

Opinion

The clock struck midnight at March Madness. We're not coming back.

What's a Big Dance without Cinderella? Other smaller schools should join us by leaving Division I.

March 28, 2025

5 min 384



Alabama State and Saint Francis players battle for a pass during an NCAA tournament game on March 18 in Dayton, Ohio. (Jeff Dean/AP)

By Malachi Van Tassell

The Very Rev. Malachi Van Tassell is president of Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania.

Each year, the NCAA basketball tournament crowns its Cinderella team, and I proudly serve as president of an institution many chose as this year's underdog. I was honored to cheer the Saint Francis Red Flash at their game in the Big Dance, something our institution had not

experienced for 34 years. But I knew as I watched the game that our run would soon be ending in a bigger way: Our board of trustees had just voted to pursue reclassification of our intercollegiate athletics program from Division I to Division III, a nearly unheard-of decision but one I know will become more common for institutions such as ours.

Intercollegiate athletics is growing in complexity, based on realities such as the transfer portal, pay for play and other shifts that move sports away from a campus-based love of the game to one that resembles a business. Division I is the highest level of intercollegiate competition and championships sanctioned by the NCAA, and the member institutions can provide scholarships to select student-athletes. Most Division I schools are forced to squeeze more money from student fees and fundraising to pay for their athletic programs and stay competitive, and often reallocate current and future operating dollars away from salaries and classrooms.

In fiscal 2022, Ohio State University spent more than \$225 million on intercollegiate athletics, which is more than three times the overall budget for my entire university. Though that is an extreme example, the reality is that big-brand programs are farm teams for the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, and small universities have become farm teams for the big-brand programs.

Players are transferring out of schools like ours to play for money and fame at schools with bigger name recognition and budgets. The fact that, for the first time, there isn't a single program from outside the four major conferences in the tournament's second weekend bears this out.

The Saint Francis board and I spent nearly a year trying to find a way to keep our student-athletes in this changing environment while still aligning with the mission of a Catholic institution and our community's expectations. What became clear to us was that our athletics priorities were diverging from those of other Division I programs, and we needed to find a new home in which our student-athletes and teams could thrive. Our student-athletes deserved it.

Our institution can no longer afford to compete for students who want the current Division I experience. Two examples made it clear that this pivot was necessary.

It was reported in [the Wall Street Journal](#) that, as one of the new members of the Big Ten conference, the Oregon Ducks basketball team traveled nearly 27,000 miles by charter plane to participate in 18 out-of-state games. To do so, each player took only online courses, and those hours in the air represented time away from their peers, their family and the court. As an educator, I can't say with a straight face and a clean conscience that this is how I envisioned the purpose and execution of intercollegiate athletics for our students. Our goals should include prioritizing our students interacting with their peers in the classroom, immersing themselves in campus culture *and* participating in their chosen sport.

[Sports Illustrated](#) wrote about the “crazy custom” Rolls-Royce plane the University of Colorado football team and its coach, Deion Sanders, used to fly to the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio in December. It is easy to understand why several of our student-athletes started at Saint Francis and then entered the transfer portal to join other programs: The allure of bigger programs is undeniable. Though, as a Catholic priest, I appreciate that the plane had Sanders's signature phrase, “I believe,” on the side. I do, too, Coach Prime.

Because we don't have money for private jets, and because our rural location doesn't accommodate planes the size of our peers' charters, our student-athletes have spent more than their fair share of time traveling to competitions by bus. Currently, as part of the Northeast Conference, the average driving time to competitions for our teams is almost six hours, and our farthest competitor is an eight-hour drive away.

With our move to the Presidents' Athletic Conference, the average driving time to reach our peers will fall to a little over two hours, and the farthest competitor will be less than 3½ hours away. With this new schedule, our student-athletes will have increased time on campus to focus on their courses and connect with campus life in ways that were impossible before.

It also means our student-athletes won't have to stay one or two nights in hotels for routine conference play, eating fast-food meals and arriving back to campus early in the morning the day after a competition — all with the expectation to attend and be successful in class. This is the type of experience the board and I want for all our student-athletes. and we

of experience the board and I want for all our student athletes, and we believe it will encourage them to stay and become alumni of Saint Francis.

I am proud of our Division I legacy and the tremendous contributions of all our student-athletes. I am also proud of this moment for our board. It has prioritized our current and future student-athlete experience, our culture, and the finances of our institution by becoming a Division III program that will no longer provide scholarships to student-athletes once we transition to our new conference.

The current headwinds in Division I athletics are making the landscape untenable for many other small universities. They, too, should reconsider competing at the Division I level. I pray they have the fortitude to join us.