

Paxson and Hayes detail initial decision-making process behind Excellence in Brown Athletics Initiative

Prior to reinstatement of track, field, cross country, administrators address concerns, clarify campus-wide emails

After the University announced last month that it would transition 11 varsity sports teams to club status and promote club co-ed sailing and women's sailing to varsity, an outpouring of support flooded in for the demoted teams. President Christina Paxson P'19 addressed some of these concerns in a campus-wide email June 6, in which she [explained](#) the reasoning behind the Excellence in Brown Athletics Initiative in greater detail. On June 9, Track, Field and Cross Country were [reinstated as varsity sports](#) — reducing the number of cut teams to eight.

In a June 2 interview with The Herald, Paxson and Director of Athletics Jack Hayes further described the decision-making process of the initiative — including the reason for the timing of its release.

According to Paxson, she had “heard for years from alumni and members of the Athletic Department that Brown has too many teams to be competitive,” inspiring her and Hayes to commission an external study to review varsity athletics at Brown. The study concluded that “38 teams and the lowest budget in the Ivy League is not a recipe for success,” Paxson told The Herald. Following this evaluation, Paxson formed the Committee on Excellence in Athletics in January 2020. The committee comprised seven alums with a history of support for Brown Athletics.

Paxson chose not to include University students or coaches on the committee because of their emotional connection to the situation. Including students in the process “would just create students competing with each other, saying, ‘we want my team,’ ‘I want my team,’ — you just can’t do it that way,” she said. The same was true for coaches, she said. “Can you imagine getting 38 head coaches in a room and saying, which sport should we keep? You just can’t do it.”

Connor Riley '20, captain of the recently demoted men's golf team, contested the idea that students should not have been included in the decision-making process. He suggested that there should have been an “open discussion and collaboration about it,” especially given the sudden nature of the announcement and its timing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Involving students “would have been much more acceptable to all of us,” he said.

The committee took a “holistic look at each and every sport,” including both varsity and club teams, Paxson said. “What they were really asking was, what would it take for this team to be a great team?” Among Brown's sports teams, “many of them are good, but we're looking for real significant increases” in performance, she added.

“We’re also looking at the landscape of the schools against which those programs compete,” Hayes said. He expressed that success against stronger competition was more highly valued by the committee. “Every one of those programs has had success, but in some cases those programs had not competed against a lot of Division I programs, and in some cases not a lot of Ivy League schools.”

The decision to pass the Excellence in Brown Athletics Initiative was unanimous at each step of the process, passing through the Campus Life Committee of the Corporation and then the full Corporation, according to Paxson.

After voting to pass the initiative, Paxson and other decision-makers considered how to release the news to students and other members of the University community. “We actually had thought about doing it later, but two factors pushed it forward,” she said. “One is that the coaches, starting in July, are really starting to talk with rising high school seniors about what schools they want to go to. ... The other factor is, this is going to be a crazy year for athletics with (COVID-19). We don’t know what’s going to happen in the fall, we don’t know what teams will be able to compete ... so in some ways it gives students an extra dimension of flexibility in deciding what to do.”

Anna Susini ’22, captain of the recently demoted women’s fencing team, said that the idea that releasing the decision now gives students more flexibility is “not true at all, because they told us in a way that really, really limits all of our options. ... They announced the decision too late, (and) all the transfer deadlines have passed.”

“There’s no good time to do this. This is always hard on the current students, there’s no way around it,” Paxson added. This is “a situation that’s been kind of going on for years ... we could have just kept kicking the can down the road, but I thought it was time to do something about it.”

Hayes noted that, with no perfect option, summer was the best time to release such a decision. “There’s never a great time, particularly for sports that play all in the fall, winter and spring,” he said. “So there’s really no time during the school year to do something like that.”

Riley disagreed with how suddenly the decision was implemented, and the negative effects that may have had on student-athletes. “Give us two years,” he suggested. Even if “we can’t change our minds, at least (then) we’re giving you time to figure out next steps,” he said.

Susini also disagreed with demoting the eight varsity teams without any prior notice. “I would have installed a transition period,” she said. “I don’t think it’s fair to us that this had to be effective immediately. ... If it’s not about money, if it’s not about budget cuts ... why does it have to happen right now?”

The operating budget of a given team was not considered in the decision to transition that team to club status. But Paxson noted that managing the overall budget was part of the reasoning to

reduce the number of varsity teams. "Maintaining the budget, we do have more to reallocate to both varsity and some of the club sports, which I think is great," she said.

In her campus-wide emails, Paxson emphasized that the initiative was a data-driven process. She noted that most of the data used can be easily viewed. "I don't think there's a lot of data that we use that isn't publicly available," she said. "The records on competitiveness are there to be seen on the Ivy League website."

Paxson and Hayes also explained their specific reasoning for promoting the sailing teams while demoting eight other sports. "Because sailing wins national championships already, it quickly rose to the top of the club sports," Paxson said.

Hayes also noted that "if there are five schools that offer a sport (within the Ivy League), it becomes an Ivy Championship sport. And sailing had four. ... With sailing going in and joining Dartmouth, Yale, Harvard and Cornell, it became an Ivy League Championship sport."

Hayes said he knew that many students would have a negative reaction to the decision, and hopes he can help athletes who were affected by the decision work through their next steps. "We tried to anticipate that frustration so that we could try to answer questions that they would have," he said.

"Maybe (this decision) means we take a little more heat from students and alumni than I would like," Paxson said. "But I'm also frankly getting a lot of positive responses from alumni and others who are saying, maybe a little bit more quietly, this is the right thing to do even though it's hard."