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March 11, 2003

Members of the UC Davis Campus Community:

After much thought and discussion, I have decided that UC Davis will accept the invitation to join the Big West Conference - a conference that includes our sister campuses of UC Irvine, UC Riverside and UC Santa Barbara. I have reviewed and re-reviewed the many opinions, reports and facts that relate to the issue, including input from the Academic Senate, the Academic Federation, a vote by our undergraduate students, individual conversations, many written communications, and the various data sets that speak simply to where we are now and where we would be in the Big West Conference.

Finally, it reduces to this: The move to the Big West Conference is necessary to preserve and improve the program we have. It is not about the coaches, the Intercollegiate Athletics (ICA) administration, or Student Affairs suddenly being gripped with aspirations for "big time" athletics. Nor is it about "entertainment" or "business." Rather, we are seeking, in an evolving landscape, firm ground upon which to continue and enhance a program that is centered around the student-athlete and the teacher-coach. Our program is an uncommon model of intercollegiate sports. Our plans to preserve it are similarly uncommon and led us early on to seek a conference with institutions of similar academic values. The Big West met that need and was expressing interest in UC Davis even as we were looking for a better fit.

Will resources be diverted from academic programs? The Academic Senate charged its Committee on Academic Planning and Budget Review (CAPBR) to report on the budgetary considerations of a move of the UC Davis athletic program from conference affiliation with the Division II California Collegiate Athletic Conference to affiliation with the Division I Big West Conference. CAPBR concluded: "The proposed budget plan should have minimal consequences on campus state or discretionary funds." And, "the proposed transition appears feasible with the funding model developed by the Athletics Department and the Office of Student Affairs."

Related to budget is the concern that the program is being funded "on the backs" of the students. In fact, CAPBR concludes that "this funding model is based on the principle that it would be inappropriate, unwise and infeasible for UC Davis to consider funding an upgrade in its intercollegiate athletics program through dependence on either 'campus funds' or on a business plan based on revenue generated by the 'entertainment value' of athletics. This funding model is thought to provide the best opportunity for maintaining or perhaps enhancing the current 'student scholar-athlete' culture of the current program because it is student-funded and the financial success of the programs will not be dependent on the win-loss record of the teams and the majority of the program will not be dependent on the vagaries of the campus budget situation."

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Will the move to the Big West Conference have a deleterious impact on the core educational mission of the university?

This concern has much to do with the disreputable behavior we most often hear and read about in Division IA (D-1A¹) programs, especially those in the “big six” conferences. To be fair, it is certainly true that not all D-IA universities have these problems, and more important, within those universities that do have problems, they are often limited to men’s basketball and football. Most important, that is not the world we will be joining.

It is necessary, though, to accept the possibility that, football aside, we are going into a Division I conference that could have all the problems that one might worry about within athletics. The 23 UC Davis athletic teams, in addition to football and men’s basketball, will be in competition with D-I teams across the country. In our planning we had to accept the possibility that those team programs might not be immune to the problems that have shown up in men’s basketball and football at many Division I universities.

In response to that concern another Senate committee, an *ad hoc* committee chaired by Professor Debbie Niemeier, proposed six recommendations to “ensure the UC Davis program maintains the student-athlete model.” They are excellent, and within the next few weeks Student Affairs will submit a reply to those recommendations. In a nutshell, we are in substantial agreement with the recommendations of this Senate Special Committee, intended to ensure that core academic values are maintained.

The Academic Federation also has been closely involved in the oversight of our athletic program, in part because our head coaches are all either Supervisors of Physical Education or Lecturer/Coaches and are Federation members. The Federation has similarly offered six recommendations (having substantial overlap with the Senate recommendations) for the preservation of “the current academic and athletic excellence of our ICA programs, regardless of the NCAA division in which UCD participates.” We will also look to those recommendations as we establish the policies that will preserve the academic values that have guided our athletic program for decades.

These Senate and Federation recommendations are not the first proactive responses to concerns about core academic values. In fact, the students themselves enumerated and built the “seven inviolate principles” into the language of the student referendum that will provide the bulk of the funding for student-athlete grants-in-aid. That referendum will free the ICA program from dependence on an “entertainment business” model that is embraced by many of those universities that are Division IA. Our students will be providing approximately 85 percent of the funding for our program at the time the Campus Expansion Initiative fully kicks in 2006-07. The language of the referendum and our response to the recommendations of the Senate and Federation committees will ensure that at UC Davis our academic core values will always guide our program.

Finally, I have been influenced by the attitude and views of the long-time teacher-coaches here at UC Davis. We have in our ranks many who have lived with, built and espoused the virtues of

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¹The “A’s” that are tacked onto “Division I” refer only to a university’s football program; “D-IA,” though, is often used to mean more than that. It implies primarily that a university has decided to spend the highest allowed amount of money on football, but it includes, as well, the implications of that decision, i.e., that compliance with Title IX is more difficult, that the university is likely in, or similar to universities in, the “big six” conferences (Big Ten, Atlantic Coast conference, Pac 10, etc.), that the university operates its athletic program as a semi-independent auxiliary enterprise, is the recipient of and dependent upon significant amounts of TV money and the site of unusually large athletics venues, and is likely to have graduation problems among athletes, especially in men’s basketball and football.

Division II athletics. Among others they include Sue Williams (22 years), Bob Biggs (24 years), Kathy DeYoung (24 years), Pam Gill-Fisher (31 years), Barbara Jahn (27 years), Jon Vochatzer (23 years), and Ray Goldbar (28 years). These are individuals who love UC Davis as much or more than anyone, and they have been strong proponents in the past of our unique athletics circumstance. They are proud of their accomplishments, not the least of which is a significantly higher graduation rate for our athletes than for the campus at large (about 85 percent vs. 75 percent). They built what is clearly the best Division II athletics program in this country.

Yet these coaches recognize and know the reasons why we can no longer be satisfied with our current model. They believe that this move is much less about seeking change in our program than it is about preserving what we have and growing upon what they have built. They believe in our athletic program and its centeredness around the student-athlete, the teacher-coach, and its required integration with and accountability to, an academic program. They have come to know that we cannot preserve what we have if we stand still, and conclude that, of all the changes we could make, the affiliation with the Big West Conference, a group of universities very much like ourselves, is necessary and comes just in time. They know that the Division II world within which our program was built has changed dramatically. Eligibility rules are also more stringent at the Division I level than at Division II and are expected to become even stronger in the next few years. As well, our historical competitors through financial exigencies and/or NCAA rule changes, have often dropped sports that we have maintained or added, or they no longer find it in their interest to schedule us.

It is for those reasons our long-time teacher-coaches argue for change. These are not people who are simply intent on “big time” athletics. In fact, they have argued against the pitfalls of that pursuit many times in the past. Their knowledge and their investment led me to know that their voices had to be well considered in my personal deliberations.

At some point these individuals will inevitably leave the program, but they will do so knowing that their principles are in the process of being translated into written policies. Through those policies, their values and principles will endure.

Summary: What the move to Division I is, and what it is not. The affiliation with the Big West Conference is a principled step in seeking to preserve the core values of a program that has been a model for the nation. This is not about seeking “bigger” or about “growing the business”; in fact, we are, with 25 UC Davis ICA sports, already one of the biggest ICA programs in the country. Rather, this is about continuing to make available to our students another broad set of opportunities for participation in a meaningful out-of-class experience. We place high value on non-classroom learning at UC Davis with our 400 registered student organizations, our nearly 6,000 internships annually, our 14,000 unduplicated participants in intramurals, our 7,000 on-campus student jobs, etc. While we may become better known because of our Big West affiliation, that higher profile is not our intent. It simply is not. By enrolling only student-athletes, and monitoring their graduation rates with appropriate incentives and penalties built in for coaches, we are intent on continuing to be unique in this nation, just as we are now. This move to the Division I Big West Conference is the best and correct move for UC Davis. It is, in fact, our only responsible option.

Sincerely,

Larry N. Vanderhoef
Chancellor