



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs



This move emphasizes that varsity athletics is an integral part of our overall educational program and that student-athletes are an integral part of the student body.

# A good move

NCAA Division III best serves Berry's mission



Berry's reputation is surely growing. Our steadfast focus on the comprehensive development of our students has placed Berry in the company of some of the finest liberal arts colleges in the nation. Our recent acceptance by the Annapolis Group, an organization of America's top 125 independent liberal arts colleges, affirms our increasing presence.

The institutions in the Annapolis Group believe that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to develop the personal and intellectual capacities of students by expanding their ability "to think clearly and critically, to judge wisely, to act humanely, responsively and collaboratively, and to communicate effectively." They also believe that a liberal arts education "offers the most effective preparation in an ever-changing world for a lifetime of meaningful and productive work, commitment to civic and community leadership, and personal growth and happiness."

Clearly, these statements are consistent with Berry's enduring values, and these beliefs propel the continuing enhancement of our academic programs as well as

the ongoing development of our student work experience into the nation's premier program. Now these beliefs are leading us to pursue an appropriate athletic affiliation for Berry – NCAA Division III – and the expansion of student-athlete opportunities on our campus.

## The right fit

When we studied future directions for our varsity athletics programs during the 2007-08 academic year, it wasn't the first time the subject had been examined. Six years earlier, a committee reviewed the benefits of a possible change in athletic affiliation. At that time, the college shifted from the NAIA's TransSouth Athletic Conference to its Southern States Athletic Conference (SSAC). Also at that time, the Board of Trustees determined that the issue of athletic affiliation should be studied again once Berry had an athletic facility that would support such a change. The Cage Center was in the planning stage, but fundraising had not yet begun.

In anticipation of the opening of the Cage Center last January, a 15-member task force

was established of board members, the athletic director, the vice president for student affairs and the Berry Alumni Association president, as well as faculty, coaching, student-athlete and student-body representatives. A comprehensive report was prepared to analyze issues and opportunities related to the NAIA and Divisions I, II and III of the NCAA. A draft report was circulated on campus in February of 2008, and the Campus Carrier summarized the report in a five-part series.

Our evaluation showed that Division III's philosophy is the most congruent with Berry's. Consider its philosophy statement:

*"Colleges and universities in Division III place highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students' academic programs. They seek to establish and maintain an environment in which a student-athlete's athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete's educational experience, and in which coaches play a significant role as educators."*

Because of this philosophy and focus, the vast majority of

Annapolis Group schools belong to Division III. Of the schools that field varsity teams (six do not), 87 percent participate in Division III and 8 percent in Division I. Only a handful of schools (three each) participate in Division II or the NAIA.

After a year of study, the President's Cabinet recommended to the Board of Trustees that Berry apply for the opportunity to explore membership in NCAA Division III. The board endorsed this recommendation at its May 2008 meeting, affirming that Berry's athletic affiliation should be consistent with its overall educational philosophy and the quality of its academic programs and that its varsity program should encourage participation through growth in the number and variety of opportunities for student-athletes.

## The game plan

We were accepted into exploratory status with NCAA Division III for 2008-09. College representatives attended two informative meetings with Division III staff members in Indianapolis during the fall

semester, as well as the NCAA national convention in January. Members of the athletic department and cabinet members also have visited a number of Division III campuses to gain firsthand knowledge and build relationships.

At this point, we intend to apply in May for provisional membership for the 2009-10 year. We will receive a response from the NCAA in July. It is important to recognize that this is a mutual selection process. We have chosen a path to pursue, but the NCAA and a conference must also choose us. If we are accepted for the 2009-10 year, we will begin four years of required provisional membership, leading to full membership in June 2013. During this time, we will remain in the NAIA and the SSAC until we can join the right NCAA conference. This period of transition allows us to become fully compliant with NCAA standards.

We believe that this decision will result in an improved educational experience for our student-athletes. Because of the division's focus on student-athletes' complete college experience, there are fewer games in many sports – 10 fewer in baseball, for example – and more defined times in preparation for each season during which student-athletes are permitted to begin varsity practice. These policies will enable our student-athletes to

participate more fully as integral members of the Berry community with all the potential for personal development that such participation brings.

The move also enables us to expand the number of students who can experience and benefit from the varsity athletics experience. One of our strategic initiatives is to increase the vibrancy of our campus; this move will increase the variety of sports that we can sponsor at the varsity level and the range of events we can host throughout the year. We have added women's softball and men's and women's swimming for the fall of 2009 and men's and women's lacrosse for the fall of 2010. Continued membership in the NAIA would make such expansion difficult if not impossible. For example, lacrosse is not a recognized sport in the NAIA, and there are only 23 NAIA schools nationwide that offer varsity swimming for men and only 30 for women.

## The cost of change

Unfortunately, the move to the NCAA comes at some cost to our current student-athletes. During the period of provisional membership, our athletic teams will be able to compete within an NCAA or NAIA conference but will not be permitted to compete for national titles, as mandated by the policies of these organizations. Considering Berry's rich tradition of national

success in the NAIA, including 12 individual-athlete and 33 team appearances at national competitions in the last five years, this is a bitter pill to swallow. For this reason, we have asked our coaches to identify other opportunities for our athletes during this period, such as nationally acclaimed tournaments outside of our typical scheduling geography and athletic contests abroad with international teams.

Another difficult issue is the need to transition to a non-scholarship athletics program. Division III principles stipulate that student-athletes not be treated differently from other members of the student body. Therefore, financial aid to athletes must be awarded as it is to students in general – on the basis of academic credentials and financial need, not athletic ability, participation or leadership. Once accepted by the NCAA for provisional membership, we will be required to be free of athletics scholarships by the end of our second provisional year. That means, if we are accepted for the 2009-10 year, we will need to address the athletics-based scholarships that have been awarded to our current freshman class, as they will be entering their senior year at the completion of our second provisional year. Certainly, we will honor our commitments to these students even as we work

to find solutions that will permit them to participate in our athletics program for their senior year. All athletes for our new and existing teams are being recruited without scholarships beginning with the class entering in the fall of 2009.

## The final score

Berry has a strong, decades-long tradition of athletics excellence. While some are concerned that Berry won't be able to recruit the same strength of student-athletes as we have in the past, we are confident that talented student-athletes will remain attracted to the richness of Berry's educational experience. We will work to meet the true financial needs of our student-athletes just as we work to meet the needs of other talented students who desire Berry's special approach to education.

This move emphasizes that varsity athletics is an integral part of our overall educational program and that student-athletes are an integral part of the student body. We have high expectations and high hopes for our student-athletes going forward, just as we do for students who participate in other parts of the Berry experience. Most importantly, we want them to leave Berry having enjoyed the completeness of a Berry experience with a clear sense of direction and a desire to pursue what is of lasting value. **B**