Everyone who has watched NCAA Division I March Madness for either men’s or women’s basketball knows 64 teams are put into a bracket based on seeding. The top four teams are 1 seeds, the next four are two seeds and so on. The teams seeded 1-16 are placed in one of four regions label as either East, West, South or Midwest but is not impacted by the location of the school. For example, Miami played in the Midwest region, Princeton competed in the South region, Arkansas competed in the West, and USC played in the East region during the 2023 March Madness. What if I told you in NCAA Division II and Division III, the playoff bracket is completely different than any other level of the NCAA and is based on where a team is located geographically. Unless you watch no Division I sports or worked in the two divisions, you have probably never heard of playoff regionalization. It’s time to break down what is playoff regionalization, how it is different from Division I and the positives and negatives of the system. Hopefully by the end, a solution will emerge for the issue of playoff regionalization.

In order to understand how playoff regionalization is vastly different than other levels of the NCAA, knowing the championship setup for Division I is necessary. Let’s start with football since it’s the simplest. A selection committee evaluates every team and determines the top four college football programs in the nation based a multitude of criterion. The top seed plays the bottom seed and the No. 2 seed plays the No. 3 seed for the National Championship. Now shifting to the men’s and women’s March Madness brackets. Again, a committee selects the 36 at-large teams as the rest of the teams automatically qualify as conference champions to make up a 68-team pool. The committee is looking to fill those at-large bids with the best teams in the nation. Once the 68 teams are determined, the committee creates a “seed list,” which is ranking the teams one through 68. Taking into account many aspects like fairness, strength of the regions, conferences, etc., the committee seeds the regions from then “seed list”. Geography is not included as a consideration in seeding, in fact the intentionally make it where teams from the same conference don’t play each other until at least the sweet 16. All the other sports are similar in that conference champions automatically qualify but the selection of the at-large bids is simply filling out the rest of the bracket by a committee.

Playoff regionalization is the process the NCAA uses to pool teams together that will square off in the postseason (Missourian). The process involves separating teams into specific regions of the country. Atlantic, Central, East, Midwest, South, South Central, Southeast, and West are the eight regions. The Atlantic region includes: Maryland and most of West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina; Central consists of North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas and a little bit of South Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri Oklahoma and Arkansas; East extends over Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and little of Pennsylvania; Midwest spreads over Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and small parts of Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri; South factors in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the outer edges of Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky; South Central includes Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and parts of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota; Southeast spreads over most of Florida and Georgia and a little of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina; West consists of Alaska, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Oregon, Nevada, California, and Arizona. All but one of which contain three of the 23 Division II conferences. A team needs to rank in the top eight in most sports with the only exception of football where it's the top seven that advance which is determined by their region record (wins and losses against teams in the same region). After those teams are selected, the compete against each other a three round regional bracket hosted by the No. 1 seed. Only the eight regional champions advance to the NCAA Championships at the predetermined location. Also, the eight regional champions are reseeded one through eight. In this regional system, the regional poll is what matters not the national poll. If you were to go to the NCAA website, you can see that Division II and Division III sports include a region ranking drop down in the rankings tab while Division I does not include this option.

Even though the Division II playoff format is different than the Division I format, playoff regionalization does present positives for schools in the division. Since the playoff bracket is made up of regions intends for schools in every region of the country have access and a chance at a NCAA championship. There are plenty of fans and schools that complain about the College Football Playoff system because there are only four teams with a chance at a title. That’s why so many have argued for a large playoff bracket and even then, only 12 teams will get a shot at a ring. Football is not the only example, in every Division I there is a region that is not represented. The 2023 NCAA Women’s Soccer Championships only eight schools are located west of Texas and five of those schools are in California. Now the 2023 NCAA Volleyball Championships has more representation around the country but still the southwest had zero schools compete. However, if you look at the Division II NCAA Women’s Soccer Championships bracket you also see locations not represented like the southwest and north.

The main reason for playoff regionalization was to encourage schools to compete against opponents within their geographical regions. The NCAA incentivizes scheduling regional opponents because it helps schools manage travel budgets and limit missed class time for student-athletes. Lower NCAA divisions make less money in broadcast rights and advertising than Division I schools. Most of the generated revenues for Division II schools come from ticket sales, donors, camps and NCAA and conference distributions. On average, Division II schools have more expenses than revenue gained (NCAA Research). In 2019, none of the 310 schools surveyed by the NCAA had generated revenues exceeding their expenses. Plenty of school have drop sports due to lack of funds. Most recently St. Leo University announced the discontinuing of its men’s and women’s track, men’s and women’s cross country and men’s and women’s swimming teams at the end of the Spring 2023 semester. By the end of the 2022-23 sports season, St. Leo will not be the only school to cut sports. So, the NCAA tries to help by prioritizing regional match-ups to save costs. Teams traveling across country can get expensive with flight costs increasing. If teams decide to bus instead of flying that takes students away from school and class longer. The NCAA appears to want to save schools money and do what is best for the student-athlete.

While regionalization benefits the universities in a couple ways it misses the mark in other ways and less enjoyable for fans. The system is supposed to allow for representation across the United States in the playoff but as mentioned before this is still not always the case. Not only does it not always allow everyone a chance at a championship title, the Division I playoff format does a great job of representing the whole country without playing within the region. For example,

<https://www.nwmissourinews.com/opinion/article_3f4aecb0-afe0-11ec-8e6b-7b679e4228e3.html>

<https://www.ncaa.com/>

<https://collegefootballplayoff.com/sports/2016/9/30/overview>

<https://www.ncaa.com/news/basketball-men/article/2023-03-09/how-field-68-di-mens-teams-picked-march-madness-each-season>

<https://www.ncaa.org/news/2019/3/7/division-ii-regionalization-review-comes-to-end.aspx>

<https://saintleolions.com/news/2023/2/21/general-saint-leo-university-names-discontinued-athletic-teams.aspx#:~:text=ST.,end%20of%20the%20Spring%20Semester>.

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