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SIUE exploring a move up

With recent success of athletic programs, committee is taking look at Division I

BY DAVID WILHELM
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EDWARDSVILLE - An 18-member task force established in September is taking the baby steps that could elevate the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville men's and women's athletic programs to the Division I level.

But Gary Giamartino, task force chairman and dean of SIUE's School of Business, said it's far from a slam dunk that the Cougars will make the jump from Division II when the group presents its final report Feb. 15, 2007.

The task force also is considering two other options: maintaining SIUE's membership in Division II or adopting a "hybrid" program that would include teams competing at the Division I and Division II levels.

"It's as much a choice as anything else," Giamartino said. "There are universities that have participated at one level for their entire history of participation in the NCAA.

"So to think because (our) university is growing that its intercollegiate athletic program will grow in terms of its scope, that doesn't necessarily follow. That's the question we're looking at."

The 10-man, eight-woman task force is composed of SIUE alumni, staff, faculty, students and people in surrounding communities. The group has met seven times and will reconvene Jan. 12.

Giamartino said the process has been painstaking since SIUE announced the formation of the task force Sept. 9.

"It's kind of like, 'Do you want to do a story on people doing homework?' because that's basically what we've been doing," Giamartino said. "We've been doing our homework. We've spent time learning about the organization of intercollegiate athletics. We've reviewed our organizational structure here.

"It's not a very exciting story so far. We have an 18-month window in which to work. We're being very deliberate and studious, trying to understand, first of all, what our program looks like and, secondly, how might we look under the options. We really haven't gotten into that second part yet."

Why mess with success?

The Cougars compete in the 14-team Great Lakes Valley Conference, which by all accounts is among the best Division II leagues in the country --athletically and academically.

SIUE has enjoyed its 11-year membership in the GLVC, but the school has continued to grow.

In the last five years, enrollment has climbed from 12,193 to 13,460. Since 1994, three residence halls and new engineering and pharmacy buildings have been constructed.

Even with all the growth and development he has seen on campus, Giamartino acknowledges there's something comfortable about where SIUE is positioned in Division II and with its conference affiliation.

"We're in a fine conference that has some terrific schools --schools that are paying attention to and endorsing the balance that is designed to characterize academic participation and athletic participation for D-II schools," he said.

"Division II participation represents a very high level of athletic skill and athletic talent, as well as academic talent. We're not at all concerned about our division affiliation reflecting our status as a university. Our student-athletes do really well, our teams do really well. We're very proud of our program now."

But Narbeth Emmanuel, vice chancellor of student affairs at SIUE, in September cited the following reasons for the university to explore a possible move to Division I:

- The men's soccer program has achieved national success, advancing to the Division II Final Four in three of the last five years. The team used to compete in Division I and won the NCAA championship in 1979.
- The men's basketball program last season was ranked nationally for the first time and advanced to the NCAA Division II Tournament.
- The men's and women's track and field team and the wrestling team continue to send athletes to compete at the national level.
- The softball program has grown to a perennial national-championship contender.

"Look at the success we're having with our current student-athletes," Giamartino said. "Do we want to change that? Do we want to change the nature of that by bringing in different student-athletes? I don't know. That's why this process is going to take a while for us to sift through all those questions."

Miles and miles to cover

In coming months, Giamartino and his task force will tackle a number of critical issues.

The group must determine whether SIUE's sports facilities are at Division I standards, meet with representatives from other universities that made the leap from Division II to Division I and explore potential membership in a different conference.

"It's a pretty deep topic," Giamartino said. "We're looking at everything from academic support services that are provided to student-athletes to potential conference affiliations to the different levels in participation --even attendance at different sports. We're looking at the nature of our facilities. We will be looking at the experience of other universities that have considered going from D-II to D-I.

"We've done a good bit of work. (But) we still have a lot more work to do. We're not even close to making any recommendations yet."

SIUE in 1999 formed an athletics committee that examined the possibility of the school starting a football program. It decided against it, and Giamartino said the current task force isn't revisiting the subject.

"That's not even under consideration," he said.

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