



Ensuring College Soccer Thrives in the Modern Era of College Athletics and the Changing U.S. Soccer Landscape

By: NextGen College Soccer Committee in partnership with U.S. Soccer

October 2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Letter from the NextGen College Soccer Committee.....	2
Introduction: A Moment That Matters	4
Recommendations.....	6
Competitive Structure and Calendar Alternatives.....	8
Next Steps.....	14
Appendices	15



A Letter from the NextGen College Soccer Committee

It has been a privilege to work together to discuss and debate the future of college soccer in the U.S. Of course, as 17 individuals from widely varied backgrounds and perspectives, there are specific topics on which we have different points of view. However, we leave the work unified in three beliefs:

1. College soccer is a uniquely American institution that remains one of the strengths of the U.S. Soccer ecosystem. Each year, it creates enormous life opportunity, growth, and development for both the tens of thousands of student-athletes whose competitive soccer-playing careers will end with college AND the many hundreds who will play professionally and/or with their respective National Teams.
2. Division I college soccer must modernize and adapt to meet the rapidly changing context of both domestic soccer and college athletics broadly. Done properly, this modernization can result in enhanced student-athlete academic, physical, and emotional well-being; improved financial footing for the sport; and more players developed to compete professionally post-college. Conversely, a failure to change likely results in both a smaller footprint of programs and less relevance in the broader U.S. Soccer elite player ecosystem.
3. College soccer must remain agile into the future. The context for soccer in the United States, globally, and the U.S. college landscape will continue to shift in the coming years. Therefore, we must be prepared to learn from the early stages of this modernization and make additional changes as circumstances dictate. Similarly, we hope that other similar “Olympic” sports can learn lessons from college soccer as they pursue their own optimal futures.

This white paper contains many recommendations – all of which require additional analysis and design before implementing. We hope this paper provides the spark necessary to move these final steps forward with intensity, and we look forward to engaging in the detailed planning and governance conversations to follow. An inclusive, holistic answer that enables all current Division I programs to remain in the same competitive context is our goal.

Finally, we would like to thank the many administrators, coaches, players, and fans who took the time to share their insights and ideas with our Committee. The advice and perspective of Committee advisors Ray Reid (retired men’s college coach), Robbie Church (retired women’s college coach), Layton Purchase (men’s college player), and Heather Gilchrist (women’s college player) were particularly valuable.

Regards,
NextGen College Soccer Committee

Dan Helfrich	<i>U.S. Soccer Leadership Advisory Group member; Principal, Deloitte Consulting</i>
Adrian Hanauer	<i>Owner, Seattle Sounders FC; Governor, Seattle Reign FC</i>
Ali Curtis	<i>Hermann Trophy Winner, Duke University; President of MLS NEXT Pro and Executive Vice President of MLS Sporting Development</i>



Amber Steele	<i>Vice President, Global Sports Partnerships, Coca-Cola; Atlanta Sports Council, Board Member</i>
Angie Long	<i>Co-Owner, Kansas City Current; Former College Athlete, Princeton University</i>
Chris Clunie	<i>Vice President & Director of Athletics, Davidson College</i>
Craig Barry	<i>Executive Vice President & Chief Content Officer, Warner Bros. Discovery Sport</i>
Darryll Pines	<i>President, University of Maryland</i>
David Tyrie	<i>President of Marketing, Digital, and Specialized Consumer Client Solutions, Bank of America</i>
Jeremy Alumbaugh	<i>President, USL Championship</i>
John Wildhack	<i>Athletic Director, Syracuse University; Committee Member, NCAA Division I Men's Basketball</i>
Mark Abbott	<i>Former President & Deputy Commissioner, Major League Soccer</i>
Mike Cullina	<i>Chair, U.S. Soccer Technical Development Committee</i>
Patrick Kraft	<i>Athletic Director, Penn State University</i>
Richard Motzkin	<i>Executive Vice-President & Managing Executive of Global Soccer, Wasserman</i>
Ryan Nelsen	<i>High-performance specialist, FIFA; Former College Player, Stanford University</i>
Sarah Jones Simmer	<i>Chief Operating Officer, National Women's Soccer League</i>



Introduction: A Moment That Matters

Division I college soccer isn't "broken". To the contrary, this uniquely American platform for the simultaneous development of young adults both on and off the soccer playing field is a major asset. It provides ~14,000 student-athletes each year with an experience that blends sport and education. For many, college soccer is the gateway to a degree and a future that would have been unattainable without the sport.

On the field, college soccer is the primary source of talent for the #1 ranked senior Women's National Team in the world. It remains the dominant source of players in the NWSL, a top league in the world. It is a critical source of talent to the Division I and II men's domestic professional leagues (MLS, USL Championship). It is a continuing source of later-developing players to the senior U.S. Men's National Team pool and to other Senior National Teams, particularly in Concacaf. College soccer features many of the most accomplished and high-potential men's and women's coaches in the United States, and on many campuses, fall college soccer game days represent a thriving example of community.

But the context within which college soccer operates is changing rapidly across multiple dimensions. Most profoundly, those changes include:

- 1) **Increasing financial pressure on college athletic programs** and operating budgets in the wake of the settlement of the House litigation
- 2) **Continuing shifts of college conference alignment** increasing the geographic distance between conference opponents for many
- 3) **An ongoing surge in the number of U.S. professional leagues and teams** (both men's and women's) that will simultaneously require a reliable pipeline of pro-ready players from the college ranks and provide more opportunities for teenagers to bypass college soccer
- 4) **Surging commercial and television interest** in competitive soccer within the U.S., expected to gain further momentum via the 2026 Men's World Cup
- 5) **The recently developed U.S. Soccer strategy** ("In Service to Soccer") and elite player development approach (The "U.S. Way"). Both emphasize the criticality of the 17–23-year-old life stage and the associated importance of college soccer

These current dynamics are occurring alongside other well-documented challenges with the existing college soccer models; this includes the physical, mental, and academic toll of a highly congested single semester fall soccer calendar, the absence of highly competitive and meaningful matches for elite players between December and May, and a limited commercial / media platform for both regular and postseason.

While much of the above context is shared between the men's and women's games, there are significant differences that must be considered when charting the future. These include but are not limited to separate NCAA sport governance committees, coach communities with distinct priorities, large differences in number of Division I participating programs (350 v 213), large differences in the criticality of college soccer as a development source for National Teams and Division I professional leagues (for example, ~70% of the players on USWNT roster for 2025 SheBelieves Cup had college soccer experience versus ~38% of the USMNT roster for 2025 Gold Cup), and material differences in the percentage of programs who can consistently compete nationally (men's side has seen 15 different champions since 2000, including 5 from non-power conferences; women's side has seen 9 different champions since 2000, with all but 2 coming



from legacy power conferences). Therefore, some recommendations will apply to both the men's and women's games, while others will be unique.

These differences are also reflected in the conference landscape. Women's soccer is nearly universal at Division I level, with 31 of 32 multisport conferences sponsoring the sport. By contrast, men's soccer is not sponsored in several Division I conferences, leaving some schools to place their men's teams as affiliates in other leagues. At the same time, recent and ongoing NCAA realignments have reshaped conference affiliations, forcing certain soccer programs to temporarily compete outside their traditional conferences. Together, these shifts highlight how college soccer programs must continually adapt to the broader dynamics of collegiate athletics.

In summary, this NextGen College Soccer Committee believes that we have reached an inflection point where proactive change is required. By making a series of thoughtful shifts, the sport and its student-athletes will thrive. Without these shifts, college soccer risks dwindling relevance in the U.S. soccer ecosystem and reduced support within college athletics.

Before detailing our recommendations, we want to be clear regarding the three "must have" outcomes of our proposal(s):

1) It must be financially beneficial to institutions, including:

- The average cost of operating a Division I program should decrease materially.
- Commercial revenue should increase materially and elevate the external platform for college soccer.

2) It must be better for the academic, physical, and mental well-being of student athletes, including:

- Students should miss fewer classes and have fewer on-field commitments during intense academic periods (e.g., exams).
- Students should enjoy the mental and physical health benefits of less match congestion and travel.
- Students should have longer periods (e.g., during summer) to advance their postgraduate professional interests (e.g., internships).

3) It must enhance the identification and development of elite players for professional and/or National Team careers immediately, including:

- Elite players should increase their time competing against and with similar talented players across the academic year.
- Professional and National Teams should have better access to identify, track, and interact with players.
- The pool of "pro ready" players should expand and benefit all domestic leagues.
- Elite players should have a clearer route to progress their careers in college, even after affiliating with a professional team.



Recommendations

This section begins with recommendations related to the role of college soccer in the broader U.S. Soccer ecosystem. It concludes with recommendations and alternatives related to college soccer's competitive structure and calendar. While the focus of the Committee's scope was Division I soccer, we believe that many of these recommendations can be adapted for the benefit of the tens of thousands of additional men's and women's players who compete in other college leagues/divisions.

- 1) U.S. Soccer, its members, and partners should invest in keeping college soccer players meaningfully in the game for life.** This should include formal programs while in school to provide subsidized coaching education / certification, referee training / certification, and access to internships or other pre-professional opportunities in the American soccer ecosystem across fields like marketing, sales, athletic training, analytics, etc.
- 2) U.S. Soccer should use its scale to offer services to college soccer that increase standards, reduce cost, and provide increased connectivity with the U.S. Way.** This includes areas ranging from referee assignments to digital player evaluation models to performance analytics/technology. Additionally, this would allow for college coaches, players, and referees to have access to U.S. Way resources, toolkits, training plans, etc., to further their own development.
- 3) U.S. Soccer should intentionally expand its awareness of and engagement with elite college players and coaches.** This could include elite player "showcases" conducted in connection with pro leagues; secure, digital sharing of player feedback/data between U.S. Soccer, colleges, and professional teams; building on efforts made in the women's program like the recent college-player only Talent ID camp; hosting coaching seminars led by USNT staff for college coaches and/or increasing the number of active college coaches invited to NT camps as assistants or observers.
- 4) The role of college soccer in player development pathways should be more formally tracked and communicated.** U.S. Soccer is likely in the best position to both capture and share the data regarding player pathways – integrating data from throughout the ecosystem including both youth and professional leagues. Over time, longitudinal data analysis about player development / pathway trends (by position, geography, age, league, club, etc.) can serve all men's and women's soccer stakeholders in a way that is missing today. This can inform ongoing discussions on topics such as the implications on player development for turning professional at different ages, the role of college soccer alongside other professional leagues / "reserve" teams in development of 17–23-year-olds, the effectiveness of college soccer in developing players for Youth and Senior NTs, etc.
- 5) College soccer eligibility rules should be modernized to reflect today's environment and build more integrated pathways with domestic professional leagues.** The Committee recommends exploring mechanisms that strengthen college soccer as a key development pathway for players with professional potential while maintaining academic integrity. As professional opportunities for young players expand, rules should evolve to better align the college and professional environments. Areas for exploration include: 1) allowing players who have signed or are under rights agreements with professional teams to pursue college competition, drawing from models used in other U.S. sports such as hockey. This framework should allow players to pursue a degree while also exploring ways for professional teams to fund some or all of their scholarships, 2) supporting a "second chance" pathway for players to enroll and compete in college after previously starting a professional career that has stalled, and 3) broadening opportunities for players to train with professional teams outside the academic calendar (e.g., summer training) without compromising eligibility. These rules would need to accommodate the differences between various leagues in player entry mechanisms (e.g., those with a college draft or not) and each league's players' union will be an important stakeholder in advancing this recommendation.



- 6) **Participation by players over the age of 23 should be scrutinized, while international participation should be supported.** In both global and domestic soccer, the relevance of competition within this defined age range is commonly reinforced. This includes the men's Olympic competition persisting as a U-23 event and the women's U-23 National Team increasing in prominence/investment. This is also consistent with feedback from the U.S. soccer ecosystem regarding the key age range of 17-23 where college soccer can facilitate player development. The associated rules could range in specifications, including options such as restricting participation over the age of 23 (with limited religious, medical, circumstantial exceptions); "capping" the number of "over age" players per roster (similar to men's Olympic soccer); or introducing rules like those in NCAA sports such as hockey that limit years of participation for players who enter school after age of 20. This recommendation also recognizes the utility that both men's and women's college soccer currently provide to other federations (especially in Concacaf) in developing the younger ages of their National Team pools and/or offering an alternate pathway for those seeking an integrated soccer/education experience. This should continue as international student athletes enrich their universities on and off the field.
- 7) **Encourage coordinated scheduling and partnership between National Team programming, college, and domestic professional leagues to minimize midseason player departures.** As international match, college, and professional calendars continue to evolve, U.S. Soccer should facilitate dialogue to explore ways to minimize disruption to each environment, including players leaving college midseason or overlapping Youth National Team call-ups. The goal is to support player welfare, academic progress, and competitive continuity, while recognizing that scheduling solutions will vary by league and season structure.
- 8) **College player mobility should be limited to defined windows to facilitate roster management and protect academic integrity in an era of roster limits and heightened transfer activity.** This includes clarity around transfer windows and rules (especially if a future college season spans multiple academic semesters). Soccer can build from the precedent set by other multi-semester DI sports like basketball and hockey, where players cannot officially compete for two teams in the same academic year. Rules should also strengthen processes related to pro team and/or agent contact with any players who are actively competing in a season or prospects who have committed but not enrolled. Player mobility should have limited interference with the academic year.
- 9) **The U.S. Soccer ecosystem of teams, leagues, and commercial partners should increase commercial opportunities and visibility for student-athletes, schools, and the broader college game.** This includes platform strategies in social media, broadcast, streaming, podcasts, etc. Several other college sports, including volleyball, softball, and women's basketball, have propelled commercial growth and student-athlete marketability via smart social media strategies over the past 5 years. The broad soccer ecosystem is already very deep with social/video content, and college soccer can and should be a bigger player. This will also help increase the profile of college soccer stars that generate outsized attention. College soccer should also be a platform that helps generate lifelong soccer fandom. In addition, U.S. Soccer should look to offer services, education, or toolkits that support college programs with local partnerships and revenue generation. College soccer-related revenue should increase meaningfully as a result.
- 10) **Regardless of the timing of the National Championship(s), U.S. Soccer should look to support, elevate, and grow the awareness of the event, turning it into a larger celebration of soccer.** This could include identifying opportunities for commercial partner support; hosting the championship in parallel to a youth tournament / event; pairing the championship with coaching or referee workshops; securing elevated broadcast and wraparound coverage; and including professional leagues and clubs in the event's activities.



Competitive Structure and Calendar

The Committee reviewed multiple structure and calendar alternatives for both men's and women's soccer. Our recommendations for both share several foundational beliefs about the desirable long-term direction:

- 1) Both men's and women's college soccer should increase regionalized competition to gain both the cost and student-athlete well-being benefits of reduced travel.
- 2) Both men's and women's college soccer should maximize the number of matches played between teams with similar on-field performance and ambition.
- 3) Both men's and women's college soccer should create more average time between regular season matches to promote rest and recovery.
- 4) Both men's and women's college soccer should make calendar choices that maximize opportunities for commercial and television/streaming growth.
- 5) Both men's and women's college soccer should offer elite players an experience that enables on-field development throughout the academic year, regardless of championship timing.
- 6) Both men's and women's college soccer can achieve ideal outcomes with only a minor increase to the current (2025-26 academic year) allowances for total training/match days across both fall and spring. Improved calendar spacing leads to stronger player development and better overall health.

With both these commonalities and the previously discussed differences in mind, the Committee believes that men's and women's college soccer should follow distinct implementation pathways and timelines. We outline the men's recommendations first, followed by the women's.

Men's College Soccer Structure and Calendar Recommendation

The Committee recommends that men's college soccer moves expeditiously to a regionalized, two-tier competitive structure and a full academic year calendar. The significantly reduced travel of regionalization provides both much-needed student-athlete well-being improvement and reduced program cost. The full academic year model provides increased rest/recovery, a more commercially optimal spring national tournament, and the avoidance of non-academic year costs such as summer preseason. The envisioned detailed model is summarized below:

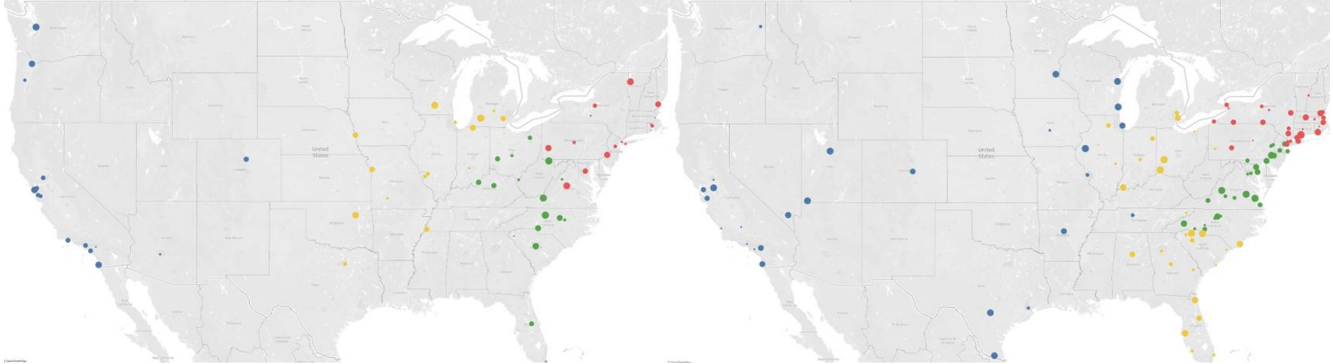
Regionalization:

- Men's Division I soccer would be organized into 4 geographic "clusters" with 50-54 teams each. The cluster would include 2 "Regional" Divisions of the 9 "most competitive" teams and the remaining teams would be divided geographically into 4 "Local" Divisions of 8-10 teams each. This structure creates regular season competition between teams of similar on-field performance and ambition – all of whom are more proximate geographically than a team's schedule today. This creates 72 "Regional" teams and 141 "Local" teams.



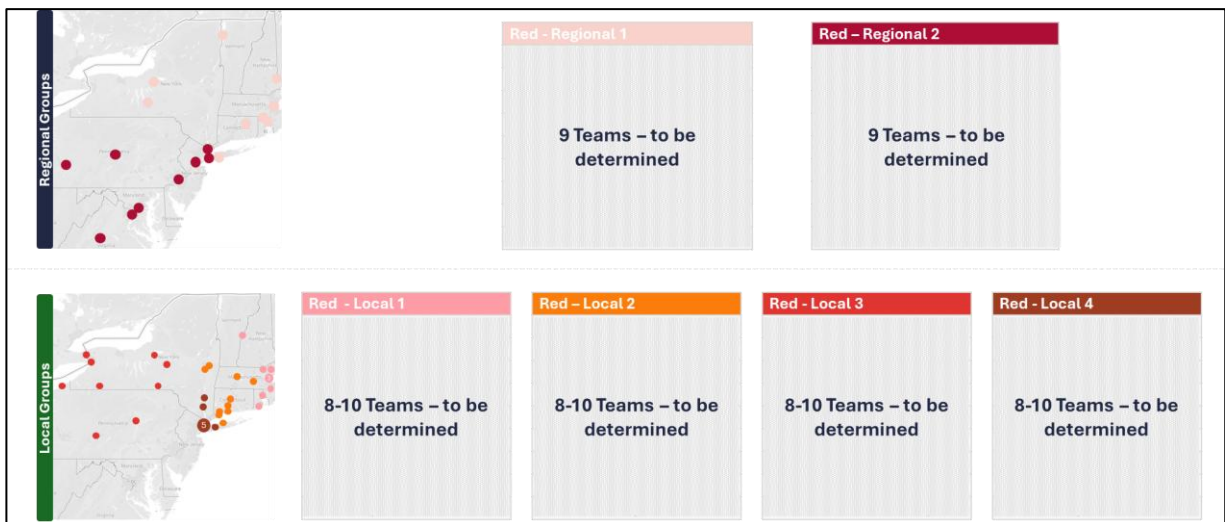
Regional Divisions

Local Divisions



■ Blue Cluster ■ Yellow Cluster ■ Green Cluster ■ Red Cluster

Geographical distribution by city – Illustrative Example



Illustrative example – Segmentation between Regional and Local Divisions

All teams must indicate whether they are interested in being placed in a Regional Division. If not, they will be placed in a Local Division. If an entire current conference that is already geographically proximate elects against regional consideration, they may be placed together in a Local Division.

Competitive Calendar:

- Preseason would begin in mid-to-late August (with flexibility to begin preseason later, if needed) aligned with the start of the fall semester to reduce room and board costs. During this period (combined with the February “return to play” window), teams may schedule up to 4 unofficial matches. These could include exhibitions against professional teams, rivalry games outside the region, legacy conference “mini-Cups,” or charity matches such as a UK-style Community Shield.
- Official regular season games (18-22 per team) would take place from September – early April with a two-month break in winter. Exact combination of fall and spring games can be flexible to accommodate field/resource constraints/weather but all must be complete by same April date. This flexibility also allows schools that operate on a quarter system to potentially begin regular season play a few weeks later than the others, enabling a more complete summer break for athletes and coaches and a lower cost period before school begins.



- Regular season matches will be “home and away” with Divisional opponents, supplemented by a few “crossover” games among teams from the same cluster but different Divisions. NOTE: An alternate format within the same overall structure could instead group all Regional tier teams within a cluster into a single 18 team Regional Division. This variation would include one match against each Division opponent and a handful of “home and away” derbies.

Regular Season Games				Post-season games				Unofficial matches/Preseason				Mandatory breaks					
June				July				August				September					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
October				November				December				January					
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35
February				March				April				May					
36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	

Illustrative example – Full Year Competitive Calendar

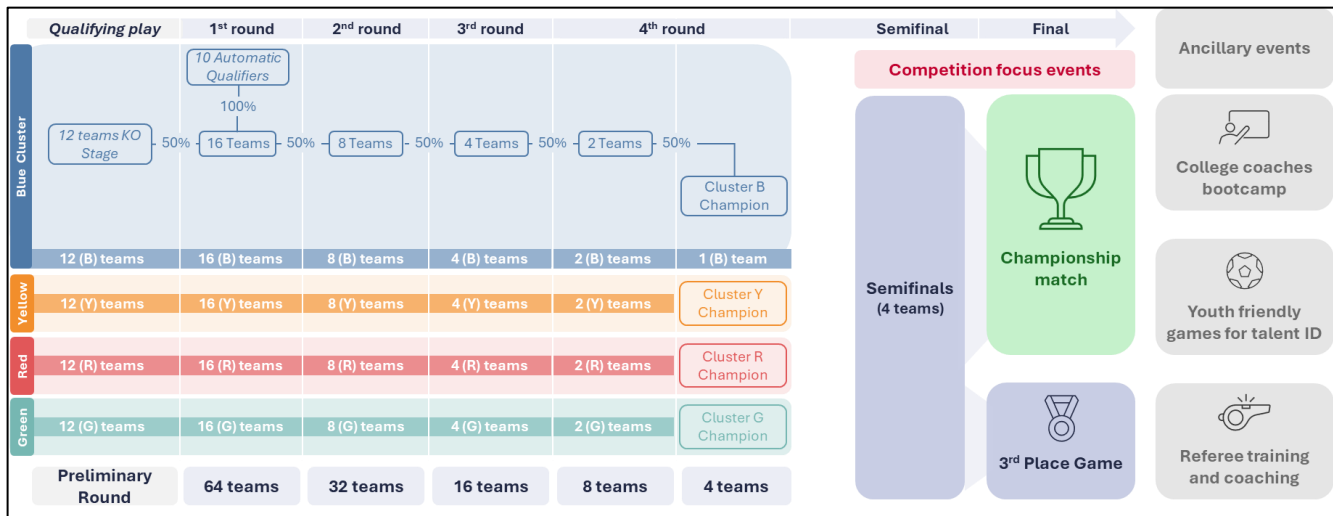
- With limited exceptions, most matches should be played Friday-Sunday, and teams should generally not play more than 3 regular season matches in any 14-day period.
- The fall portion of the season should end by early December, allowing students to focus on exams.

Competitive Approach:

- Standings will be consistent with global standards (3 points for a win, 1 for a draw), and national tournament qualification is based strictly on table placement (no computer rankings, no selection committee).
- The national tournament would include more qualifiers from the Regional Division than the Local and would also include a “play in structure” featuring games between the top non-qualifiers in Regional versus their equivalent in Local. Just as today, all 213 Division I teams compete in the same national tournament for a single national championship.
- It will be a 64-team national tournament, consisting of 16 qualifying teams per ‘Cluster’. The top 3 finishers in each Regional Division (6), the top finisher in each Local Division (4), and then 6 additional berths awarded based on a televised play-in game between the 4th-6th place finishers in each Regional Division versus the 4 Local Division runners-up and the two highest 3rd place finishers (determined based on points per game). This sets up 6 high stakes matches with the strong possibility of “David versus Goliath” storylines. It would be possible within this overall framework to ensure that all current conferences with an “Automatic Qualifier” (AQ) are represented with at least one team in the national tournament “play in” stage.



- There will be 4 cluster finals staged for maximum exposure and commercial value, followed by a traditional national “Final 4/College Cup” contested between cluster winners in a major stadium in early May.
- The national tournament format would be designed with commercial partners to optimize revenue and visibility.
- Non-qualifying teams would be allowed ~2 unofficial games in April for development.



Illustrative example – National Tournament

- In general, current NCAA conferences would not be organizing or managing regular season play given the regionalized model. However, there would be the option to run pre-season or in-season mini-tournaments or Cups that award a distinct conference championship trophy. This would allow teams to compete for an additional title and preserve connections to historical conferences. It is also possible for a current conference that is already situated regionally to keep most or all its members together in one of the Local Divisions.

Competitive tiers:

- Objective published criterion would be required to determine team placement within the tiers in Year One. The Committee developed and analyzed several models applying slightly different criteria to assess feasibility. Upon review, we believe that the criterion should be primarily weighted toward on-field performance metrics over the past 2-5 seasons and could be supplemented by other factors including program funding/resources and geographic balance. This will enable high-performing teams from any current conference to be part of the Regional tier, but only if they are interested. Our early diligence suggests that certain programs might elect to be assigned to a Local Division, even if deemed competitively suitable for Regional.
- In our sample modeling, we confirmed that the Regional/Local tiering is effective in grouping teams of similar on-field performance together. For example, the average Regional Division had a median 2-year RPI of 46, with a range from 34 to 65 across the 8 Divisions. Similarly, the average Local Division had a median 2-year RPI of 141, with a range from 105 to 152 across the 16 Divisions. Note that we explicitly decided this paper should not include the details of any of our preliminary models for individual team placement. This is for two primary reasons: 1) Broader analytic modeling would be required to determine the final criterion, and 2) In-flight 2025 season results should be factored into the ultimate team placement.



- Once implemented, the tiers would need to be objectively re-determined after each season to ensure that major changes in a program's performance and ambition were reflected. This could occur either through on-field performance similar to promotion/relegation or off-field analysis by a committee that objectively considers many factors.

Rationale for this Recommendation

- It keeps all 213 Division I programs in the same championship context, while ensuring most regular season matches are played against teams of similar performance/ambition, in similar geographies.
- It implements many standards of men's soccer globally, including the August-May calendar, the use of standings/table for determining championship berths, and the increased time between matches for both player recovery and training/development.
- It increases the number of teams that play in the national tournament (from 48 today to 64 in this model) and increases the number of meaningful games.
- It maximizes the duration of the summer (non-academic year) window for student athletes to pursue pre-professional soccer (e.g., training/playing with pro teams) or off the field interests (e.g., corporate internships).
- It capitalizes on the single window in the current college athletic calendar without high profile championship activity (mid-April to early May), creating elevated commercial interest (no football, no basketball, before the lacrosse/softball/baseball championships).
- It significantly reduces operational costs through regionalization and today's costly non-academic year periods of play like preseason. Preliminary estimates of operational cost savings range from \$25K for programs that compete primarily locally today, to \$150-\$350K for programs with a national travel footprint.
- It provides ~6-7 months of structured college play with ~3 months of opportunity in professional environments for elite players.
- It dramatically reduces travel and the associated negative academic implications (missed classes); more spacing between matches provides emotional and physical health benefits.
- The flexibility afforded in scheduling accommodates individual school and geographic needs (e.g., weather considerations, field conflicts with other sports) and circumstances – making it easier for schools to transition to a multi-semester season model.
- It reignites historic regional rivalries that have been overlooked or diminished due to football and basketball-driven conference realignment.
- It enables multiple competitive alternatives for current NCAA conferences to award a conference championship if they desire.

Other Alternatives Considered

The Committee thoroughly considered a series of alternatives before arriving at this recommendation. Two were analyzed in the greatest detail.

The first is a model that would implement a strictly regionalized, full academic year model that did not include the two-tier Regional/Local competitive framework. This model would be the least costly to operate. Ultimately, this "strict regionalization" model would have reduced the frequency of matchups between current highly competitive programs and therefore the Committee did not believe it offered a suitable competitive environment to develop elite players.



The second is a model that would create two distinct college soccer tiers that competed for separate national championships on separate calendars. A “fall only” calendar for the majority and a multi-semester model for the most competitive teams. In some ways, this model could be compared to the current FCS/FBS college football framework. Ultimately, the separate calendar, separate championship model worked against our goal of keeping all 213 Division I teams in the same national competitive context.

The Committee also discussed the possibility of applying the 2026 women's calendar (which starts the season in July) to the men's game. There was universal feedback, however, that this idea would not advance several of the Committee's overall objectives for the men. Most notably, it would shrink the summer period for student athletes to pursue off-field professional ambitions (e.g., summer internships) or on-field summer training/competition in professional or pre-professional soccer environments (e.g., USL2); add to the preseason costs that we are seeking to reduce; and negate the possibility of the commercial revenue and marketing upside of a May national championship.

Women's College Soccer Structure and Calendar Recommendation

While many of the forces impacting men's college soccer (including operational cost pressure and the physical/academic toll of match congestion) apply to the women, the competitive structure/calendar solution must reflect the many contextual differences between the two sports. This includes nearly 50% more teams/athletes in the women's game and less “top to bottom” competitive parity, and as described earlier, U.S. women's college soccer has long been the premier, large-scale development pathway for elite 18–22-year-old players in the world. This strength continues to drive success for our domestic professional leagues as well as the U-19, U-20 (in which college players accounted for ~65% of call-ups in the past year), and Senior National Teams.

But the women's soccer ecosystem – both globally and domestically – sits in a moment of unprecedented innovation, investment, and opportunity for elite players. The Committee believes strongly that this creates an imperative for U.S. women's college soccer to proactively modernize. This includes creating alternatives that, at a minimum, deliver a more competitive environment for elite players to develop in the “off-season” months. This includes addressing today's development challenge of no meaningful, highly competitive matches for 6 months (December-May). Without such change, the Committee believes the women's game faces accelerating risk of becoming less relevant/attractive as a destination for the most talented players. Any recommendation must balance the interests and soccer-related ambition of the ~9,000 Division I women's players with the hundreds who have professional and/or National Team futures. Therefore, the Committee recommends the following:

- 1) The 2026 season continues as planned with the newly approved calendar that begins the season two weeks earlier in July, creating the benefits of less match congestion and less missed class time than the current calendar. U.S. Soccer and other influential stakeholders in the soccer ecosystem should bolster ongoing efforts within the women's college coaching community to generate more commercial/television attention to the sport during both the early 2026 season “summer” window and the December national championship.
- 2) This is accompanied by a new, separate spring 2027 competition for certain elite programs built in conjunction with U.S. Soccer. The Committee envisions this elite spring competition to be conducted regionally. The culmination of this spring competition could be a new flagship elite global U23 soccer event, perhaps contested among ~4 regional college spring champions with ~4-12 elite U-23 reserve professional teams (from both domestic and global leagues) and/or Youth National Teams.



- 3) We initiate a broader period of engagement after the conclusion of the 2025 season with a cross-section of administrators, players, and coaches that represent the breadth of women's college soccer constituencies. During this period, we should analyze both the implications and stakeholder preferences of pursuing more fundamental structural changes to the women's competitive model and calendar. This analysis should consider an alternative that continues with the 2026–27 model as-is, an alternative similar to the proposed men's model with regionalization and a full academic year calendar (potentially bringing specific benefits to the women's game such as reduced overlap with FIFA international windows and stronger alignment with the global calendar), and other models that build upon our 2027 spring concept to further intensify the competitive environment for the ~25–50 elite programs that primarily drive National Team and professional pathways. Regardless of the path ultimately chosen, clear support from U.S. Soccer, the professional leagues, and the youth leagues will strengthen the sport.

The Committee believes strongly that all these recommendations would further elevate the women's college game. Additionally, they build upon both the sport's rich history and the passion to grow the college game that exists among key stakeholders, including women's coaches. We also believe that it is reasonable to pursue this more phased implementation timeline than we have recommended for the men. This timeline would allow for both more dialogue in the women's college soccer community and the incorporation of lessons learned from the men.

Next Steps

We will spend the beginning of the academic year discussing the Committee's recommendations with all key stakeholders in the college soccer and college athletics ecosystem. This includes additional opportunities for both coaches and players to share their perspectives. We will work with the right governing bodies to translate these recommendations into formal rules proposal(s) that will be considered this fall. We believe strongly that these changes will have the greatest impact if implementation begins with the start of the 2026-2027 academic year, providing tangible financial benefit and taking full advantage of the American soccer momentum expected immediately following the 2026 World Cup. We also recognize that some phasing of how this full suite of recommendations is implemented may be pragmatic given the totality of the suggested change.

Additionally, we will collaboratively design the financial and operational model to support the recommendations, covering topics including ownership of scheduling, management of championships, governance of competitive play, and funding/commercialization (including television/streaming) of the new model(s). There would likely be a wide range of potential sources of funding/capital to invest in college soccer's future.



Appendices

APPENDIX A – COLLEGE SOCCER CURRENT STATE

College soccer in the United States features a robust structure for both men's and women's programs across multiple divisions of competition. Below is a comprehensive overview covering the number of teams, participation figures, scholarship norms, and recruiting / conference trends.

NCAA Divisions and Teams

Across all NCAA divisions, there are over 800 men's soccer programs and around 1,000 women's soccer programs. NCAA Division I has 213 men's soccer programs and 350 women's soccer programs, resulting in over 5,700 men and 8,300 women playing collegiate Division I soccer each year.

Conference Landscape and Affiliations

- **Women's Soccer:** 31 of 32 Division I multisport conferences sponsor women's soccer.
- **Men's Soccer:** 9 Division I conferences sponsor women's soccer but not men's soccer. The SEC and Big 12 are examples of conferences that sponsor women's but not men's.
 - **In the Pac-12 only two member schools sponsored soccer** — Oregon State (men's and women's) and Washington State (women's). Both competed in the West Coast Conference.

Men's vs. Women's College Soccer – Key Differences

Details	Men's Game	Women's Game
Division I College Programs	213	350
Role in National Teams	Limited	Primary source of youth/senior talent
Division I Domestic Pro League Pathway	~50% of players from college	~85% of players from college
International Players	~35%	~12%

*Numbers from last available NCAA RPI Ranking numbers

Current Player Pools Across the Ecosystem

Category	Male Players	Female Players
Youth (13–17 years old)	MLS Next, ECNL Boys, USL Academy: ~44k	ECNL Girls, Girls Academy – ~27k
D3 Pro Leagues, Semi-Pro, and Adult Pre-Pro (18–23 years old)	MLS Next Pro + USL League One + USL League Two – ~5.3k	USL W League – ~2k (NWSL D2 & WPSL Pro set to launch)
College (DI)	~5.7k	~8.3k
D1 & D2 Pro Leagues	MLS + USL Championship – ~1.5k	NWSL + USL Super League – ~600

Potential League Expansions (2025–2030)

~50 new pro teams are expected, creating over 1,200 new roster spots:

- 1) **Men:** +9 teams (2 MLS, 7 USL Championship) = +200 players
- 1) **Women:** +40 teams (NWSL, USL Super League, NWSL D2, WPSL Pro) = +1,000 players



APPENDIX B – PLAYER AND COACH DATA

Pro League Contracts

Over the last 5 years, the number of U-19 men's and women's players signing pro league contracts (across all pro league divisions) has consistently risen. The following numbers come from U.S. Soccer's Internal registration database. We are partnering with professional leagues to collect additional data.

Men's U19 players signing contracts in U.S. pro leagues

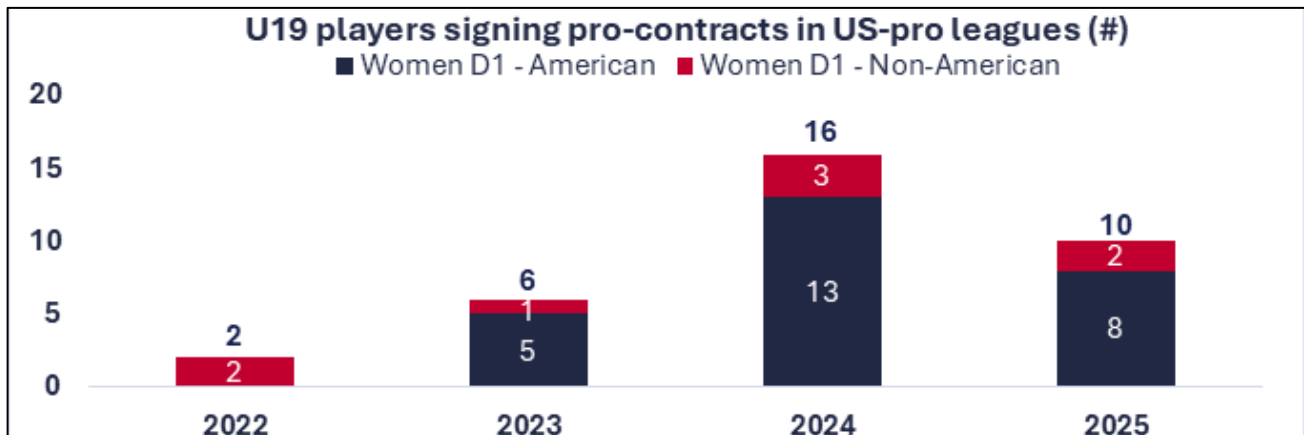


Pro League	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
MLS (MLS, MLS Next Pro)	38	52	75	77	103	119
USL (USL Championship, USL League One)	12	20	25	26	13	4
Grand Total	50	72	100	103	116	123

Takeaways:

- MLS Next Pro was introduced in 2022, likely contributing to the large YoY growth from 2021 to 2022; pro league expansion across all divisions also creating more total roster spots
- **146% overall increase** from 2020 (50 players) to 2025 (123 players).

Women's U19 players signing contracts in U.S. pro leagues



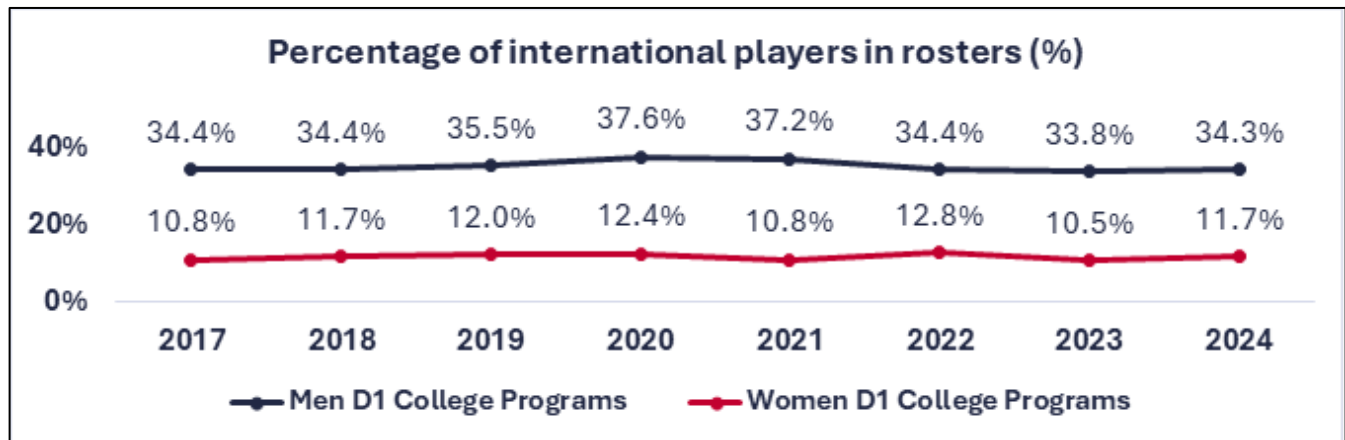


Pro League	2022	2023	2024	2025
NWSL	2	6	14	8
USL Super League			2	2
Grand Total	2	6	16	10

Takeaways:

- College remains the primary pathway for pro women's players, but we are seeing a sharp increase in the number of U19 players opting to immediately go pro (8x from 2022 to 2024)

International Players



Takeaways:

The percentage of international players in college Division I programs is higher on the men's side than the women's side

Professional Leagues Nationality Breakdown

Nationality Summary in U.S. D1 & D2 Pro-Leagues (2024)			
Men			
League	U.S. Players	Non-U.S. Players	Total
MLS	350	502	852
USL Championship	320	286	606
Total	670	788	1,458
Percentage	46%	54%	100%
Women			
NWSL	259	125	384
Percentage	67%	33%	100%

*Men's numbers gathered via TransferMarkt.com and Women's numbers gathered via NWSL '25 rosters. USL Gainbridge Super League first season concluded in 2025.

Takeaways:

- The percentage of international players in the local professional leagues is higher on the men's side than the women's side



Coach License Information (Men's Division I College Programs)

License information compiled via (1) USSF Learning Center, (2) manual searches on college websites

Conference	USSF A	USSF B	USSF C	UEFA A	UEFA B	UEFA C	UEFA Pro	Other
ACC	9	3	1		1			1
America East	2	2			2			2
Atlantic 10	6	2			2			3
Big South	3		2	1				2
Big Ten	4	3					1	3
Big West	3	3	1					3
Ivy League	5	1						2
Sun Belt	3	3	1		1			2
The American	4	1	1					3
WCC	6	1	1					2
The Summit League	2	2	1	1				1
Big East Conference	3	2	2			1		4
Coastal Athletic Association	5							5
Missouri Valley Conference	4	3						1
Southern Conference	2	1				1		2
WAC	5	1	1					1
Ohio Valley Conference	2	2						5
MAAC	5	2	2					4
Horizon League	2	5	1					2
Patriot League	5	1						4
Northeast Conference	1	2	3					3
Atlantic Sun	1	3			1			3
Grand Total	82	43	17	2	7	2	1	58

*Other includes National D, National F, NSCAA Advanced National Diploma, NCSAA National License, NCSAA Premier Diploma, A – Senior, A – Youth, NCSAA National Diploma, NCSAA International Premier Diploma, 11v11, No public information available.

Takeaways:

- Licenses are well distributed across conferences, with the USSF A license being the most common (especially within the ACC)
- While A & B licenses are well represented within power conferences, there is not a significant drop when looking at other historically competitive conferences (e.g., Ivy, Patriot, Horizon, Big East)
- Majority of Men's Division I college coaches have a USSF license, making this a high-leverage opportunity for alignment to U.S. Way philosophies