

ESSAY

Colleges Are Cutting Varsity Sports. That Could Be a Good Thing.

Few of the cut programs will perish, instead transitioning to club teams that allow athletes to continue playing more on their terms, without the strain of the N.C.A.A. rule book.

By Tom Farrey

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Heads are starting to roll now, over the defunding of varsity athletic teams at colleges and universities across the country. Samantha Huge, the athletic director at William & Mary in Virginia, resigned under pressure last week, just a month after cutting seven sports from her department in an attempt to balance an unwieldy budget made worse by the coronavirus pandemic.

Huge won't be the last. Since April, more than 250 teams in about two dozen sports have been eliminated across collegiate sports, including all three N.C.A.A. divisions, affecting schools like Minnesota, Iowa, Dartmouth and Connecticut.

Many are pushing back against the cuts: athletes and alumni of these programs; politicians; and of course, the entrepreneurs at the center of the \$30 billion-plus youth sports industry — from recruiting services to travel tournament operators — helping families chase coveted N.C.A.A. roster spots for their children.

With fewer incentives for return on family investments in youth sports, dire predictions have been made about declines in youth participation, in Olympic medalists, even in the health of the nation.

I'm not so sure about any of that.

Let's take a step back. Since the early 1990s, according to the N.C.A.A., the amount of athletic scholarship aid dispensed at member institutions has grown to \$3.5 billion from \$377 million, with much of that bump because of the drastic rise in the cost of tuition. Official recruits also get preferential admission to selective colleges, a perk that has been known to drive some wealthier families to extremes. See Operation Varsity Blues.

These incentives have transformed the landscape of youth sports, and not for the better. Children who flash early talent have more reason to train hard. But they are often specializing in one sport by age 12, suffering burnout and overuse injuries that were once rare, while families who can spend thousands of dollars a year on scouting showcases effectively push aside those with fewer resources. Children from the lowest-income homes in the United States were playing sports at half the rate of those at the other end, and that's based on data gathered before the onset of the pandemic, which may only widen the divide between sports' haves and have-nots.

Reducing the number of varsity teams will mean fewer athletic scholarships, but also potentially less money spent pursuing them and more university support for other forms of campus sports.

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Ultimately, few of the cut varsity teams will actually perish. They will just transition to being club teams, many with the help of the athletic department and, as with all clubs on campus, funds allocated by the student government.

How terrible could that shift be? Club athletes represent their colleges, wear the colors, but play more on their terms, not those of an athletic department groaning under the strain of an N.C.A.A. rule book and of a business model that turns many athletes into employees without paychecks.

“I loved, loved, loved my experience,” said Hanako Agresta, 21, who played women’s club field hockey at UConn and is now headed to medical school. “We didn’t have a coach so we had to plan our practices and travel. But my identity didn’t revolve around being an athlete. Instead, I feel I was able to grow into a new identity by challenging myself on and off the field.”

Alumni donations can help hire coaches and a trainer, as they long have for the rugby club at Stanford, one of the universities that recently eliminated several varsity programs.

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“I feel for the athletes whose programs were just cut, but I think they will find that club frees up time to get passionate about other things,” said Johnny McCormick, a former Stanford rugby player. “Now as a 33-year-old dad with two kids, I really appreciate that. You only get to do college once.”

He remembers playing on a gorgeous campus field dedicated to rugby and taking buses to games around the Bay Area. He skipped one game to catch Shakespeare Week in Oregon.



Stanford men's rugby, a club sport, in a 2018 game. Alex Ho/Stanford Athletics

We need to move away from the idea that college sports must be varsity N.C.A.A. programs, full of recruited stars. About 460,000 collegians compete at the N.C.A.A. level. More than 11 million play club or intramural sports, nearly all of them for the joy and intrinsic benefits of athletics.

The N.C.A.A. recently produced research showing that its athletes do better in life than other students. But any better than club athletes? I wish that had been part of the analysis. Separate research by the National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association, which helps colleges organize campus recreation, shows that members of club teams exhibit unusually strong leadership skills.

In a lower level, intramurals, NIRSA discovered even more of those qualities. In campus recreational facilities, the only place the organization's survey found a stronger correlation with leadership was in groups of students who organized pickup games or joined fitness classes.

General student bodies should be asked to provide more support for these activities, rather than varsity teams that very few can join. In the 2018 fiscal year, students underwrote N.C.A.A. Division I programs with \$1.2 billion in mandatory and often undisclosed fees, according to an NBC Sports investigation. That was a 51 percent increase from a decade earlier, compared with a 37 percent jump in annual tuition at four-year public colleges.

A downsizing of varsity teams may force a reconsideration of the way Team U.S.A. athletes train. Many, at least in the Summer Olympic sports, develop their skills in N.C.A.A. programs with elite facilities. But so do competitors from abroad, drawn to the only university system in the world that offers athletic scholarships. In the 2016 Summer Games, nearly a quarter of all the medalists who had competed in the N.C.A.A. were representing countries other than the United States.

National sports governing bodies may have to work more closely with a more concentrated set of universities to build Team U.S.A. Some already are.

Did you know the school that sent the most Olympians, 18, to the 2018 Winter Games was tiny Westminster College, which doesn't even have an N.C.A.A. program? The Salt Lake City school was merely the "official education partner" of U.S. Ski & Snowboard, providing free tuition to emerging talent identified by the federation.

Also, some of Team U.S.A.'s greatest performers, like the gymnast Simone Biles and the swimmer Michael Phelps, have never competed in college, because they reached elite status in high school and chose to accept lucrative sponsorships that disqualified them from N.C.A.A. participation.

Mine is not a call for the abolition of big-time football or basketball, or any revenue-producing sport. These are marketing tools for universities, and they're not going away. Neither is Title IX, the federal law forbidding discrimination based on sex at educational institutions, which provides a level of protection for women's teams that were established long after men's programs had built up paying audiences. Some endangered men's teams, which produce little or no revenue, may even be preserved if bloated football rosters can ever be cut down.

The only certainty is that a warped model for college sports is unraveling. Forward thinkers should embrace the disruption.

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