THE RIGHT WAY FORWARD
NAIA 2026 NATIONAL CONVENTION

Conference Strength

At the fall meetings, the COP affirmed that conferences remain critically important to the NAIA and supported the formation of a working group to position NAIA conferences to remain or become competitive with NCAA DII and DIII peers, strengthen member recruitment and retention, and improve the student-athlete experience.

To date, the group has discussed the role and structure of NAIA conferences, reviewing data showing improvements in finances, leadership, and revenue since 2012. The focus has been on defining the purpose of conferences, balancing staffing costs with institutional needs, and clarifying expectations for the commissioner role.

Additionally, the working group agreed to modify the objectives to include an additional area focused on recruiting NCAA DII and DIII institutions.

The working group plans to meet throughout the spring and summer, aiming to bring an initial plan or recommendation to the COP and CCA at the fall meetings.

Updated Working Group Objectives:

- Cultivate an environment of collaboration among conference commissioners and national office staff toward this initiative.
- Provide a comparative analysis of the NAIA, NCAA DII, and DIII conferences.
- Identify areas of strength and collectively agree upon elements needed to evolve NAIA conferences.
- Create a plan to implement the identified elements to support this initiative.
- Equip members to effectively advocate in the recruitment of NCAA DII and DIII institutions.

Working Group Members:

- Dr. Paul Stumb, president, Cumberland University (Tenn.)
- Dr. Kelly Ryan, president, Eastern Oregon University
- Dr. Joe Parisi, president, Missouri Valley College
- Bill Popp, commissioner, Appalachian Athletic Conference
- Kiki Barnes, commissioner, HBCU Athletic Conference
- Dustin Wilke, commissioner, The Sun Conference