletic Director Tim Selgo on why GVSU is a member of DII and why it will remain so

Because Grand Valley's enrollment has grown, there is often discussion that GVSU should become DI. Has that been discussed at Grand Valley?

A school's membership classification within the NCAA depends on two things only:

1. Institutional philosophy; and
2. How much money the school wants to spend on intercollegiate athletics

It has NOTHING to do with enrollment. For example, Duke has a little over 6,000 undergraduate students. Does that mean they should be DII or DIII? No. There are some DIII schools with over 10,000 undergraduate students. Although it is a natural correlation to make to think that with Grand Valley's enrollment growth in the past 10-15 years that DI is an option, the fact of the matter is that it is not a criterion for which division a school chooses to compete in. Unlike high school athletics, in which a school's classification is determined by enrollment, one's classification in college athletics is not. Athletic scholarships are the great equalizer in college athletics and it is up to each school to determine how many scholarships they want to offer and how much they want to spend in staffing and operating expenses.

With all of your football success, why don't you just go I-AA (or DI Championship Subdivision as it is now known)?

The Divisions of I-A and I-AA (or DI Bowl Subdivision and Championships Subdivision as they are now known) refer to FOOTBALL only. ALL of your other sports must be Division I, which is very difficult. In football in DII, the maximum number of scholarships you are allowed to give is 36. In I-AA, it is 63, and in I-A it is 85. Some of the top DII teams have shown they can compete in I-AA, but again, that only refers to the sport of football. While a few schools have done reasonably well in the sport of football in their move to I-AA, their other sports have not achieved much success, if any, in their other sports versus Division I competition. Grand Valley takes pride in being able to compete nationally in all of our sports, which we have proven we can do in DII.

In addition, in this part of the country, there aren't many I-AA schools. Youngstown State and Eastern Illinois are probably the two closest and I don't think our fans would identify with any of them. There have been some schools that have moved to DI and their closest conference opponents are hundreds of miles away. Not only is that a lot more expensive, but it also takes away from rivalries and cost your student-athletes more missed class time traveling to away games.

How much more would it cost to move to Division I?

For a Division II school, GVSU offers 19 sports, which is above the average. Our overall annual athletics budget, including staff, scholarships, and operating expenses, is a little

over \$7,000,000. Most Mid-American Conference schools (e.g., CMU, WMU) annual budgets are in the \$15,000,000-20,000,000 range. The Big 10 Conference schools are in the \$50,000,000-110,000,000 range with Ohio State's budget being the highest in the country at a reported \$110,000,000. And keep in mind, we are only talking about annual budget dollars here and haven't even looked at facilities costs for improvements, which I will refer to later. The bottom line is it takes a LOT of money to have any kind of competitive program in Division I and Grand Valley is not even close to having that kind of money for its athletics programs.

In Division II, we have adopted the slogan "I chose Division II". Grand Valley chooses Division II for philosophical reasons in addition to the financial reasons. We believe in having a broad based athletics program in which every sport and every student-athlete has an opportunity for success. A lot of schools in Division I end up having to cut sports (Men's Track and Men's Swimming are two examples that have been cut all too often at DI schools) because they cannot keep pace with the funding of the BCS level programs. As a member of DII, our programs are affordable and we believe strongly in offering a broad based athletics program.

But by being DI, won't your revenues make up that difference?

This is one of the biggest myths in college athletics. There are only about a dozen DI schools, if that many, that actually "net a profit" as we normally think about the term profit, meaning their revenues generated from athletics are greater than their expenses. Almost every institution supports their intercollegiate athletics programs through institutional funding. Again, there are very few schools (e.g. U of Michigan, U of Texas, U of Florida, Ohio State) that do not rely at all on university funding in some way. Most DI schools support well over 50% of their athletics budgets with a student fee, tuition, or some other way of charging students to fund their athletics programs. GVSU generates about 15% of its own budget through the revenues we generate via ticket sales, sponsorships, fund raising, etc., which means that the institution is funding 85% of the costs of the athletics programs. That is better than many DI schools, but as you can see, the athletic department at almost every school is funded like every other department, i.e. the university supplies the funding. Studies have shown that schools that go DI might increase their revenues some, but the increase in their expenses far exceeds their increase in revenues.

There is some research, commissioned by the NCAA, completed in June of 2005 by Jonathan and Peter Orszag, which provides factual information supporting my statements in the previous paragraph. The document is entitled, "Empirical Effects of Division II Intercollegiate Athletics". Any school interested in moving from DII to DI needs to look at this evidence and any logical minds, that eliminate their egos in their thinking, would come to the conclusion that it is foolish for their school to make the move to DI.

What about schools that move to Division I and state their reasons are to increase enrollment or improve their academic standing in higher education?

Again, schools that move to DI, in some cases, have seen a short spike in enrollment or fund raising, but the spikes don't last and studies show they quickly go back to normal. Grand Valley has proven in the last 20 years that you do NOT have to move to DI to increase your enrollment, or to increase your profile in higher education or your region. Instead of spending a lot of institutional money in athletics by going DI, Grand Valley has invested its resources where they should go and that is to improve its institution, by investing its resources into its academic programs.

Some schools say that by being DI they get more exposure for their institution?

The BEST way, and the LESS EXPENSIVE way, for an institution to get more exposure for itself is to specifically target some marketing dollars in the areas in which the institution wants to recruit students in. Becoming DI is FAR more expensive than doing this and most schools that have gone DI in recent years aren't getting any more publicity for their schools than they did before, they are just spending more money on athletics. And in most cases, the publicity they are getting is negative, either from the compromises they make to try to be successful or by having losing programs.

Believe it or not, one of the reasons some schools use in moving to DI is to get on the ESPN bottomline, which is the ticker at the bottom of the screen that scrolls the DI scores throughout the day. In my opinion, that type of thinking is absolutely foolish. First of all, the number of high school kids who are potential students at one's school watching this is minimal. I don't have the stats but I think it could be easily deduced that 99% of high school seniors do NOT pay any attention to the ESPN bottomline. Those that do are probably student-athletes and 99.9% of them are NOT going to make their college selection based on seeing a school's name come across the ticker. Furthermore, many of the DII schools that have gone DI come across that ticker on the losing end, so what message is that sending to potential high school recruits, our school is a loser?

There is no question everyone takes great pride in seeing their school's name in the national limelight. We have experienced that at GVSU. However, to have that as the driving force behind moving to Division I is driven by the egos of the decision makers. Some of these schools come up with other reasons that it has benefited their school, but again, Grand Valley has proven better than they have that remaining DII is better for your school in the short run AND the long run.

OK, so what about the facilities cost you mentioned earlier?

This is where schools that move to DI really struggle to "keep up with the Joneses". The best example I could give would be if GVSU were to move to DI, we would have to build a new football stadium. In many ways, our stadium currently is inadequate for DII and certainly for the attendance we have had. However, to make our stadium a "DI stadium", a safe estimate of the cost would be \$50,000,000, and that would not get us anything close to what the "real" DI programs have. Our school has been trying to build a new library for a few years now and it has a price tag of close to \$70,000,000. It has been a struggle to secure the funding for this. Imagine how tough it would be if it were

competing for the money to try to build a new stadium as well. This is the type of stress and conflict that MOST schools in DI face in trying to “keep up with the Joneses”. There is no question an institution is faced with a conflict in priorities and somebody suffers because of it.

There is currently a DII school that is taking the steps to move to DI. It has recently been published that a DI school nearby this school, which would be classified only as a midmajor DI, has approved \$83,000,000 worth of athletics facilities improvements. The DII school probably doesn't have close to \$83,000,000 worth of athletics facilities in total and one of their soon to be competitors is making improvements of that much. Someone must have a magic wand to think that the DII school has a chance to compete with that when they become DI.

In the last 15 years, Grand Valley has built close to a half a BILLION dollars worth of academic or student life buildings. THAT is how an institution should invest its dollars if it wants to become a better institution, NOT by spending millions of dollars to move to DI.

What does the student body think about DI vs. DII?

Every so often I have students ask me this because they have friends at DI schools and of course, it looks cool on TV when they see them. Once I begin to describe how the funding of college athletics works and that at most of these schools, it is the students who are paying the difference between DI and DII, almost every student realizes that yeah, maybe we should stay DII!

Why does the media bring this up with an article about every other year or so?

The success of our sports programs at GVSU naturally generates this kind of discussion and rumors in today's internet world. The media are looking for stories and this topic seems to be of interest to them. Naturally, it would be more “sexy” for reporters to cover games versus big name DI opponents. Our Men's Basketball team's exhibition game victory over Michigan State last year is an example of this, so some of this is self-serving. However, MOST members of the media have indicated to me that we are right where we belong in DII and they really enjoy covering our teams.

What about the student-athletes' perspective?

Having been a student-athlete myself, albeit 30 years ago, and having been around college athletics my entire adult, professional career, I believe I can safely say that one of the most important things in the life of a collegiate student-athlete is to have the opportunity for postseason competition. People who have never been a collegiate student-athlete don't understand how hard it is. Most of the time, college sports can be a grind, whether you are DI, DII, or DIII. It is a lot more competitive and involves a lot more hard work than high school sports. The “fun” is in seeing all of the hard work pay off and getting a chance at postseason competition. Division II offers more postseason

championship opportunities than any either DI or DIII. I think anyone would realize that GVSU student-athletes have a much better chance at qualifying for postseason competition and having success in it in DII than they would in DI. This is another very important reason why we believe DII is the right division for GVSU.

Many schools make the decision to move to DI to get into the “Big Dance”, i.e. the NCAA DI Basketball Championship. We have all seen examples of schools that have spent millions of dollars in their move to DI, get all excited because they get a week of publicity in the national media for being a #16 seed, and then get blown out by 30 or more points by a #1 seed, which to me just reinforces the notion that you don’t belong there.

Or we have seen schools that have moved to I-AA, which again, means ALL of their other sports are DI. We all have seen and will see examples of these schools make the I-AA football playoffs. However, what you don’t see in the media is all of the other sports at those schools having almost NO chance at postseason play and certainly NO CHANCE at a national championship. Some of these schools had nationally competitive programs in softball, swimming, soccer, cross country, volleyball, etc., but they have fallen off the college sports map because it is very hard for them to compete in DI. I spent 20 years of my life at the University of Toledo in the Mid-American Conference. It is a GREAT conference and I was fortunate enough to play in the “Sweet Sixteen” during March Madness in my junior year. But the facts of life are that at the mid-major or low-major level, you almost have NO chance at a national championship. Having been a part of conference championship teams at DI and now having been a part of national championship teams at DII, I can tell you from first-hand experience, being a NATIONAL champion is far more rewarding!

Our conclusion at GVSU is that DII is the right place for Grand Valley for now and for the foreseeable future. Yes, there may come a time that GVSU should consider another level of college sports, as the landscape in college sports is always changing. But for now, there is no question we believe we should be in Division II. We believe in the DII philosophy of our student-athletes having “Life in the Balance”. We believe they are students first and are here at GVSU to get an education, both in the classroom and through their sport, with getting a degree from Grand Valley the top priority. Grand Valley strives for *excellence in our academic and athletic programs*. We believe the best division for us to achieve this is in Division II. For all of the success we have had in football in the last 6 years, we currently do not have any former players in the NFL. That speaks volumes about our coaching staff and their abilities, but it also tells us we must know our limitations and remember what our mission is at Grand Valley. Athletics just plays a part in our school’s mission, it isn’t and shouldn’t become the driving force behind decision making as sometimes happens at DI schools who are trying to be something they are not.

Our programs are achieving success, our student-athletes are students first, and our athletic programs aren’t costing our institution a small fortune. That leads us to the

conclusion that more DI schools should be like us and adopt the DII slogan “I Chose Division II”!