

NAIA Women's Wrestling: Growth, Scholarship Models, & Performance Standards

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Executive Summary

Women's wrestling in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) has transitioned from an invitational sport to a fully sanctioned championship discipline, characterized by rapid expansion and a flexible scholarship model. As of the 2025–2026 & 2026–2027 seasons, there are between 46 & 53 sponsoring institutions. The NAIA's "equivalency" scholarship model—typically allowing for 10 full scholarship units per team—permits coaches to distribute aid among larger rosters, often ranging from 25 to over 40 athletes.

The sport's growth is driven by its early adoption of championship status (2022) and less restrictive recruiting & roster regulations compared to the NCAA.

1. The Evolution & Growth of NAIA Women's Wrestling

The NAIA was an early leader in legitimizing women's collegiate wrestling, becoming the first governing body to sponsor it as a championship sport.

Historical Growth Timeline

- **2018–2019:** Introduced as an invitational sport with 21 teams.
- **2020–2021:** Expansion to approximately 31–39 schools.
- **2022:** Officially became the 28th NAIA Championship sport after meeting the 40-institution threshold.
- **2023–2025:** Steady participation with 34 to 46 schools reporting active programs.
- **2025–2026/2026–2027:** Current estimates range from **46 to 53 sponsoring institutions**, depending on the inclusion of affiliate or provisional members.

New Program Additions (2026–2027)

The following institutions have announced or are projected to begin competition for the 2026–2027 academic year:

- **Defiance College (Ohio)**
- **Wilberforce University (Ohio):** Notable as the only NAIA HBCU to sponsor the sport.
- **Bellevue University (Nebraska):** Joining the Heart of America Athletic Conference.
- **Andrew College (Georgia)**
- **Bismarck State (North Dakota):** (Projected 2025–26/2026 start).

2. Scholarship Structure & Financial Aid

The NAIA utilizes an **equivalency model** for athletic aid, which provides significant flexibility for roster building compared to the "headcount" models found in some other sports.

Mechanics of the Equivalency Model

- **The Cap:** Programs are generally allotted **10 full athletic scholarship equivalencies** (some sources cite 8).
- **Distribution:** Coaches rarely award full scholarships. Instead, they divide the 10 equivalencies into partial awards. This allows a coach to provide partial aid to 20, 30, or even 40+ athletes.
- **Aid Stacking:** Athletic aid can be "stacked" with academic merit scholarships (for high GPAs), need-based institutional grants, or federal aid. This reduces the total cost of attendance for a broader group of athletes.
- **Estimated Value:** Fully funded programs may average between **\$4,000 & \$9,000 per athlete**, though this varies by institution.

3. Roster Management & Scale

Unlike certain NCAA divisions, the NAIA does not enforce a universal roster cap for the regular season.

Roster Size Trends

- **Average Roster Size:** Most established programs carry **25 to 40 athletes**.
- **High-Capacity Programs:** Top-tier or well-funded programs (e.g., Indiana Tech, Campbellsville University, Life University) often exceed 30 or 40 athletes. Campbellsville explicitly maintains a roster minimum of 45 (Varsity and JV combined).
- **Small Programs:** Newer or developing programs may have single-digit rosters (5–8 athletes) while building their recruiting base.
- **National Championship Limit:** While regular-season rosters are uncapped, teams are limited to **12 qualifiers** for the NAIA National Championships, with a maximum of 2 wrestlers per weight class across 10 weight classes.

4. Comparative Landscape: NAIA vs. Other Governing Bodies

The NAIA occupies a unique "sweet spot" for many athletes due to its balance of competitive opportunity & flexible recruitment.

Category	NAIA	NCAA (DI, DII, DIII)	NJCAA (Junior College)	Club (NCWA)
Status	Official Championship (since 2022)	Official Championship (since 2026)	Official Championship/Invitational	Non-Varsity / Student-Run
Scholarships	10 Equivalencies; "Stackable"	DI/DII: Scholarships; DIII: Merit/Need, Academic	High ceilings (up to 16–20 in some cases)	None (typically self-funded)

Category	NAIA	NCAA (DI, DII, DIII)	NJCAA (Junior College)	Club (NCWA)
Recruiting	Flexible; No strict calendar or "dead periods"	Highly regulated; Strict contact calendars	Regulated by NJCAA	Informal
Institution Type	Small-to-mid private/regional	Large public to small private	Two-year community colleges	Independent/ University affiliated
Team Counts	~46–53	~126 (combined D1-D3)	~14–30	~69–100+

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