

N4A



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Over the past five months, many of us were forced to analyze minute-by-minute information to fine-tune return to campus plans and testing protocols in response to a global pandemic. Some units within athletics departments found themselves in a holding pattern, while others were working around the clock to meet the needs of a confused, discouraged and displaced student-athlete population suddenly trying to navigate online learning and remote support just beyond their fingertips. As a member of N4A for over a decade, I have never been prouder of the way professionals in our field have responded to these unexpected challenges and I know that our student-athletes are glad we continue to answer the call.

I believe that adversity reveals preparation and as Inky Johnson would tell you, "When adversity strikes, you do not rise to the occasion, you

revert back to your training." What if you have never trained for the opponent across from you? What if you cannot even see your opponent? How do you neutralize or contain an invisible threat? How well and how quickly institutions and conference offices respond to these questions will dictate how and when we restore some small sense of normalcy as it relates to college athletics. But, one thing is for certain – college athletics will never go back to normal.

The challenge we face as higher education and athletics administrators is wrestling with the dichotomy between leadership and absolutism. Our predecessors and mentors did not leave behind a blueprint for successful decision making in the middle of a pandemic. There is no perfect framework to apply to these situations to ensure you are making the right decisions. You have a responsibility to be as responsive as possible, with the information available, to help student-athletes, their families, and everyone in your department make the most informed decisions.

I would be remiss if I did not very clearly address the more daunting and pervasive invisible threat regarding deep-seated and sophisticated systems that perpetuate racism and inequity

across our country. Interestingly, a few weeks ago I was scrolling through Twitter and came across an episode of Emmanuel Acho's *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* where he and his guest were discussing the intersections of race and religion. In their dialogue, Acho's guest drew a comparison between COVID-19 and racism, and posed the question of, "What if we treated racism like we have treated the coronavirus?" He said, "We assumed everybody had it, we listened to the experts, and we altered our entire lives to make sure that this virus didn't get a stronghold in our communities."

I challenge you, as a leader in your department, to attack systemic racism and inequity with the same level of attention and energy we have so naturally applied to this pandemic. I also ask that you challenge conventional wisdom as it relates to power and effective decision making as you shift between priorities that you, alone, are not equipped to address. Let us set aside our titles and continue to find ways to lean into, listen to, and learn from other's experiences as they see them, not how we imagine them to be. Meaningful progress is on the other side of fear and comfort.

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Jasmine Ellis

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Due to growing concerns of the public health threat associated with the COVID-19 virus, our campus unexpectedly closed on March 10. I was unaware of how dramatic our "normal" lives would go on to be heavily impacted. Several months later, we are still living through a global pandemic. I feel fortunate to be led by a strong, capable and passionate director of athletics, Tara Owens. Her guidance and leadership through this pandemic has focused on the mental health of our staff and student-athletes, positively influencing those within our reach and seeking out opportunities to be the change we want to see in our world!

Navigating through this pandemic has mandated shifts in how we show compassion for others while appreciating the people and moments in our lives. Now, our focus is on

creating positive and efficient communication and becoming masters of unmuting during our virtual video meetings and conferences! While each of our individual worlds have been impacted with unimaginable experiences, adjusting to a "new normal" has also ignited an appetite for change.

Athletics serves as a proverbial watering hole, bringing together people from different backgrounds. As we continue to pivot and respond to the new way of living, I find solace in the fact that college athletics provides the platform for the healing that is needed to help see us through this unprecedented time.

The current state of our nation is an impetus for us all to be introspective as to the ways we influence positive change. If your introspection and self-reflections result in feelings that you are not contributing to the changes needed, do something different to get something different. In college athletics, we have a fiduciary responsibility to answer the call for progress in our respective communities and foster environments that promote progress.

Although evolving and unknown challenges may still lie ahead, the expectation that college administrators are to motivate and inspire

students, staff and coaches remains entrenched as part of our mission. We must all move forward together. Serving as a female, minority administrator in the athletics department of a historically black college and university, I remain inspired by the student-athletes that have already faced and overcome adversity. We look forward to conquering the challenges of tomorrow.

The undeniable fact is that college athletics will remain impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With challenges comes opportunity. As individuals and members of society, we have the opportunity to focus on the impact of how we treat ourselves while being aware that the outcomes of our actions will affect others. I remain hopeful that we will individually answer the call to push ourselves, not solely for personal achievement, but to establish a "CAN DO" society. Maya Angelou said, "If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be." Therefore, I urge each of us to rethink the daunting task of establishing a "new normal" and be exactly who we are meant to be; a part of the larger solution.

Colleagues, remain encouraged, choose kindness and know that you are not alone in your desire for a better tomorrow!