

Doc: Power conferences seeking more control over NCAA championships, governance

The proposal would grant the SEC, Big Ten, Big 12 and ACC rights to manage events like the men's and women's basketball tournaments

[ross dellenger](#) Wed, Jan 8, 2025 at 6:39 PM EST

MIAMI — A proposal from the power conferences stands to potentially remake the NCAA governance and championship structure, shifting more authority to the power leagues over rule-making, policy decisions and, even, postseason events.

The proposal, a collaboration of the four power leagues, would grant the SEC, Big Ten, Big 12 and ACC rights to manage postseason championships, such as the men's and women's basketball tournaments, assuming control over events that have long been operated by the national association.

The proposal is described only as a "working document" and is not a complete or approved product.

However, as the NCAA works to establish a new governance model to coincide with the [landmark settlement of the House antitrust case](#), the document indicates a clear direction from the SEC, Big Ten, Big 12 and ACC. They want an expansion of their previously existing autonomous legislative powers, not only for rule-making and policy decision-making

but for NCAA championships as well, controlling concepts like tournament format, revenue distribution and selection committee process.

The proposal would create a new subdivision within the NCAA umbrella — an expected concept and one included in [NCAA president Charlie Baker's "Project DI" plan](#) he announced in December of 2023.

Yahoo Sports obtained portions of the document.

When reached, each power conference confirmed the existence of the proposal. SEC commissioner Greg Sankey cautioned that the proposal is only a conversation-starter as all of Division I leaders examine a new governance model.

"There have been seven to eight months of discussions about the NCAA governance decision-making process," Sankey told Yahoo Sports. "We have a responsibility to develop an idea. We've circulated this with our conferences. We've let the NCAA president know. This is an important time for change. We think it is important to provoke thought."

The NCAA Division I Board of Directors has recently created a working group to explore a new governance model. Sankey is a member of the working group, which is called the Division I Decision Making Group.

ACC commissioner Jim Phillips, a member of the NCAA Board of Governors, said leaders are attempting to find a governance structure that "fits" modern college athletics. "More work needs to be done," he said. "To me, this is part of the ongoing evolution of college athletics."

The proposal from the power conferences does not signal the long-

discussed breakaway from the national association, Sankey and other commissioners say, and there remains a commitment to continue to grant broad access to postseason events. That includes the NCAA basketball tournaments, two events that give automatic qualifiers to the champions of all 32 Division I leagues.

The tournament, dubbed "March Madness," is the crown jewel of NCAA sports, perhaps most popular for its feel-good upsets from low-seeded, mid-major programs. The men's event is worth nearly \$1 billion annually, by far the association's biggest cash cow that sustains the athletic budgets for many non-football and FCS programs.

"We still view the championships as binding us together," Sankey said. "The basketball tournament is a national and American experience. I do think what happens in March is pretty cool. The Cinderella stories are part of the fabric and we respect that reality."

Phillips called the tournament a "national treasure" and he remains "adamant" in access points for all leagues.

Brett Yormark, commissioner of the Big 12, calls the proposal part of a "complete review of the entire model" and a necessary "modification" to provide greater authority to the power leagues.

"We have no desire to compromise what makes college athletics so special, but instead we want to make necessary adjustments to reflect where the industry is going," he said in a statement to Yahoo Sports.

However, there is fear that granting the power conferences control of these marquee postseason events will limit opportunities for those mid-majors and, possibly even, reduce their revenue shares from the tournament.

How different would the NCAA basketball tournaments look if the power conferences were in charge of them? (Michael Allio/Getty Images)

Such changes to the NCAA governance structure may require a vote of the full Division I membership — likely a difficult majority to obtain. Those in the other 28 conferences fear repercussions of ceding more authority to the Big Ten, SEC, Big 12 and ACC, multiple non-football playing and FCS executives told Yahoo Sports this week.

The power leagues, specifically the Big Ten and SEC, used threats of a breakaway to consolidate more revenue during CFP negotiations last spring. The four leagues also spearheaded negotiations over the House settlement, agreeing to millions of dollars in back-damages to former athletes, a portion of which will be paid by the non-power conferences without gaining their input.

The moves have more rapidly grown a gulf between the four richest conferences in college athletics and everyone else. Already separated by massive resource and money gaps, the two groups, some believe, are nearing an untenable situation, roaring toward an eventual divorce.

"This could be a real fight over the future of what college athletics looks like," one FCS leader said. "At some point, we're going to have to call their bluff and say, 'Take your ball and go.' It seems to me that we are increasingly closer to that happening."

The chances of the NCAA adopting the power leagues' proposal is uncertain.

The proposal was described by one as an "aggressive solution" that has "real legs," but by another as having little to no chance to pass in its current iteration. If the power leagues don't get consensus in a full

membership vote, they could withdraw from the association.

However, that presents another problem: The power leagues and NCAA entered into a 10-year agreement as part of the House settlement, binding the entities together through 2035.

Power conference commissioners began to circulate their proposal to school presidents and administrators earlier this week — a decision that is not coincidentally timed. The annual NCAA convention begins next week in Nashville, where leaders of all three divisions meet to debate and discuss key legislation items.

A new governance model is a long-discussed issue that became a priority after the NCAA agreed to settle three antitrust lawsuits over athlete compensation, most notably the House case. Starting in July, pending approval of the settlement in April, schools are permitted to share revenue directly with athletes in a historic step in college sports history and one that necessitates changes to NCAA rules and structure.

As part of the power league proposal, the NCAA Board of Governors and DI Board of Directors — the association's top governing groups mostly made up of university presidents — are likely to see their authority limited. The intent of the proposal is to create uniform policy among, at the very least, the four leagues.

For decades now, the NCAA has operated as a fractured group with more than 300 member schools in Division I alone, all with differing resources and cultural philosophies. Often misunderstood, the NCAA is a voluntary membership organization where schools create rules that the association then enforces.

However, those rules have come under attack by the courts and state

lawmakers as violating antitrust law, many of them over the long-time policy prohibiting compensation to athletes. With those rules now crumbling, those money-generating powers within the four top leagues are moving closer to a professionalized model — a shift that necessitates wholesale structural changes, they believe.

In fact, in November, SEC commissioner Greg Sankey and his presidents sent a letter to Baker expressing disappointment in a governance model that the NCAA staff showed commissioners in a meeting over the summer and urging the association to grant the power leagues much more autonomy, not just in governance but playing rules and championship tournaments.

Sankey has long expressed publicly his frustration in the NCAA governance model for its slow, bureaucratic process and the inclusion of lower-tier school representatives on policy-making committees. But lately, Sankey and other commissioners, namely Yormark and Phillips, have stumped for both more access points in championships for their programs and representation on NCAA championship selection committees.

Currently, NCAA officials are in active negotiations with CBS and Warner Bros. Discovery over an idea to expand the men's and women's basketball tournament to add four or eight teams.