

The **D-III** Advantage

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Want to know one of the best-kept secrets in the NCAA?

It's small college swimming.

Why swim at the Division III level? Simply put, the biggest advantage of NCAA Division III swimming is that the student-athlete has the opportunity to attend a Division III school. As an extension of the institution's larger academic mission, swimming is most often fully integrated into the academic experience. Division III institutions are typically smaller colleges with small classes, which place a premium on academic achievement coupled with athletic and co-curricular successes. Because there is a cooperative relationship between the institution's academic and athletic powers, the swimmer is fully integrated into the academic mainstream, thereby securing the integrity of her academic experience.

Many small college coaches are also professors at their respective colleges. The result is an environment that minimizes daily conflicts while maximizing the student-athlete's opportunities for academic and athletic growth. This holistic experience, which reveres both academic and athletic success, encourages mentoring relationships between professors, coaches, and students that extend beyond the scope of simply teaching the student academically. It can be argued that while the D-I or D-II athlete enjoys these benefits of a positive, mentoring relationship with her coach, the D-III student-athlete enjoys the same with both coach and professors alike.

Occasionally a student-athlete fails to investigate D-III because she thinks a small school will be too expensive, or else fixates on receiving an athletic scholarship. Small school financial aid packages can be quite competitive, often matching or exceeding state school costs and athletic scholarship offers. Helping with the financial situation, most small school student-athletes graduate in four years, lessening college expenses and getting students into graduate school or the workforce earlier. Division III alumni are extremely useful as mentors and future contacts as small school loyalties often run deep.

Further, student-athletes join small college swimming teams solely for the love of the sport. No one's education is tied to her swimming performance. This promotes a healthy team atmosphere, since teammates are not competing for limited scholarship funds. Also, because most D-III swimming programs are not competing against high profile, revenue producing sports (i.e., football or

basketball) that monopolize the headlines, there is also the opportunity for many schools to develop a higher profile swimming program within its given community.

Like its D-I and D-II counterparts, D-III swimming is characterized by a broad spectrum of programs that vary in their focus and in their intensity. On the one hand, the participation-based programs emphasize providing the student-athlete with a recreationally centered experience that minimizes the competitive component of swimming. Typically these D-III programs welcome swimmers from all backgrounds including the most inexperienced novices. On the other end, the most competitive D-III programs provide the swimmer with a highly focused training and competitive environment designed to maximize the student-athlete's opportunities for success. These programs are characterized by carefully scripted recruiting efforts, sophisticated training programs, and intense competition. In this light, small college swimming should not be equated with small-time swimming. In fact, at the upper end, the fastest D-III swimmers routinely make Senior National cuts, Olympic Trials and occasionally international squads. Likewise, Division III nationals are as fast as many Division I Conference meets and are held in some of the country's finest aquatic facilities. As one D-III swimmer put it, "D-III swimming is a blessing in disguise...it's big school, high caliber swimming with small college heart."

Regardless of the level, dual meets are exciting and championship meets bring major breakthroughs. With 216 female and 175 male teams in Division III, there are plenty of programs from which to choose. With a little digging, you are bound to find a school and a program that fits your talents, background, and goals.