



Knight Commission On Intercollegiate Athletics

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Guidelines and Considerations for Decisions to Reopen College Sports

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The Knight Commission appreciates the gravity, urgency, and uncertainty of decisions about how to reopen college sports, and recognizes that reopening college sports programs is an important leading indicator of the broader national crisis gripping higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The decisions that college leaders make about whether to bring athletes back to campus and engage in training and competition should not be made in isolation but rather should go hand in hand with decisions about returning other students to dorms, classrooms, and dining halls. Maintaining the safety and health of college athletes is just as vital as maintaining the safety and health of all students, faculty, staff and university administrators.

The Commission acknowledges and applauds the deep commitment of college and university leaders to minimize the health risks of COVID-19 for athletes and staff, and the hard work and careful planning that college administrators and health care professionals are undertaking to address reopening institutions and their athletics activities.

At the same time, the Commission is aware that college leaders face substantial financial pressures and popular sentiment to reopen college sports this fall, and that some institutions may lack the funding in the midst of the pandemic to reopen in the manner they might prefer—for example, employing practices recommended by public health officials such as testing and quarantine quarters.

The choices made by college presidents and government leaders about reopening in whole or part, delaying, or cancelling college sports will impact the structure of college athletics long after the pandemic has ended. That makes it even more essential that decisions about reopening safeguard college athletes and advance intercollegiate sports in the future.

Given the volatility and uncertainty associated with the pandemic, and the pressures to start up college sports competition, the Commission recommends seven guidelines and considerations for making decisions about reopening college sports:

- 1. College presidents, relying on guidance from medical experts and public health officials, should be the primary decision makers about whether and when to delay, reopen and/or keep open their college athletics programs.*
- 2. Give paramount priority to minimizing health and safety risks of college athletes and staff as well as the university community, superseding monetary considerations or public pressure to reopen. Minimizing risks to college athletes includes following recommended best practices and protocols,¹ respecting any decision made by individual athletes to refrain from*

participation in team activities due to physical and mental health concerns, and ensuring that such athletes are not penalized or unduly pressured to participate. It also means retaining flexibility to respond to changing health threats, even to the point of stopping practice and play if circumstances warrant it, or deferring the return of college sports until such time as the risks to the health and safety of athletes, staff, campus community, and the public can be minimized with greater confidence.

- 3. In keeping with the educational mission of universities and collegiate sports programs, institutions should provide an extensive on-boarding protocol for athletes and staff before team engagement occurs to help them navigate a pandemic without recent precedent. That on-boarding protocol should ideally include information about testing and mandatory education on reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19, on athletic program and campus procedures for minimizing that risk, and on potential quarantining of infected athletes.*
- 4. Protect and preserve the educational and sports opportunities provided through college athletics, and in the event of unavoidable reductions in athletics scholarships or sports opportunities, ensure compliance with Title IX.*
- 5. Ensure that COVID-19 related health and safety policies and practices treat all athletes equitably.*
- 6. Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in Black communities, and the disproportionate representation of Black athletes in college football and basketball, college presidents should ensure that reopening decisions do not exacerbate but rather reduce racial inequities and disparities.*
- 7. When implementing unavoidable spending cuts in athletics, prioritize reducing inefficiencies, curbing excessive spending, and adjusting sports competition schedules in ways that preserve the quality of the college athlete experience.*

The decisions college presidents face about reopening their institutions, much less their athletics programs, are among the most difficult and sensitive decisions they will face during their careers. Yet in crisis, there is also opportunity, and it is the Commission's hope that when the pandemic has passed, college athletic programs will be in a position to more fully advance the education, health, safety, and success of college athletes.

The Knight Commission stands ready to support college leaders in any way it can as they sort through the terrible and unprecedented challenge of COVID-19.

¹Recommended Resources:

American College Health Association: COVID-19 resources and guidelines, <https://www.acha.org/covid-19>

NCAA Sport Science Institute: Core Principles of Resocialization of College Sports, <http://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/core-principles-resocialization-collegiate-sport>

National Athletic Trainers' Association: Pre-Return and Return-to-Campus Preparation and Communications Plan and resources, https://www.nata.org/sites/default/files/icsm_return_to_campus_packet_covid19.pdf and <https://www.nata.org/practice-patient-care/health-issues/covid-19-coronavirus>



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