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Temple's Largest-Ever Gift Unravels After Donor Faces Fraud Probe

Temple University has terminated a $55 million gift—the largest in the school's history—after the donor's company came under federal investigation, President John Fry announced in a letter to the campus community.

The gift came from Christopher M. Barnett, a 2010 Temple graduate who has also stepped down from the university's board of trustees. His company, ABA Centers of America, which provides services to people with autism, is facing a federal probe into alleged wire fraud, money laundering and other offenses, according to court records. Fry said Barnett denies the allegations.

Fry described the termination as a mutual decision, made after Temple learned of the allegations. He said the university believes ending the gift was necessary, while crediting Barnett with cooperating throughout the process out of a stated desire to shield Temple from any fallout. Fry added that Barnett is recovering from a life-threatening medical event.

The gift, announced in October 2025, had been set to rename Temple's College of Public Health as the Christopher M. Barnett College of Public Health. That renaming will no longer happen, Fry said, and no payments toward the $55 million had been received before the termination.

Fry acknowledged the news would land hard within the college, calling it "deeply disappointing" for students, faculty, staff and alumni. He sought to reassure the community that the college's standing wouldn't suffer, describing it as "one of Temple's strongest academic units" and pledging continued investment in its growth.

He also moved to frame the episode as separate from Temple's broader fundraising trajectory, saying the termination "does not diminish the philanthropic momentum and strength of Temple." He pointed to $159 million raised in fiscal year 2026—the most successful fundraising year in the school's history.

"Our commitment to Temple's mission of providing our students with an excellent education remains steadfast," Fry said, "and we look forward to continuing this important work together."

THE $100,000 THRESHOLD: MORE COLLEGES CROSS IT THAN EVER BEFORE

Sixteen colleges and universities now charge more than $100,000 a year for tuition, housing, books, and fees combined—an eightfold jump from just two a year earlier, according to The Princeton Review in its upcoming "The Best 392 Colleges" guide.

Harvey Mudd College tops the list at $104,512, followed by Duke University, the University of Chicago, USC and Barnard, all north of $103,000. Georgetown, NYU and Colgate University also cleared six figures, while Brown, Northwestern and Pepperdine came in just above $99,000.

This milestone lands at a fraught moment for higher education's public image. Roughly 70% of Americans believe the sector is headed in the wrong direction, and confidence in the payoff of obtaining a degree is unusually low.

The shift is already reshaping where students choose to enroll. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data shows undergraduate enrollment continuing to inch upward overall, but the gains are now concentrated at community colleges and four-year public schools rather than smaller private institutions—a sign that sticker-price shock may be steering more families toward less expensive options.

Sticker prices, though, rarely reflect what students actually pay. Private colleges discounted tuition by an average of 57% for incoming students last year, according to the National Association of College and University Business Officers.

Among the 16 schools now above $100,000, first-year students with financial need received average grants ranging from $42,000 to $79,000, Princeton Review found. "The data tell a clear story: Don't rule out a private college due to its sticker price, because odds are very good that you will receive a grant from that school," said NACUBO president Kara Freeman.

Some elite schools have gone further, eliminating tuition altogether for middle-income families: Harvard, Penn and MIT are now tuition-free for undergraduates from households earning less than $200,000. Still, Princeton Review editor Robert Franek said the six-figure threshold itself is likely to unsettle families already anxious about the cost of a college degree.

One in Three College Students Regularly Use AI on Coursework, Study Finds—9% Admit to Cheating

A sweeping new study of more than 95,000 undergraduates has found that generative AI use in college classrooms is now widespread enough to threaten the reliability of how universities measure learning and that a meaningful share of that use crosses the line into outright cheating.

The research, published in Science in May 2026, was led by Igor Chirikov of the University of California, Berkeley, alongside Cornell University's René Kizilcec and Ivan Smirnov. Drawing on survey data from 20 major public research universities collected during the 2023-24 academic year, the team found that 37% of students used tools like ChatGPT at least monthly to help produce text, code, or video for assignments. Adoption varied sharply by field. Roughly 62% of computer science majors reported regular use, compared with 24% of arts students.

Because students often hesitate to admit rule-breaking even in anonymous surveys, the researchers turned to a statistical workaround called a list experiment, which estimates sensitive behavior without ever asking individuals to confirm it directly. That method put the rate of AI-assisted cheating at roughly 9%—lower than many anecdotal accounts have suggested, though the researchers found cheating climbed to 26% among daily AI users, compared with just 7% among monthly users.

The study also surfaced demographic gaps. Women and students from underrepresented racial minorities reported lower rates of regular AI use than their male, White, and Asian peers, a disparity the authors warn could deepen as AI tools grow more specialized and expensive.

Rather than pushing for bans or stricter detection software, the authors argue for a broader rethinking of assessment itself. Their recommendations range from a return to closed-book, proctored testing to clearer classroom rules on acceptable AI use, to redesigning assignments that incorporate AI as a demonstration of professional skill. Because norms differ so much by discipline, the team suggests professional associations—not universities alone—should help set field-specific standards, while staying alert to unequal student access to AI tools.

"Assessment reform is necessary and urgent," Kizilcec said, warning that unchecked AI misuse undermines "the credibility of university credentials."

The Campus Sports Lab

When a Denison University athlete's readiness score shifts from green to yellow or red, a coach can see the change almost immediately. That signal may lead to a conversation about training, sleep, academic stress, or recovery.

The tool behind this is the Denison Sports Performance Dashboard. It was developed by five Denison data analytics majors. They are all varsity athletes and spent two years building the visual dashboard for their own athletics department.

The project demonstrates how colleges can turn athletics into an interdisciplinary learning laboratory, giving students meaningful experience while helping teams solve real problems.

Denison purchased force plates that measure the ground reaction athletes produce while jumping. The technology generates about 80 metrics related to fatigue, force generation, asymmetries, rehabilitation, and other indicators. Coaches, however, do not always have time to interpret that volume of information.

Students Jordyn Maurer, Jack Williams, Jack Rollo, Max Fishbein, and C.J. Geier helped close that gap. Their dashboard organizes force-plate results alongside information such as game statistics and injury histories. Coaches can identify patterns, assess athletes' readiness, and use the results to inform training decisions.

The students gained experience collecting, analyzing, and presenting data and coaches received an immediately usable product. The project also offered Denison, a liberal arts institution, a scalable model for connecting athletics, academics, and career preparation.

At the University of Michigan, the Athlete Innovation Initiative shows how that concept can operate across a large research institution. Launched in 2024, the program connects Michigan Athletics with the university's Human Performance and Sport Science Center and School of Information. Students can work in sports performance data analytics, applied sports science technology, and the Human Performance Athlete Innovation Lab.

The Michigan program provides access to advanced equipment and professional settings, but its most transferable lesson may be structural. Institutions need a genuine athletics challenge, faculty or staff supervision, a multidisciplinary student team, access to appropriate data, and a clearly defined product or research question. They do not necessarily need Michigan's scale, but they do need guardrails.

Athletes should know what information is being collected, who can see it, how it will be used, and if and when it will be deleted. Institutions must determine whether a project is a classroom exercise, an internal assessment, or research requiring formal review. Faculty and qualified athletics professionals should supervise student access to identifiable health and performance records.

Consent also becomes complicated when coaches influence scholarships, roster positions, or playing time. Athletes must be able to decline participation without fearing penalty. They should also have opportunities to shape the questions being studied and understand the conclusions drawn from their data.

Athletics can become one of the most consequential applied-learning environments on a campus. The strongest sports labs will produce useful innovations and career-ready graduates while protecting the students whose bodies make that work possible.

Let's Be Curious, Not Judgmental

Fostering Constructive Campus Dialogue

By Peter Rojas, Jamie Wire, Lara Ericson, and Lee Bitsóí, EdD



Clockwise from top left: Peter Rojas, Jamie Wire, Lee Bitsóí, and Lara Ericson

Have you ever wanted to ask someone about their background, identity, or beliefs based on what you see, but hesitated? Navigating these interactions with curiosity rather than judgment is crucial for building inclusive campus environments through a lens of cultural fluency. Yet students, faculty, and staff often express that speaking up, engaging in open dialogue, or sharing differing points of view on campus can feel intimidating.

To bridge this gap, as Director of the Intercultural Center at Brandeis University, I introduced a novel initiative, Be Curious Dinners, in 2024. I was inspired by the TV character Ted Lasso, and my premise was simple: lean into the iconic philosophy of being curious, not judgmental.

The idea was to invite community members to share a meal and engage in candid, guided conversations about topics we often shy away from including race, politics, religion, gender identity, and socio-economic class. I sought guidance and support from my division leader and he was on board right away. We eagerly allocated resources to bring my vision to life and agreed that this was timely since it was a presidential election year and people wanted to discuss politics, but were hesitant.



The Be Curious Team from left: Don Greenstein, Jamie Wire, Peter Rojas, LeManuel Bitsóí, Lara Ericson, Marcus Curry



Marcus Curry, ICC program administrator, sharing insights during dinner with students.

The format for a Be Curious Dinner is intentionally designed to spark connection. Prospective attendees accept their invitations without knowing the evening's topic of conversation. Upon arrival, they are randomly assigned to a table of 6–7 students, staff, and faculty. Before the engagement begins, ground rules are introduced for holding productive conversations on sensitive issues, and then the topic of the night is revealed. After dessert, facilitators encourage each table to share an insight or appreciation gained from their fellow conversationalists.

Attendees left energized—having learned how to approach tough conversations while building meaningful new connections. The dinners have enabled our campus community to hold authentic conversations about sensitive topics at a time when they so often fuel division rather than belonging.

The Gender and Sexuality Center and the Center for Spiritual Life partnered with me to integrate their expertise into future events. With all of us serving as co-facilitators, our strong collaboration inspired other campus partners to join our effort.

We secured a grant from the Brandeis Legacy Fund, allowing the program to scale rapidly. In

Spring 2026, we launched "Be Curious Bites"—a drop-in food truck event where participants earn meal tickets by answering trivia questions tied to past dinner topics. The "Bites" format also serves as a pipeline, allowing us to register future dinner guests and ensure at least half of every table consists of first-time participants.

The impact has been extraordinary! Across all formats, Be Curious has engaged more than 1,150 Brandeis community members, including students, faculty, staff, and local community members. Traditional dinners consistently carry long waitlists, while the food truck events alone have reached more than 900 participants.

More importantly, participant feedback highlights a profound appetite for safe, candid dialogue. In anonymous feedback, one participant said:

"There is this stigma where you can't really speak your mind on campus, and here, I felt encouraged to be curious. It feels like a safe space just to say what you want about a topic."

"Right now, we live in a world where it's quite hard to voice your opinion, especially when it isn't popular. This is an opportunity to learn, collaborate, and be educated, but most importantly, to understand each other."

"I feel like not all of our classes allow us to connect current world events to the coursework. Having an outside-of-class space to talk about these things is really cool."

Ultimately, these memorable conversations are rooted in vulnerability, reflection, and shared learning. Our approach is grounded in cultural fluency, so Be Curious imparts essential skills for college students—including empathy, active listening, and the capacity to navigate complex cultural nuances across diverse contexts.

Because this model relies on simple frameworks and genuine human connection, it can easily be adapted to any institution, and we encourage other campuses to explore this possibility.●

Peter Rojas is the director of the Intercultural Center at Brandeis University, Jamie Wire is the director of the Gender and Sexuality Center, Lara Ericson is the director of the Center for Spiritual Life, and Lee Bitsóí is the vice provost for access and excellence.

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Higher Ed on the Ballot

What the Midterm Results Mean for Colleges

By Erik Cliburn



Heading into the Nov. 3 midterm election, Republicans controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress, and all 435 House seats and 35 Senate seats were on the ballot. Democrats won control of Congress, giving them a potential check on President Donald Trump's higher education agenda.

Pressure is Already Building

In September, the administration rescinded $810 million of funds allocated by Congress for education and health care, including $70 million earmarked for international students. The Department of Homeland Security has proposed a $70,000 fee on a work authorization program for international students. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has also warned colleges against using data from a national student voting study, threatening to withhold or claw back federal funding, according to an American Council on Education (ACE) issue brief. ACE says ED has not found any privacy violation.

The White House defended the September cuts in a news release.

"These programs have deviated from their core mission and instead support wasteful and divisive projects, including doctoral dissertations on queer and trans community-building in foreign countries," the release reads.

What Divided Government Could Mean

Jon Fansmith, a senior vice president at ACE, told the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) that Democrats were likely to retake the House. Even partial control, he said, carries weight.

"Frankly, controlling both chambers doesn't necessarily add that much when the opposition holds the White House," Fansmith said. "Really, control of one chamber is all that's really necessary to start throwing a lot of sand in the gears of the administration.

Former Rep. Susan Wild, (PA-D) told APCO, a public affairs and strategic communications consulting firm, that a Democratic House would likely focus on affordability including larger Pell grants, and on vigorous oversight of ED, though the president must sign any new bills.

Analysts caution against expecting dramatic change. Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute believes Democrats won't pass much.

"There's likely to be changes as a result of oversight and pushback, but on something like student aid, outside of maybe at the edges of some of the rulemaking, there's unlikely to be any change for the next two years," Hess said.

The December Deadline

Federal funding runs out Dec. 11 under a stopgap measure that holds student aid at fiscal 2026 levels, NASFAA reports. If the current Congress doesn't finish a budget, incoming members will, and Democrats' new majorities give them more leverage. Ross had expected another stopgap into early 2027, and Wild agreed full-year spending bills were unlikely. The Pell Grant program faces a projected shortfall of nearly $17 billion by the end of fiscal 2027, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

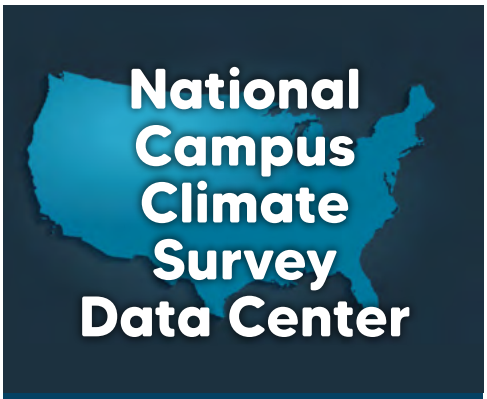
Accounting firm RSM calls federal funding volatility the top risk for educational institutions and nonprofits.

Students Hold Part of the Answer

About two-thirds of college students said they were extremely likely to vote, according to a CIRCLE survey, and 62% identified as Democrats compared with 26% as Republicans. Their top concern is the cost of living.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leaders urged members to make the stakes explicit. "Higher education must be a key issue in the 2026 midterms, and we're ready to make sure that happens," said James C. Davis, AFT vice president.

With the votes in, answers will come quickly. The December funding deadline arrives weeks after Election Day, and a Democratic-controlled Congress takes its seats in January.



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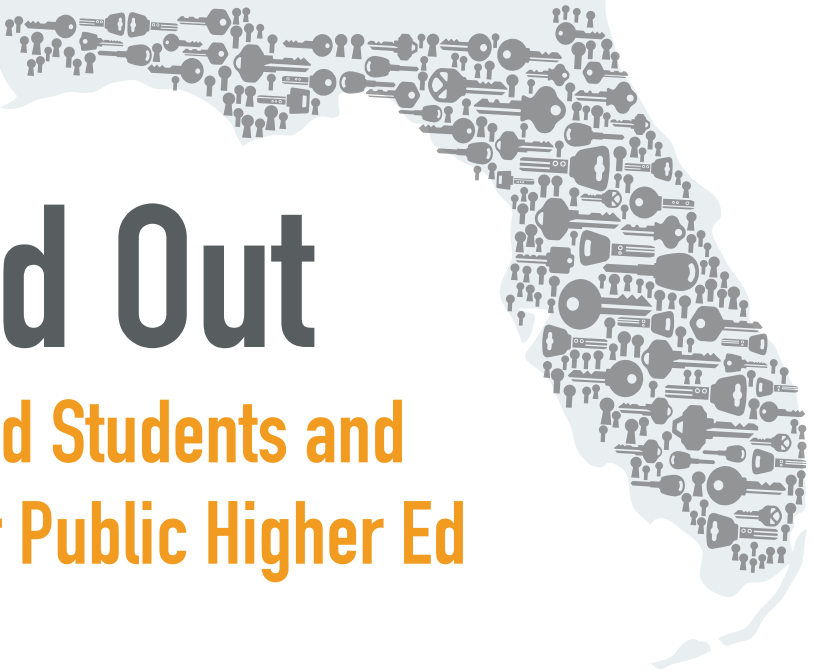
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Locked Out

Undocumented Students and the Fight Over Public Higher Ed

By Erik Cliburn

Florida is closing its public colleges and universities to students who cannot prove they are in the country legally, while the Trump administration is suing the states that continue to accept these students. For the roughly 525,000 undocumented students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, according to the American Immigration Council (AIC), the two fronts are narrowing the options quickly.

Florida's restrictions came through administrative rule, not legislation. On June 30, the State Board of Education adopted Rule 6A-10.0240, which requires each Florida college system board of trustees to adopt a policy ensuring that every admitted student is a U.S. citizen or is lawfully present in the country. Applicants must attest to their status before being admitted and provide documentation before they enroll.

In September, the Florida Board of Governors voted unanimously to amend Regulation 6.001, which bars new students who are in the United States unlawfully from selective public universities beginning in 2027-28. All 12 state universities currently use selective admissions, according to the Alliance for Civic Engagement (ACE). Together, the policies cover the state's 28 public colleges and 12 universities.

However, the state legislature never signed off. Similar bills died in committee during the 2026 session, and critics argue the boards overstepped their authority. A bipartisan panel that reviews agency rules also warned that letting each college design its own verification process could produce different outcomes at different schools. The state has not said whether DACA recipients are covered.

Supporters Cite Priorities; Opponents Cite Costs

Supporters frame the change as a question of who public institutions should serve. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has said the rule simply requires colleges to verify status, and he has described it in terms of Florida residents.

"I would rather have that spot go to a Florida resident," DeSantis said following the policy change.

Opponents point to the students themselves. Nearly 60,000 undocumented students are enrolled in Florida higher education institutions, per AIC, and roughly 8,000 graduate from the state's high schools each year, according to the Higher Ed Immigration Portal. The Florida Education Association (FEA) and United Faculty of Florida (UFF) rallied against the university rule before the Sept. 3 vote, and said the Board of Governors approved it unanimously with no discussion, despite public opposition. UFF President Robert Cassanello said the rule undermines the state's own workforce needs.

"The Board of Governors has lost sight of its responsibility to safeguard higher education for the common good," Cassanello said. "Rather than increasing our university system's capacity to educate Florida's future workers and leaders, this rule stymies growth and closes doors that have helped our communities, which is especially devastating at a time when Florida faces critical shortages in healthcare, education, and skilled trades."

FEA President Andrew Spar argued the ban does nothing to address the pressures facing Florida families and wastes the state's investment in students it has already educated.

"Stripping away the opportunity for children educated in Florida's public schools to access higher education does nothing to help families deal with the real challenges they face, like a worsening affordability crisis, lack of affordable housing, or skyrocketing healthcare insurance costs," Spar said. "Florida has already invested in the

future of these students, many of whom were brought here as children through no fault of their own. Forfeiting that investment is not only wasteful, but it also harms our communities and Florida's economic future."

The Florida Policy Institute estimates the college ban alone will cost the system $15 million a year in lost tuition and fees, even as colleges already struggle with declining enrollment.

Researchers at AIC and the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration who study the undocumented population say these students are already contributing. Steven Hubbard, PhD, a senior data scientist at AIC; Miriam Feldblum, PhD, the co-founder, president and CEO of the Presidents' Alliance; and Corinne Kentor, PhD, the senior manager of research at policy at the Alliance, make that case in an August fact sheet about undocumented students in U.S. higher education.

"Undocumented students and graduates contribute as entrepreneurs and taxpayers, advancing economic prosperity even when they face constraints on their postgraduate professional pathways," Hubbard, Felblum, and Kentor write.

Other States Already Bar Undocumented Students

Florida is not the first state to take this step. The Higher Ed Immigration Portal classifies Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, like Florida, as having the most restrictive tier of policies for undocumented students, which actively bans enrollment at all or some public institutions.

Alabama's H.B. 56, signed in June 2011, bars undocumented students from enrolling in any public college or university and from receiving in-state tuition or state financial aid. The law also blocks undocumented residents from professional and occupational licenses. DACA recipients might still be eligible to enroll at certain institutions including Auburn University, Troy University, and the University of Alabama campuses, the portal says.

South Carolina's H.B. 4400, signed in June 2008, also bars undocumented students from all public colleges and universities, along with receiving in-state tuition, scholarships, and grants. The state's Commission on Higher Education has determined that DACA recipients may enroll but cannot receive in-state tuition or state aid. Undocumented students make up about 1.2% of South Carolina's college students, compared with 1.1% in Alabama.

Georgia takes a narrower approach. Its Board of Regents Policy 4.1.6 prohibits undocumented students, including DACA recipients, from enrolling at any University System of Georgia institution that did not admit all academically qualified applicants in the two most recent academic years. That keeps them from attending schools such as the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, and a federal appeals court upheld the policy in March 2019. Georgia also requires undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition and denies them state aid. Since the summer 2026 term, a Georgia Student Finance Commission change also ended access to state-funded dual enrollment for undocumented students, DACA recipients, and others without eligible status. The portal estimates Georgia has 16,306 undocumented students in higher education and about 3,000 undocumented high school graduates each year.

Federal Lawsuits Target Tuition

The federal government is pressing from the other direction. On Sept. 10, the Department of Justice filed its final four complaints against Hawaii, the District of Columbia, Arkansas, and Utah, bringing the total to 25 lawsuits challenging in-state tuition for undocumented students. The department argues the laws discriminate against U.S. citizens and conflict with federal law.

Assistant Attorney General Brett A. Shumate of the Justice Department's Civil Division framed the cases as a matter of fairness to citizens in the department's announcement.

"This Department of Justice will not tolerate American students being treated like second-class citizens in their own country," Shumate said.

The department has momentum. Courts in Texas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Illinois, and Kansas have permanently blocked similar laws, including an order from the Fifth Circuit, the DOJ says. Kansas' law was struck down the day before the latest filings. Cases remain pending in 15 other jurisdictions including Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, California, and New York.

The suits target tuition rates and financial aid rather than admission, but the practical effect is similar: higher costs for students and legal uncertainty for the institutions serving them. The AIC and Presidents' Alliance fact sheet takes a dim view of the trend.

"Recent rollbacks of in-state tuition access in several states, largely due to lawsuits brought by the U.S. Department of Justice combined with state actions to end access, represent a significant break from two decades of gradual expansion," Hubbard, Felblum, and Kentor write, warning of consequences for the states involved. "As a result, states that introduce restrictive policies may see reductions in academic performance, increases in food and housing insecurity, and changes in degree attainment and local workforce participation in future years."

The report also notes that fewer than one in four undocumented students have access to DACA, the program that offers work authorization and protection from deportation.

What Comes Next

The next test in Florida may come in the 2027 legislative session, when lawmakers could write the bans into law, limit them, or leave them alone. Elsewhere, the outcome will depend on rulings in the pending cases.

College Sports Money Flows Unevenly Through Conferences

Most of the money in big-time college sports doesn't go straight to the schools. It flows first through athletic conferences, that sell their television rights as a package, and through the NCAA. How that money is divided increasingly determines which athletic programs can pay their own way.

A September 2025 report from Sen. Maria Cantwell's (D-Wash.) Commerce Committee staff tracked the split using conference income tax filings. In 2002, schools that were in the five "Power" conferences received around $6.3 million a year more in payouts than those in the other top-tier football conferences. By 2023, that gap had grown to $43.3 million per school.

"Without change, there won't be any more 'any given Saturday' gridiron dreams or March Madness Cinderella stories," the report said.

Postseason college football is widening the gap further. The report said the college football playoff's new ESPN contract, which begins this academic year, is worth an estimated $1.3 billion annually. Nearly 60% of that money is expected to go to the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference.

The NCAA, by contrast, spreads revenue from its men's basketball tournament across all three of its divisions to support scholarships and athletes' insurance.

A July report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) shows how the divide plays out on campus. In 2023-24, the 69 Power conference colleges generated $10 billion in athletics revenue, more than three times the combined total of the other 283 schools in Division I, the NCAA's top tier. The median Power school earned $33.4 million from media rights alone. That was more than five times the amount any school outside those conferences made from broadcasts.

Few programs actually break even. The GAO found that 94% of Division I athletic departments spent more than they brought in, with a median shortfall of $20.6 million. Colleges covered those gaps with $7.2 billion from general funds and student fees, money that often comes partially from federal student aid. That equates to roughly $8,500 per student.

NCAA Swaps Eligibility Model as Courts Weigh Challenges to the Old One

The NCAA has scrapped the eligibility system that's governed college sports for decades, replacing it with a simpler age-based clock—even as lawsuits over the old rules keep working their way through federal courts.

Under the old rule, student-athletes got five years to play four seasons, with redshirt years, injury waivers, and other exceptions built in. Members voted June 23 to replace that system.

Athletes now get five years to play five seasons, counted from high school graduation or their 19th birthday, whichever comes first. Redshirting—when an athlete limits or sits out competitions while remaining enrolled and practicing with the team--effectively disappears, and injury waivers are no longer allowed, with the exception of maternity leave, military service, or religious missions.

Athletes who'd already used their fourth season by spring 2026 don't get extra time under the new rule, while those still enrolled can pick whichever system benefits them more.

The change follows an April 7 executive order on college sports from President Trump, though the NCAA says the plan predated it. It's designed to head off a wave of litigation. Athletes have increasingly sued the NCAA for extra years of eligibility, often citing injuries or other circumstances and arguing the old rule's exceptions should cover them too.

Some suits have succeeded, while others have been thrown out because the athletes' college careers ended before courts could rule. The new system is meant to replace those case-by-case fights with one clear standard—though it creates its own winners and losers. Athletes with late birthdays could gain eligibility, while those who graduate high school early could lose some.

Separately, student-athletes have challenged the NCAA on antitrust grounds, arguing the association acts like a group of employers that illegally banded together to limit how much athletes can earn—by capping how long they're allowed to play, and therefore how long they can be paid. One federal court agreed the NCAA and its member schools may be acting as a single, coordinated buyer of athletes' talent, and temporarily blocked the eligibility rule from applying to one group of athletes. An appeals court has paused that ruling while it reviews the case further.

The NCAA is also pushing Congress to pass the Protect College Sports Act, aimed at setting a national standard for college athletics rules, which currently sits before the Senate. See page xx for more information on the Act.

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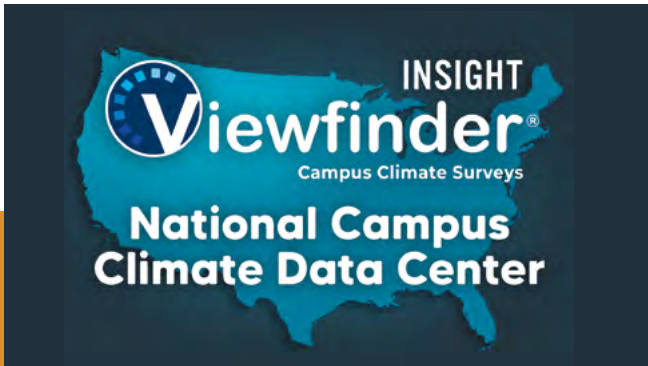
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The Adaptive Athletics Gap



Adaptive Student Athletes Require More Support

By Erik Cliburn

When Stanford University sprinter Sydney Barta sustained a stress fracture in 2024, the injury itself was not unusual. Those types of breaks are common among runners. What made Barta's treatment more complicated was that she fractured her only biological foot.

Barta, a 2021 Paralympian and the first amputee to compete on Stanford's varsity track and field team, runs with a specialized prosthesis. The asymmetry places additional force on her biological ankle and knee, particularly when she slows down.

Her experience illustrates a gap emerging across higher education: student athletes with disabilities are competing at increasingly greater levels, but the campus systems needed to support them are not always designed for their disability.

A recent Stanford Medicine examination of adaptive sports medicine found that athletes competing in the Paralympic Games experience more than twice as many injuries as athletes in the Olympic Games. The

risks vary according to their disability, adaptive equipment, and sport, making individualized care essential.

For colleges, adaptive athletics represents both a student access responsibility and a research frontier. Closing the gap will require trained clinicians, usable facilities, specialized equipment, inclusive emergency protocols, and sustained institutional investment.

Different Athletes, Different Risks

Adaptive athletes are not a single clinical population, and equal access does not mean identical care.

Student athletes who use wheelchairs may experience increased shoulder strain because their upper bodies power both athletic performance and daily mobility. Those using prostheses can develop blisters, pressure injuries, or skin breakdown where their bodies meet their equipment. Competitors with spinal cord injuries may have difficulty regulating body temperature, potentially turning a hot weather event into a medical emergency. Athletes with visual impairments can also face distinct injury patterns, including a heightened risk of head injuries.

These differences complicate familiar college sports medicine practices. A preseason evaluation may need to address prosthetic fit, skin integrity, pressure relief, wheelchair propulsion, heat regulation, or the health of an athlete's unaffected joints. Emergency plans may need to account for impaired sensation, autonomic dysfunction, communication differences, and the safe handling of mobility equipment.

Without clinicians trained to recognize these risks, injuries may be missed or treated without addressing their underlying causes.

Infrastructure Is Part of Care

Clinical expertise cannot overcome a facility a student athlete cannot fully use. Federal standards require accessible routes to sports fields and activity areas. Accessibility requirements also cover spaces such as locker rooms, swimming pools, seating areas, and other areas of athletic facilities. Yet, technical compliance establishes a minimum. It does not necessarily mean a student athlete can independently enter a training room, transfer onto an examination table, use strength equipment, access recovery spaces, or evacuate safely during an emergency.

A meaningful accessibility review should follow them through their entire experience, from transportation and parking to training, competition, treatment, recovery, and departure. Athletes with disabilities should participate in that review because they are often best positioned to identify barriers that remain invisible on architectural plans.

Equipment requires the same sustained attention. Racing chairs, sport wheelchairs, specialized prostheses, transfer devices, and adapted strength equipment can be costly. Without recurring equipment and maintenance budgets, programs may depend on athletes providing their own gear, private fundraising, or temporary grants. A technically available program can remain functionally inaccessible when students cannot afford the equipment needed to participate.

A Research Frontier

Adaptive athletics also creates opportunities for interdisciplinary research. Questions involving prosthetic design, wheelchair propulsion, movement asymmetry, pressure-injury prevention, temperature regulation, and rehabilitation can cross the boundaries of medicine, engineering, biomechanics, and data science.

Research conducted with these athletes can improve performance and injury prevention, but institutions must ensure that they benefit from the work. Studies should include informed consent, privacy protections, appropriate clinical oversight, and meaningful participation to determine which problems researchers need to solve.

Models for Campus Integration

Stanford University is building adaptive sports into clinician education. Its non-operative sports medicine fellowship includes a weekly adaptive sports program along with training in biomechanics, injury prevention, and musculoskeletal care. This model helps clinicians develop relevant expertise during training, rather than scrambling to acquire it after an athlete arrives on campus.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign offers another model. Its wheelchair athletics program, housed within the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services, draws on more than 70 years of experience. The university connects collegiate competition with wheelchair sport science, physical therapy, transportation, and environmental accessibility.

At the University of Michigan, the Adaptive Sports and Fitness program combines research, student engagement, community partnerships, and educational programming. Its goals include increasing awareness, access, knowledge, and participation among people with and without disabilities. That structure positions adaptive athletics as a campuswide endeavor rather than an isolated service.

These programs demonstrate that meaningful inclusion requires coordination among athletics, disability services, sports medicine, rehabilitation, recreation, engineering, and academic researchers.

Recruitment should follow that investment. Inviting students with disabilities to campus before facilities, staffing, equipment, and emergency plans are ready risks offering visibility without meaningful opportunity.

The strongest programs treat adaptive athletics as neither a charitable project nor a separate corner of campus recreation. They recognize it as an access obligation, a competitive opportunity, and a field capable of advancing research and clinical care.

The measure of inclusion is not whether an athlete with a disability can enter the facility. It's whether that athlete can train, compete, recover, and belong there.

The Transfer Portal: A Threat to Student-Athlete Mentoring



By Robin R. Means Coleman, PhD

At the time of this writing, Nijel Pack is a student-athlete at the University of Oklahoma, concluding his sixth season of collegiate basketball eligibility. An elite shooting guard, Pack transferred to Oklahoma in April 2025 after entering the transfer portal.

Before that, Pack attended and played at the University of Miami, arriving there after entering the transfer portal in 2022. At the time, he was widely regarded as one of the most sought-after players available.

His commitment to Miami coincided with a reported two-year, $800,000 Name, Image, Likeness (NIL) deal with LifeWallet, a company owned by a university booster, along with additional benefits, including a car.

Before landing at Miami, he played for Kansas State University. Over the course of his collegiate athletic career, he also declared for the NBA draft twice, withdrawing both times to preserve his collegiate eligibility.

His continuous transfer course of action—now increasingly common—illustrates a fundamental shift in the structure of college athletics.

Over more than three decades teaching and mentoring student-athletes, particularly those in revenue-generating sports, I have emphasized a consistent message: the probability of turning professional is exceedingly small.

A college degree remains the most reliable foundation for long-term success for these students. The data reinforce this reality. Roughly a mere 1.1% to 1.2% of NCAA men's basketball players are drafted into the NBA. For women, the figure is approximately 0.9%. In football, only about 1.6% of NCAA athletes reach the professional level.

The emergence of NIL compensation and the transfer portal is transforming not only athletes' economic opportunities, but also their educational trajectories—and, by extension, faculty members' ability to support them.

For those of us invested in student academic development, a pressing question arises: what does meaningful mentorship look like when student-athletes' institutional affiliations are increasingly transient?

Taken together, NIL and the transfer portal have introduced a functional equivalent of free agency in college sports. Student-athletes signal mobility by entering the portal, while NIL opportunities create powerful incentives to relocate in pursuit of more lucrative opportunities.

The result is a heated market dynamic in which recruitment is always ongoing and extremely transactional.

Much of the public debate has focused on whether NIL constitutes de facto pay-for-play, thereby signaling the end of amateur college sports. That debate, while important, obscures a larger structural reality. Universities and adjacent industries continue to enjoy enormous economic benefits from college athletics.

In 2025, the top 75 college sports programs were valued at a combined $51.22 billion. Beyond campuses, college athletics drives substantial economic activity, including an estimated $3.3 billion in wagers on the 2026 NCAA basketball tournaments alone.

Moreover, emerging betting and prediction markets tied to athlete transfer announcements and decision-making further complicate the landscape.

The transfer portal itself, introduced in 2018, initially served administrative efficiency. Compliance officers gained a centralized system for tracking athletes movements and eligibility, while coaches could monitor prospective transfers in real time.

Since the NCAA's 2024 decision to allow unlimited transfers, the portal's function has expanded dramatically. It now facilitates a level of mobility that fundamentally alters the relationship between student-athletes and their institutions.

Since the NCAA's 2024 decision to allow unlimited transfers, the portal's function has expanded dramatically. It now facilitates a level of mobility that fundamentally alters the relationship between student-athletes and their institutions.

This carries academic consequences. As student-athletes transfer with increasing frequency, sometimes mid-academic year, universities' capacity to provide sustained advising and mentorship diminishes. Faculty relationships, which depend on time, continuity, and cultivating trust, are particularly vulnerable.

Official NCAA metrics offer little

indication of concern. The Association reports that the Division I Graduation Success Rate increased from 74% in 2002 to 91% in 2024, with notable gains among Black student-athletes and in football and men's basketball.

On its face, the trend suggests academic progress. However, what may be more opaque is the lived academic experiences of highly mobile athletes whose educational pathways may be fragmented.

Indeed, the current system strains foundational theories of student success. Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement emphasizes the importance of sustained engagement with the campus environment.

Vincent Tinto's model of retention highlights social and academic integration as critical to persistence. Research by George Kuh and Shouping Hu underscores the development benefits of meaningful student-faculty interaction, particularly when it involves significant investments of time and energy. Terrell Strayhorn has emphasized the centrality of belonging, defined by affirming institutional relationships.

These frameworks share the common premise that student success depends on the continuity of (faculty) engagement. The emerging reality of college athletics challenges that premise. What, then, is to be done?

Current policy responses are insufficient. The proposed SCORE Act, introduced in 2025, focuses primarily on regulating NIL compensation and mitigating legal uncertainty.

Its provisions related to academics are minimal, requiring only that institutions provide access to academic and career counseling.

A more candid acknowledgement is needed. For a subset of student-athletes, the collegiate experience now resembles a form of short-term contractual engagement within a loosely coordinated higher-education system. Institutions have not adapted their academic support structures to this reality.

Addressing this gap will require both research and institutional innovation. Existing transfer-student frameworks, such as those advanced by the American Council of Education and the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, offer useful starting points.

In particular, they emphasize coordinated support, college credit mobility, and shared responsibility across institutional units. However, even these more thoughtful models assume a degree of stability that no longer applies to many student-athletes.

New research should center explicitly on multi-transfer student-athletes, examining how mobility shapes their academic decision-making, sense of belonging, and degree attainment.

Equally important, institutions should experiment with new mentoring models that are not confined to a single campus. One possibility is a system of distributed, compensated faculty mentorship, supported by athletic departments or governing bodies, that follows student-athletes across institutional boundaries.

Such proposals raise significant practical and philosophical questions, including whether highly compensated athletes will prioritize academic engagement. What is clear is that maintaining models predicated on stability in an environment defined by mobility is no longer tenable. If the structure of college athletics has changed, so too must the methods by which institutions support student learning and development.

The question is no longer whether change is necessary, but whether higher education can confront the implications of a changing educational experience.

Robin R. Means Coleman, PhD is a professor of Media Studies and of African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia and a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board.



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A Senate Bill Would Rewrite College Sports' Rules, and Reach Well Beyond the Athletic Department

By Erik Cliburn

The Protect College Sports Act would legislate student-athlete pay, transfers between schools, and eligibility to play into federal law. It would also add new academic, medical, and reporting obligations for colleges.

For several years, college athletes' right to earn endorsement money has been governed by a patchwork of state laws, NCAA rules, and most recently, a court settlement. A bipartisan bill that has passed the Senate would replace much of that patchwork with a single federal standard.

The Protect College Sports Act—proposed to establish nationwide rules around student-athlete compensation, scholarship guarantees, health and safety standards, women's and Olympic sports protections, and broadcasting arrangements—was passed by the Senate in a 77-22 vote on September 28.

CBS Sports reported that no college sports overhaul had advanced that far in the Senate before. The bill's authors are Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), Eric Schmitt (R-Mo.), and Chris Coons (D-Del.). It now awaits action in the House. If the House does not act before the current Congress ends in January, the bill would have to start over.

The backers point to mounting financial strain on colleges. A September 2025 report from Cantwell's staff found that Division I schools had cut 41 Olympic sports programs since May 2024, affecting at least 1,000 athletes.

"Colleges, large and small, have reached a breaking point," Schmitt said in March, when he and Cantwell unveiled the media rights proposal that was later folded into the bill. "The current environment of runaway deals, facility arms races, and skyrocketing coaching salaries has put pressure on the entire system."

The bill would guarantee athletes the right to profit from their name, image and likeness (NIL). It would also bar states from setting their own rules on NIL pay, transfers, or eligibility. Athletes would get five years to compete, beginning either when they first enroll full time or in the academic year after they turn 19, whichever comes first. They could transfer once without penalty, but a second transfer would generally cost a year of competition. Agents' fees on endorsement deals would be capped at 5%.

Much of the bill would land on the academic side of campus. Athletics staff could not pressure athletes over their choice of courses or majors. Colleges could not cut a scholarship because of performance, injury, or roster decisions. Division I schools would have to welcome back former scholarship athletes who left without a degree within the past decade, with the same aid they had before.

Colleges would also have to cover athletes' out-of-pocket costs for sports injuries, both while they play and for five years after. Each school would need a health and safety officer who reports to someone outside the athletic department.

Annual reports would break down revenue, spending, athletes' time commitments and academic outcomes by sport.

The bill also targets the wealthiest programs. Schools with at least $80 million in athletic revenue would have to keep scholarships and roster spots in sports that don't profit at 2024-25 levels. Those would include women's teams and Olympic sports such as swimming and track. A school seeking a hardship waiver would first have to cut coaching pay in its moneymaking sports by the same proportion. They also could not pay any coach more than $500,000 from sources other than athletics revenue or donations to the department.

The bill's biggest financial lever is an exemption from antitrust law. It would allow colleges to voluntarily pool their broadcast rights and sell them jointly, much as NFL teams do. Supporters estimate the arrangement could generate $4 billion to $8 billion in new income. Every participating school would be guaranteed at least as much media revenue as in its best recent year.

The Commerce Committee says 32 NCAA conferences and more than 380 colleges support the bill. The Big Ten and Southeastern Conference, the two wealthiest, demanded changes before backing it. They argued that the media pooling provision and athletes' broad new right to sue needed revisions

Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-Ala.), a former SEC football coach, is also opposed.

"I think their bill goes too far," Tuberville said on the Senate floor in June. "Unfortunately, it gets too deep into the businesses of universities, conferences, and athletics departments, while doing far too little to give the student-athlete the stability and clarity that, actually, they need."

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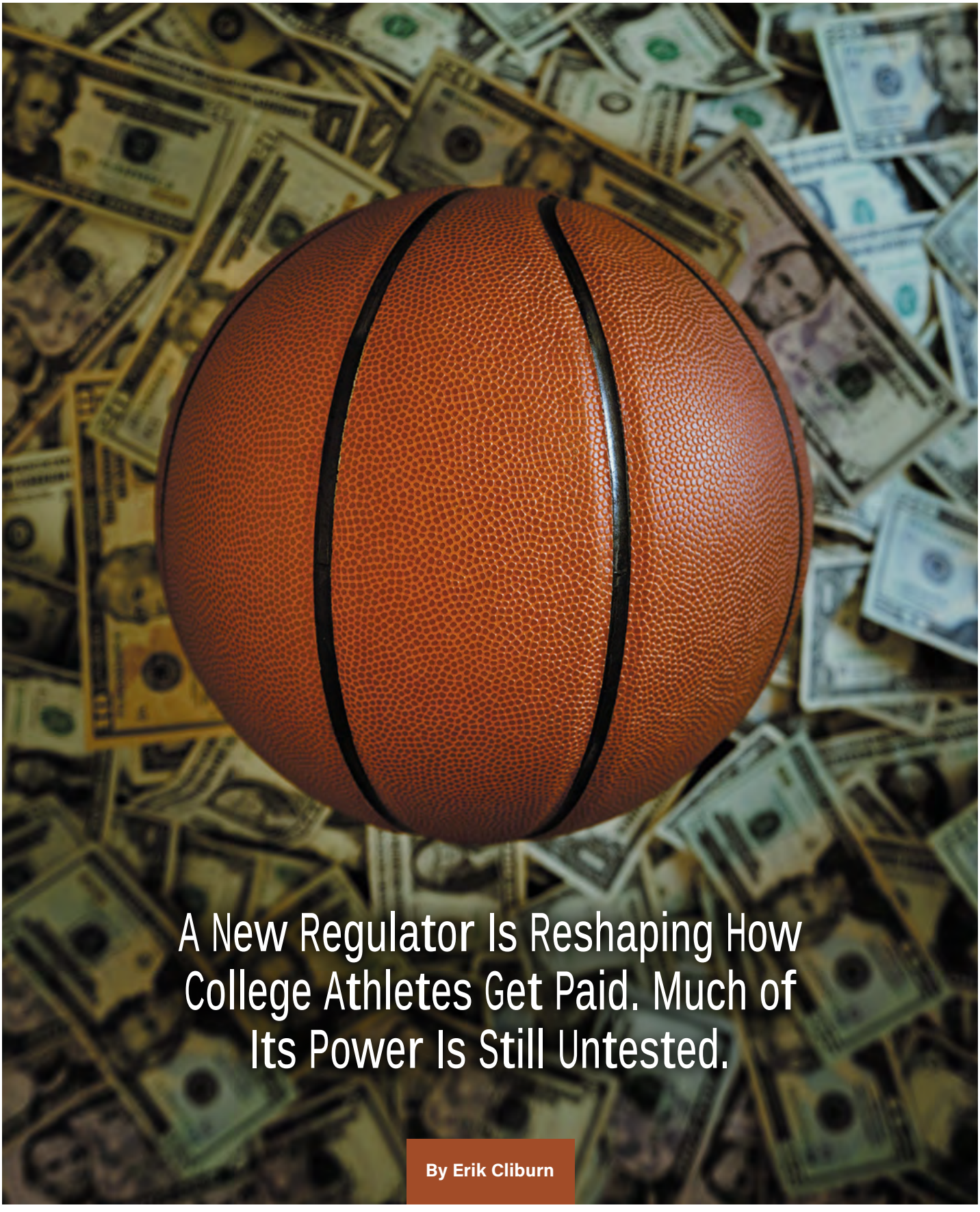
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A New Regulator Is Reshaping How College Athletes Get Paid. Much of Its Power Is Still Untested.

By Erik Cliburn

The College Sports Commission, created through a landmark antitrust settlement, now oversees student-athlete pay at Division I colleges. Here's what campus leaders should know.

For decades, NCAA rules barred college athletes from being paid beyond receiving scholarships. That era formally ended on June 6, 2025, when a federal judge approved the settlement of *House v. NCAA*, a class-action antitrust suit that student-athletes brought against the NCAA and five of the country's largest athletic conferences: the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and SEC.

The settlement lets Division I colleges pay athletes directly. The payments are capped at 22% of the average revenue those schools earn from media rights, ticket sales, and sponsorships, which equates to about $21.58 million per college this academic year.

To police the new system, the conferences created an independent body, the College Sports Commission (CSC).

"We look forward to implementing this historic settlement designed to bring stability, integrity, and competitive balance to college athletics, while increasing both scholarship and revenue opportunities for student-athletes in all sports," Big Ten Commissioner Tony Petitti said when the settlement was approved.

What the CSC Oversees

The commission enforces three sets of NCAA rules that grew out of the settlement. The first is the cap on direct payments. The second is a set of limits on roster sizes, which replaced the old caps on athletic scholarships. The third governs athletes' earnings from their name, image and likeness (NIL), such as endorsement deals. Everything else, including academic eligibility, stays with the NCAA's own enforcement staff.

Colleges must log every payment agreement with an athlete in a system called CAPS within five business days of their signing, and must attest each year that they stayed under the cap. Athletes, for their part, must submit any outside NIL deal worth $600 or more to NIL Go, a clearinghouse built by Deloitte. Reviewers there weigh whether the payor has ties to the athlete's college, the deal promotes a real product or service, and that the pay matches what comparable endorsees earn.

> The commission reported on Sept. 9 that NIL Go has cleared 46,478 deals worth $582.49 million since June 2025, including $227. 25 million this past July and August alone.

That scrutiny is aimed largely at donors. The settlement's definition of an "associated entity or individual" includes anyone who has given more than $50,000 to a college over their lifetime, a group advancement offices will recognize.

The volume of deals has become substantial. The commission reported on Sept. 9 that NIL Go has cleared 46,478 deals worth $582.49 million since June 2025, including $227.25 million this past July and August alone.

"Our job is to review every deal for compliance with the rules, and to do so consistently, efficiently, and as quickly as we can," Bryan Seeley, the commission's CEO, said in a statement.

Athletes whose deals are rejected can revise them or take the dispute to neutral arbitration, a process designed to wrap up within 45 days.

What Remains Unsettled

For all the talk of stability, the commission's enforcement machinery is barely tested. Only one arbitration case was pending as of September 23.

Public universities face a thornier question. The settlement concedes that the NCAA and the conferences cannot waive the constitutional immunity many public institutions have from certain lawsuits. The athletes' attorneys, however, reserved the right to argue that this immunity doesn't shield schools from the settlement's terms. Colleges are also required to arbitrate disputes only where state law allows it.

The rules for challenging the commission are uneven as well. The arbitration procedures for athletes can change only if their attorneys, the NCAA, and the conferences all agree. The commission can revise the procedures for colleges on its own after giving them an opportunity to comment.

Outside pressures loom also. Title IX obligations, a July 2025 presidential executive order, and competing bills in Congress could each reshape the commission's role before the settlement's 10-year term ends.

It remains to be seen what changes may come in the future.

Colleges Can Now Pay Athletes Directly. Nothing Says How the Money Must Be Split.

By Erik Cliburn

For most of its history, the NCAA barred colleges from paying athletes anything beyond scholarships. Since July 1, 2025, however, Division I colleges that opted into the *House v. NCAA* settlement can pay them directly from athletic department budgets. Each college may distribute up to 22% of the average revenue that schools in the five power conferences earn from media rights, ticket sales and sponsorships. That cap was $20.5 million per school in 2025-26 and increased to about $21.58 million this year. The payments are separate from endorsement deals with outside companies, known as name, image and likeness (NIL) deals.

Participation is voluntary. An accounting honors thesis at the University of Arkansas (U of A) counts 319 of 365 Division I programs as opting in for 2025-26. All eight Ivy League schools declined. Schools that stayed out cited costs, roster limits and the risk of Title IX lawsuits. Title IX is the federal law barring sex discrimination in education programs, including athletics.

That last concern points to the model's central feature: the cap is a ceiling, not a formula. The settlement doesn't say how a college must divide the money among sports, and the thesis finds that Title IX is the only constraint beyond the cap itself.

Schools that have disclosed plans have steered most of it to the two biggest moneymakers. Louisiana State University (LSU) committed its full $20.5 million last year, with 75% for football, 15% for men's basketball, and 5% for women's basketball. The last 5% was split among every other sport. CBS Sports reported before the first payments that more than 70% of power-conference money was expected to go to football.

"With women's sports, Olympic sports, and other sports losing scholarships and roster slots every year, it is time to reverse the damage," Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) said in March, when she and Sen. Eric Schmitt (R-Mo.) released a draft bill on media rights.

What the Settlement Protects

The settlement's safeguards for smaller sports concern roster spots, not dollars. It lifted the NCAA's scholarship limits and replaced them with roster limits. Judge Claudia Wilken initially refused to approve the deal in April 2025 because those limits could have pushed thousands of athletes off teams, ESPN reported. The lawyers revised it so that no athlete would lose a spot as a direct result. Objectors had also raised Title IX concerns. Wilken said those could be addressed outside the settlement, according to a summary of her ruling by Optimum Sports Consulting.

Executive Orders Point Toward the Same Rules Congress Is Debating, but Can't Enforce Them

Two presidential orders on college sports sit alongside the settlement and the Senate bill. Neither carries the force of a statute.

President Trump signed the first, "Saving College Sports," on July 24, 2025, a month after the settlement was approved. It described a "rudderless system in which competing university donors engage in bidding wars for the best players, who can change teams each season." The order declares it the executive branch's policy that third-party "pay-for-play" payments to athletes are improper. It also says athletic departments with more than $125 million in revenue should add scholarships and roster spots in non-revenue sports. Departments with more than $50 million should keep at least their 2024-25 levels. It directs the U.S. Education Department, the Labor Department, the National Labor Relations Board, the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission to act on athlete status, enforcement, and scholarship protections.

The order's own wording limits it, though. It says it creates no right "enforceable at law or in equity." A Saul Ewing legal analysis noted that it is unclear how agencies could direct scholarship and roster numbers within their existing authority.

A second order, "Urgent National Action to Save College Sports," followed in April 2026. According to the White House, it calls for five years of eligibility and one free transfer, two of the terms in the Senate bill. It also directs the Federal Trade Commission to enforce rules on sports agents. The administration paired it with calls for Congress to pass legislation.

A New Expense on Thin Margins

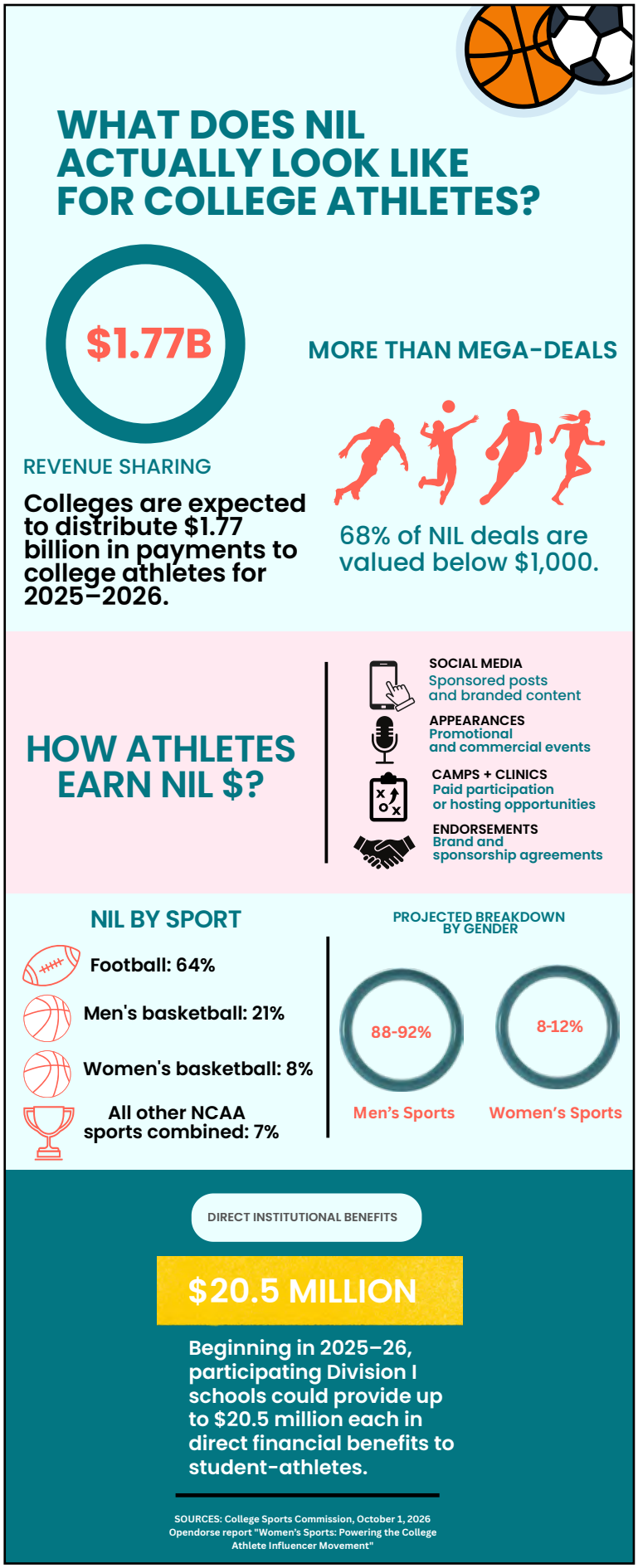
The money has to come from somewhere. The U of A thesis found the cap exceeds the total 2022 revenue of 81 of the 232 Division I schools with public financial data. Even at the SEC and Big Ten, average 2024 expenses, about $196 million, slightly exceeded revenue, approximately $194.4 million, before any revenue sharing. The thesis counts student fees and institutional support as revenue. LSU, which reported an $818,000 operating loss in 2024, froze hiring. Outside the power conferences, the thesis says state appropriations, student fees and university transfers already cover 56% of operations at Group of Five schools and 69% at Football Championship Subdivision schools.

Colleges are looking for new money. Ten had signed jersey-patch sponsorships by April, and the University of Tennessee added a 10% "talent fee" to ticket prices. Others are trimming. U of A, which cut 10% of its athletic staff in 2025, announced in April that it would discontinue men's and women's tennis. In 2023-24 the two teams earned less than $10,000 against more than $2.6 million in expenses. The athletic director cited long-term sustainability. Minnesota's proposed $200 student athletics fee drew backlash from students and alumni.

For lower-revenue programs, "the model compounds an existing structural imbalance rather than introducing a manageable new cost," wrote Cal Dunham, the U of A thesis author.

What Congress Would Change

The Senate passed the Protect College Sports Act on Sept. 28 by a 77-22 vote. The bill would write the cap into federal law and keep it in place after the settlement expires, adjusted yearly for inflation. It would also add what the settlement lacks: a floor for smaller sports. Schools reporting at least $80 million in annual athletics revenue would have to keep at least as many scholarships and roster spots for sports that don't cover their own costs as they offered in 2024-25, with limited one-year waivers. The bill protects spots, not payments, so it sets no minimum share of the cap for any sport. It now goes to the House, where law firm Morgan Lewis noted there is limited floor time before the current Congress ends in January. See page 20 for more information.



The NCAA Made Mental Health Support Mandatory. Coaches Are Becoming the First Line of Defense.

A rule in place since 2019 sets baseline expectations for every NCAA member college. Now the association is training coaches to spot problems before they become crises.

By Erik Cliburn



For much of its history, the NCAA treated athletes' mental health as a matter of good practice rather than an obligation. That changed in 2019, when member colleges adopted a rule requiring every school in all three divisions to make mental health services and resources available to its student-athletes. The association's constitution, rewritten in 2022, goes further. It states that college sports must be run in a way that protects, supports, and enhances athletes' mental and physical health.

Increasingly, the NCAA is counting on people who aren't clinicians to help meet that commitment. Divisions II and III schools now pay for coaches and athletic trainers to take Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). The course teaches people without clinical training to spot signs of trouble and steer athletes toward care.

"For many college athletes, they see the trainers and coaches as their closest and most trusted adult figures on campus," said Judith LeDoux, a certified Mental Health First Aider who directs a program for public safety workers at Anna Maria College. "Having them trained in MHFA can only provide a benefit to athletics staff and student-athletes."

The Rule Requirements

The requirement points colleges to the NCAA's Mental Health Best Practices. The guide was drawn up with more than 20 medical, mental health, and athletic organizations and was updated in 2024. It rests on four pillars.

First, each athletic department should have a written plan for promoting mental health, developed with a licensed provider. Second, every athlete should be screened for psychological distress at least once a year using a scientifically validated questionnaire. Third, schools need written action plans that spell out how athletes are referred for care in routine and emergency situations, and who is involved. Fourth, only licensed mental health professionals should be in charge of diagnosis and treatment.

Beyond those core elements, the guide encourages schools to train coaches each year, teach athletes about the importance of sleep, and offer guidance on social media and name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals. It also acknowledges that approaches "will vary by school," depending on athletes' needs and available local resources.

What Athletes Report

The NCAA's most recent Student-Athlete Health and Wellness Study surveyed 23,272 college athletes during the 2022-23 academic year. It found that mental health concerns had eased since the height of the pandemic but remained high. Among women, 44% said they felt overwhelmed by all they had to do constantly or nearly every day, and 29% reported overwhelming anxiety. The figures for men were 17% and 9%. Academics, planning for the future, and finances were the stressors cited most often.

About 70% of respondents said they knew where to go on campus for mental health help, yet only half said they would feel comfortable seeing a campus provider.

Trust in coaches has slipped. Just 40% of women said they would feel comfortable discussing mental health with their coaches, down from 49% in 2019.

Among men, the share fell from 62% to 54%. Coaches, meanwhile, report carrying more of the load. In a 2022 NCAA survey, more than 80% said they were spending more time on athletes' mental health concerns than before the pandemic.

Coaches Are Becoming First Responders

Division III launched its training program in March 2025 with the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. Up to 30 staff members at each school can complete a 7½-hour session, which certifies them for three years. By late July 2025, 66 of the division's colleges had finished the training. Division II opened a similar program in August 2026, with both virtual and in-person sessions.

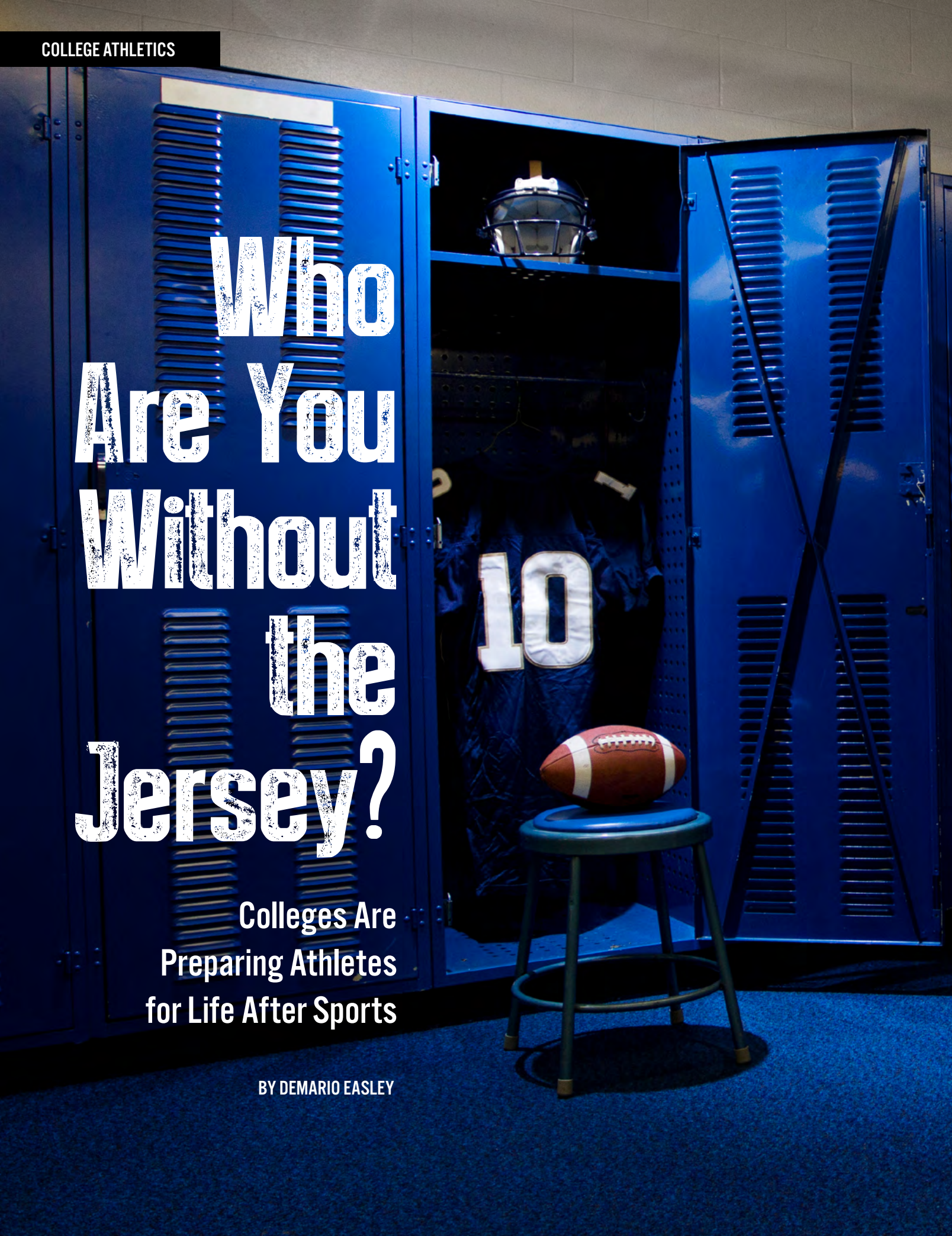
"In this population, I have found that the knowledge gained as part of the MHFA program has helped decrease the stigma related to mental illness in athletics," said Jennifer Ostrowski, director of the athletic training program at Moravian University. "The skills and techniques have empowered coaches to approach athletes with their concerns and encourage them to seek professional mental health services."

Questions Remain Unclear

It is not yet known whether that approach leads to better outcomes for athletes. The NCAA's public materials also say little about how schools' compliance with the mental health requirement is monitored.

The pressures on athletes are changing, too. The best practices guide flags social media, NIL deals and sports betting as emerging risks that may add to concerns around performance and body image. The NCAA committee that oversees athletes' health helps shape the guide. It met in mid-September to discuss issues around sports betting and online harassment.

The latest survey data also was collected before colleges began paying athletes directly. That leaves open how these students are faring now that many of them are also being compensated.



Who Are You Without the Jersey?

Colleges Are Preparing Athletes for Life After Sports

BY DEMARIO EASLEY

For years, the schedule is practically written for them. Wake up, train, attend class, practice, compete, recover, and repeat. Somewhere between early-morning workouts and weekend road trips, college student-athletes build friendships, routines, and identities around the sports they love.

Then, one day college ends. For most, so does their competitive athletic career. There is no halftime speech for the transition.

Colleges invest considerable resources in preparing athletes to compete, but preparing them for life without competition presents a different challenge. New NCAA research suggests that while student-athletes recognize the value of their athletic experiences, many remain uncertain about what comes next.

Among juniors and older Division I athletes responding to the NCAA's 2025-26 Student-Athlete Needs, Aspirations and Perspectives study, 60% in men's sports and 53% in women's sports agreed or strongly agreed that they felt ready to transition out of competitive athletics.

Yet the NCAA's 2025 Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College study found that more than 80% of respondents credited athletics with developing skills such as leadership, time management, adaptability, and the ability to perform under pressure.

The distinction matters. Being ready for a career is not necessarily the same as being ready to stop being an athlete.

When the Schedule Disappears

For student-athletes, sports often provide more than competition. They offer structure, community, mentorship, and a sense of purpose. Losing those familiar experiences can require adjustments that extend beyond finding employment.

Research published in Frontiers in Sports and Active Living in January 2026 examined the experiences of 30 former college varsity athletes navigating life after competitive sports. Researchers identified changes involving exercise, nutrition, injury management, career planning, and social support as important considerations during the transition.

Some recently-graduated athletes may welcome the freedom to explore interests previously constrained by demanding schedules. Others may struggle to replace the routines, relationships, and identities that shaped their college experiences.

Neither is universal. But both suggest that readying athletes for graduation should involve more than just helping them write résumés.

Preparing for the Next Chapter

Some colleges are already developing programs that address the professional and personal dimensions of leaving athletics.

At Illinois Wesleyan University, the Life After Sports program helps graduating student-athletes navigate the transition through self-assessments, values-based activities, and guided reflection. Offered each semester, the program encourages participants to recognize skills developed through competition while considering how those experiences can shape their identities and goals beyond sports.

Georgia Southern University takes a career-focused approach through Athletes Preparing for Employment Experiences. In summer 2025, the university expanded its programming to include football and men's and women's basketball players. Over three weeks, participants attended sessions on interviewing, personal finance, social media, personal branding, and name, image, and likeness opportunities. Seniors and graduate students also participated in a networking luncheon involving representatives from 14 corporate partners.

At Georgia State University, the Counseling Center addresses another dimension of the transition: identity. Its Beyond the Game workbook encourages student-athletes to reflect on their college experiences, explore who they are beyond competition, and envision their next chapters.

These initiatives illustrate three complementary approaches: helping athletes understand who they are, preparing them for employment, and providing resources to navigate the personal adjustments that accompany leaving sports.

More Than a Career Plan

Sometimes a student-athlete's need to transition arrives unexpectedly.

An injury, loss of eligibility, or decision to step away from competition altogether may end a sports career. That makes preparation throughout college particularly important.

Universities can help by connecting athletes with internships, career counseling, mentorship, and opportunities to develop relationships beyond their teams. Mental health resources and conversations about athletic identity can complement traditional professional development.

But access alone does not establish effectiveness. Institutions also need to consider whether athletes know these resources exist, can realistically participate around athletic commitments, and receive support before their final seasons.

Not every former athlete will struggle with the transition. Not every student-athlete will need the same support. Still, colleges have an opportunity to prepare them for more than the next game, the next season, or even graduation.

Colleges have spent decades teaching athletes how to represent their institutions. Preparing them for life after sports means ensuring they also know how to represent themselves when the jersey comes off. ●

Athletic Departments Are Becoming Startups

New business entities test university control, transparency, and financial discipline.

By Misty Evans



University of Kentucky

When the University of Kentucky (UK) approved a new business structure for athletics in April 2025, the promise was greater flexibility: more opportunities to generate revenue, manage expenses, borrow capital, and draw on outside expertise and partnerships.

The move reflected a historic proposal to transform its athletic department into a separate legal holding company called Champions Blue, LLC. This made Kentucky the first major university in the United States to shift its entire sports operation into a limited liability company structure.

The financial commitments remained substantial. UK's trustees subsequently approved an internal loan of up to $110 million for athletic capital investments. University plans also anticipated operating loans totaling up to $31 million across two fiscal years.

The figures illustrate a central question facing colleges reorganizing the business of sports: What changes when athletics moves into a separate entity, and what responsibilities stay within the institution?

For Karen Weaver, PhD, an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and a former athletics administrator and coach, the answer begins with governing boards understanding the full bargain. Her book, "Understanding College Athletics: What Campus Leaders Need to Know About College Sports," came from years of teaching senior campus leaders.

"The trustees can't just see what's the good in the deal," Weaver says. "They have to see what the risks are in the deal."

Know Which Deal You Are Making

The *House v. NCAA* legal settlement approved in June 2025 enables participating Division I institutions to provide direct financial benefits to athletes, with a first-year limit of $20.5 million. Third-party name, image, and likeness agreements have separate rules. That added financial pressure has helped spur new organizational approaches.

Champions Blue, LLC is a nonprofit, public holding company for athletics, ultimately governed by the university's board of trustees. UK says its affiliated corporate framework resembles the structure used for two community hospitals and allows for outside expertise and operational differentiation.

Michigan State University took a different approach with Spartan Ventures, launched July 1, 2026. Its structure includes a nonprofit parent, a for-profit media corporation, and a nonprofit fundraising foundation. Commercial operations moved into the organization while coaches, compliance, facilities, and athlete support remained within university athletics.

Neither structure should be conflated with a private-equity transaction. Establishing an affiliate determines how an institution organizes its activities. A financing or commercial agreement determines what it promises a partner, potentially including access to assets, future revenue, or decision-making authority.

That distinction matters when evaluating Weaver's warnings about private capital. An affiliate may create opportunities for such agreements, but its formation alone does not establish their terms.

"There is no one size fits all," she says. "Every board has to answer those questions for themselves."

Looking Past the First Payment

When an institution considers outside financing, Weaver cautions



Michigan State University

against allowing an upfront payment to overshadow the obligations attached to it.

She describes arrangements in which outside companies offer substantial funding in exchange for control over revenue-producing activities including ticketing, marketing, hospitality, and parking. The immediate benefits can be appealing, such as cash for investments and fewer employees on the college's payroll.

The longer view is not simple. Weaver says some proposed agreements stretch 20 years, likely outlasting the tenure of the administrators and trustees approving them. Leaders need to consider what happens if the organization is sold, institutional priorities change, or a relationship no longer serves the university.

The size of the payment cannot answer those questions, and neither can a promise of faster decisions.

Board composition is another consideration. Weaver offers a hypothetical arrangement in which a company holds three seats on a five-member board and the university holds two. The institution could lose a vote on a decision affecting its future.

Her example concerns a possible partnership structure, not the composition of every athletics affiliate. The broader question is whether the institution's actual decision rights match its stated commitment to retain control.

Make Oversight Usable

In its launch announcement, Michigan State described a seven-member Spartan Ventures board, with seats reserved for the university president, trustee chair, and athletics director, alongside four outside members. It also said safeguards would prevent the university from losing control of department operations.

Such assurances provide a starting point for scrutiny. The practical reporting questions are specific: Which decisions require university approval? What documents can trustees review? What happens when commercial objectives conflict with institutional priorities?

Weaver's clearest requirement is access to the full agreement. She says she has encountered situations in which only a smaller group was allowed to review documents because of concerns about public disclosure or competitors obtaining information.

Trustees cannot assess obligations they cannot see.

Public disclosure raises a related but distinct question. Weaver emphasizes that public records requirements depend on state law, while university oversight also depends on institutional governing documents. Moving activity into an affiliate requires examining both, rather than assuming a new legal structure resolves either issue.

She also cautiones that university counsel may need additional expertise to navigate commercial arrangements, nonprofit obligations, taxation, and conflicts of interest.

"This requires more expertise than you might already have on campus," she says.

Define What Success Protects

Operational flexibility can change incentives as well as organizational charts. Michigan State reported 46 Spartan Ventures employees at launch and described opportunities to reward employees for financial performance.

Weaver questiones whether outside operators necessarily understand higher education's culture. Generating revenue, she says, must remain consistent with the institution's mission and vision.

That concern becomes tangible when leaders consider who can reject an unsuitable commercial opportunity, how staff incentives reflect campus responsibilities, and whether new income supports broad athletic participation or simply finances the next competitive escalation.

Michigan State identifies preserving opportunities across 23 sports as a reason for its revenue strategy. That is an institutional goal against which the model's results can eventually be evaluated.

Weaver remains skeptical that structural innovation alone will contain spending.

"We don't necessarily have a resource problem," she says. "We have a spending problem in athletics."

Weaver worries that competitive pressure encourages leaders to accept a deal before they understand its consequences.

"If you had that time to plan and strategize and learn, you could make better decisions if and when that opportunity comes," she says.



Changing the Game

Collegiate athletics is in the middle of one of the most significant transformations in its history. New models for revenue-sharing, name image and likeness (NIL), and the transfer portal have reshaped the landscape. The expectations placed on student-athletes — and on the institutions that support them — have never been higher or more complex. And at the same time, the programs that are thriving are the ones that refuse to accept that things have to be done the way they have always been done.

We are proud to present the recipients of the 2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Innovation Award: College Athletics, honoring colleges and universities where bold, forward-thinking ideas are redefining what it means to support student-athletes, staff, and advance the field.

These are institutions

that identified a gap, need, or opportunity and built something better in response. Some have transformed how student-athletes are developed as leaders, professionals, and people. Others have reimagined what academic support can accomplish when it is organized around completion rather than eligibility. Several honorees have built partnerships that extend the reach of athletics deep into their surrounding communities, and others are pioneering new approaches to developing coaches, mental fitness, nutrition access, and the art of telling an athletics program's story.

"What strikes us about this year's honorees is how creative their ideas are," says Lenore Pearlstein, co-publisher of Insight Into Academia. "These are not programs that required enormous budgets or major infrastructure investments. Instead, they required someone who looked at a familiar problem and decided to solve it differently."

Selected from institutions across the country and every level of intercollegiate competition, this year's Innovation Award winners represent a remarkable range of approaches united by a shared conviction: that collegiate athletics is most powerful when it serves the whole person, strengthens the institution, and gives back to the communities that surround it. Through their stories, readers will find practical models, replicable ideas, and a vivid picture of what collegiate athletics can look like when innovation is treated not as a luxury, but as a responsibility.

2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Innovation Award: College Athletics Recipients

- Agnes Scott College
- Army West Point Athletics Association
- Berry College
- Bossier Parish Community College
- Clovis Community College & The Diamond Learning Center
- College of DuPage
- Joliet Junior College
- LeTourneau University
- MassBay Community College
- Otterbein University
- Southwestern College
- Surry Community College
- University of California
- University of Miami
- University of North Florida

Building the Whole Person:
Development, Identity, and Life Beyond Sport

College athletics has always promised to develop more than competitors. The phrase "student-athlete" is itself a statement of intent — a recognition that what happens in the classroom, on the field, in the community, and in the development of a young person's character. That promise has often remained aspirational rather than structural. The following honorees have made it concrete, creating programs that deliberately develop their student-athletes as leaders, as professionals, and as people — with or without a uniform on.

Agnes Scott College sits in Decatur, Georgia, and its DNA of a Scottie program is designed to define and develop the qualities that make an Agnes Scott athlete prepared for the world. Launched two years ago and now fully integrated into the athletics department's expectations, the program is built around year-long intentional programming covering identity and goal-setting, leadership, nutrition and wellness, stress management, communication, career development, and decision-making. Rather than relying on one-time workshops, the program takes a deliberately developmental approach — skills are built progressively throughout a student's collegiate career, with coaches reinforcing the work within their own teams. Every athlete, not just team captains, is encouraged to understand how her choices, voice, and contributions shape her team, campus, and community. Community service is embedded in the program as leadership in action — they learn that showing up for others is part of what a leader does. The initiative also includes a community-centered facility revenue strategy, opening Agnes Scott's athletic spaces to youth organizations, schools, and recreation programs at affordable rates, turning their facilities into community assets and generating sustainable revenue without making local access an afterthought.

Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, has tackled a different but complementary challenge: getting clinical-quality psychological skills training to every student-athlete, not just those who seek it out. The Cardinal Mental Fitness Community (CMFC), constructed over two years by Director of Athletics Dr. Greg Lott and clinical sport psychologist Dr. Steve Graef, delivers ten targeted sessions throughout the academic year, each covering a specific psychological construct such as goal-setting, mindfulness, visualization, anxiety management, and identity beyond sport. The sessions work across three elements: learning the science, connecting with peers across sports (a golfer discussing anxiety with a football player creates unique moments of empathy and insight), and receiving practical tools to integrate into training. Coaches have become genuine partners in reinforcing the content within their own programs — the volleyball team now uses mindfulness techniques in serving preparation, while cross-country employs daily stress check-ins before



Otterbein University's 2026-27 Cardinal Mental Fitness Community with the moderator for the year, Dr. Leif Smith



University of Miami's Leadership Academy

practice. In the program's most recent cycle, the CMFC averaged more than 80 participants per session, up from roughly 30 in its first year, with 61% of athletes reporting the program was valuable to them and 58% saying the tools were useful in competition.

A third area of this work involves helping student-athletes translate the exceptional skills they develop through athletics into credentials that employers actually recognize. The demanding schedules of competitive athletics make it genuinely difficult to engage with traditional career development programming, and many athletes arrive at graduation having developed extraordinary leadership, resilience, and communication skills that never appear on a résumé.

The University of North Florida's Total Osprey Digital Badge Program, launched in Spring 2025 and now serving 357 enrolled athletes, addresses this directly through a digital badge framework delivered through the university's Canvas Credentials platform. The OspreyPro Professional Skills Badge covers résumé development, interview preparation, and career exploration through workshops and AI-assisted professional assessments. The Covey LeaderU Badge is a 30-hour leadership curriculum. Elective badges allow students to personalize their learning in areas including NIL, financial literacy, and personal branding. A Capstone Career Readiness Experience requires demonstration of mastery in transferable skills and identity development beyond sport.

What ties these approaches together is the conviction that holistic development doesn't happen by accident — it requires structure, intentionality, and genuine institutional investment.

At the **University of Miami,** that investment has been sustained for more than a decade through the Helper Helper platform, which began in 2015 as a community service tracking tool and has since evolved into the operational backbone of an entire student-athlete development ecosystem. With 400-plus athletes across 18 sports — roughly 25% of them international — keeping the department meaningfully connected and engaged requires both consistency and flexibility.

The platform's three-minute mobile sign-in process allows the university to communicate events, track engagement across four pillars including Community Outreach, Career Competence, Leadership Development, and Personal Enhancement, and document volunteer activities that athletes initiate on their own time. The Annual Pen Pal Program, which pairs 100-plus athletes with local second- and third-grade classrooms throughout the year, exemplifies the philosophy: the program curates experiences with genuine developmental staying power.

Since 2015, Miami athletes have accumulated more than 81,800 total engagement hours across 3,272 opportunities, and the Hurricanes have ranked in the top three nationally in Helper Helper's NCAA Community Service Challenges for five consecutive years, including first-place finishes in 2022-23 and 2024-25.

From the Sidelines to the Front Office:
Developing the Next Generation of Coaching Leaders

Ask any college athletics administrator what the most difficult moment in a department's leadership cycle is, and most will give the same answer: when a head coaching position opens up and the pool of truly ready candidates is smaller than it should, or could, be. Assistant coaches develop deep expertise in their sport, but advancement requires more — the ability to manage people, navigate institutional dynamics, build external relationships, manage a budget, and take ownership of an entire program's culture. The following honorees are ensuring their assistant coaches have the opportunity to develop those critical skills. These schools are building their pipelines intentionally.



Valhalla Stadium at Berry College

Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia, established its Assistant Coaches Development Program in Fall 2023 to address this gap. The program focuses on the business of intercollegiate athletics, identifying professional goals, the transition from assistant to head coach, leadership and communication skills, campus and community engagement, résumé development, interview preparation, and what is necessary to be an exceptional assistant coach. Participants are encouraged to look beyond their individual sport and to explore multiple forms of leadership — as senior or associate coaches, athletics administrators, campus leaders, and conference contributors. Two years in, the results are measurable. Six participants have advanced to head coaching positions at other institutions. Most significantly, one participant transitioned into a head coaching role at Berry College itself — representing the program's first successful internal succession and validating its function not just as a professional development initiative but as a genuine succession-planning tool.

Operating within a very different institutional context but motivated by the same insight, **Army West Point Athletics Association** launched its Future Head Coach Development Program in January 2026. The program is grounded in the United States Military Academy's foundational commitment to leadership development, but it applies that framework explicitly to coaching advancement. The inaugural cohort of five assistant coaches received instruction covering program management; managing up and across, external relations, revenue generation, fan engagement and communications, internal operations, budgeting and fundraising, and a mock interview with guided feedback.

One of the program's most practical elements is its focus on retention as well as advancement by investing in assistant coaches. Army West Point signals that their development matters, making the institution a more attractive destination for talented future candidates who want to advance. One participant had already secured a head coaching position at another institution by the time the first cohort concluded.

LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas, has focused on a related but distinct challenge: how do you build a coaching culture across an entire department, not just develop individual coaches within it? The Head Coach Collective, launched in August 2025, is the result. Built on the recognition that head coaches are frequently siloed within their individual sport, while the health of an athletics

department depends on coaches functioning as organizational leaders, the Collective meets regularly around four structural components: Growth Gain, in which one coach shares a meaningful leadership lesson and the group identifies transferable insights; Leadership Lab, which introduces a leadership concept for discussion and application; Baller Breakthroughs, peer problem-solving sessions built around real challenges individual coaches are currently facing; and intentional cultural development work.

The expectations of the Collective create the trust necessary for genuine candor. What ultimately emerges is something most athletics departments lack: a structure that converts the individual leadership wisdom of experienced coaches into a shared institutional resource. One person's hard-won lesson becomes everyone's takeaway. One coach's unsolved problem gets the benefit of the department's collective experience.



LeTourneau University Air Dome

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The Campus as Community: Partnerships, Inclusion, and Athletics as a Bridge

Athletic events have long served as gathering points for campus communities. But the most innovative departments today are asking a bigger question: how can athletics extend beyond the campus to strengthen the communities that surround it, and how can the values of sport — teamwork, belonging, inclusion, and shared purpose — be made available to people who have traditionally been left outside the arena? Three of this year's honorees have built programs that answer that question in distinctive and moving ways.

Clovis Community College in Clovis, California, began its relationship with Jami Hamel de la Cerda and the Diamond Learning Center (DLC) — an educational institution for adult learners with intellectual and physical disabilities — in 2022, when Jami made a $200,000 gift to support Clovis' Crush student-athletes. It was the largest single gift in the college's history and to athletics in the 100-plus-year history of its four-college district.

What followed, however, was not simply a donor relationship, but the discovery of a shared mission. Both organizations serve students who have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that higher education was not for them. Both believe that learning is a lifelong endeavor and that community changes what people believe is possible for themselves. Crush athletes began visiting the DLC campus to sign autographs, play games, and take part in what have become legendary dance parties. DLC students began packing the bleachers at Clovis athletic events in bright neon green shirts, cheering on athletes they came to know as friends.

Jami's generosity continued in 2024 with an additional $300,000 gift for a new on-campus sports complex named the ISE Diamond L.I.F.E. Sports Complex, representing a forever reminder of their shared mission that Learning Is For Everyone. The complex, scheduled to open in Spring 2027, will include a soccer field, all-weather track, field house, scoreboard, and press box — amenities that Clovis student-athletes have never before had access to.



Diamond Learning Center Founder & CEO Jami Hamel De La Cerda, her sons Isaiah, Samuel, and Elijah, and DLC staff presenting a $200,000 donation check to Clovis Community College's women's soccer team.

Since the partnership began, the number of athletes with a 3.2 GPA or higher has grown from 42 to 99, a 136% increase, and the college has produced more conference championships and All-Americans in the four years since Jami's initial gift than in its entire history combined.

One hundred miles north, a different kind of community partnership has been taking shape. **Joliet Junior College** (JJC) in Joliet, Illinois, formalized its relationship with the Greater Joliet Area YMCA in February 2025, though the connection had been building for years. Together, the two organizations have built a set of programs that use JJC's athletic facilities and the YMCA's youth development expertise to build something neither could have created alone. The YMCA Junior Wolves NFL Flag Football League — supported by the Chicago Bears — was developed and hosted at JJC's campus, joined by a Youth Basketball League and a cheer and dance program running through winter and summer months.

In the most recent year, the partnership hosted 300 youth participants, more than 20 volunteer coaches, and over 135 individual

games and practices. JJC athletes visit area schools through the Paws on the Street program, mentoring younger students and building the leadership skills that come from being a role model. The YMCA Teen REACH summer day camp, hosted at JJC's facilities, drew more than 100 campers per day in 2026 — many having their first experience on a college campus. Three community workshops — Jobs in the Trades, Jobs in Healthcare, and Finding Free Money for College — brought more than 265 attendees to campus. The partnership reflects a conviction that JJC's campus is not a destination but a resource, and that athletics can be a vehicle for making higher education feel familiar, welcoming, and within reach.

What inclusion looks like in practice — as a lived experience — is visible in **Massachusetts Bay Community College's** Unified Sports program. MassBay became the first community college in the state to establish a Unified Sports program operating under the Special Olympics umbrella when it launched in 2022. What began with a handful of students meeting informally to play and exercise in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has grown into a program serving 12 to 15 students who practice basketball twice a week and compete in the Special Olympics Yawkey Basketball League.

In its first competitive season, the team captured a silver medal. The program has since expanded into outdoor track and field through Special Olympics events. For the students at the center of the program, Unified Sports provides confidence, teamwork, physical fitness, leadership, and something genuinely difficult to quantify: the experience of being an athlete, of representing a college in competition, and of belonging to a team that shows up for them. Students without intellectual disabilities participate as teammates and partners alongside their peers — demonstrating that differences do not have to be barriers to participation. Faculty and staff have embraced the program as their own, with large groups traveling to games and creating an extraordinary sense of school spirit around a team that demonstrates, concretely, what the institution stands for. MassBay has recently added a second coach to support the program's continued growth — an institutional investment that signals this is not a one-time experiment but an ongoing commitment.



Children in the Joliet Junior College and YMCA Junior Wolves NFL Flag Football League.



Massachusetts Bay Community College Unified Sports program co-head coaches Kelly Graska and Richie Haskell.

From Eligibility to Excellence: Rethinking Academic Support in Athletics

For too long, academic support in college athletics has been organized around a single narrow goal: keeping student-athletes eligible to compete. That model fails many in a fundamental way — it treats the classroom as an obstacle to navigate rather than as the primary reason a student is on campus. The following schools have replaced the eligibility model with something more ambitious: a genuine commitment to completion, credential attainment, and the academic development that prepares athletes for the rest of their lives.

Surry Community College in Dobson, North Carolina, arrived at its current approach through a frank institutional reckoning. In 2023-24, only 8 of 16 athletes left the college with a credential. Advisors operated separately from coaches. Coaches knew when a player struggled on the field but not always in the classroom. Academic support existed but nothing connected it to accountability. The college rebuilt its model around a simple principle: academic success should begin before a student ever enrolls and continue until they walk across the graduation stage.

The director of advising now participates in recruiting visits, meets prospective athletes and their families during campus visits, and holds sport-specific onboarding sessions at the start of every year — with coaches present — so that students immediately see their coach and advisor operating as partners. Every athlete is assigned to that advisor as a dedicated caseload from first day through completion. Early alerts from faculty route directly to the athlete's coach and the athletic director within days. Study hall attendance is a condition of playing time. Weekly grade reports go simultaneously to every coach and the athletic director.



Surry Community College student-athletes, administrators, academic advisors, and academic support staff meet to discuss strategies for student success.

In 2025-26, all 14 students who completed their final season left Surry with a credential — a 100% completion rate, up from 52.4% in 2021-22 and driven by each component added to the model.

Bossier Parish Community College in Louisiana has built its Cavalier CARE (Comprehensive Academic Resources and Empowerment) model around a similar conviction, and with a similar emphasis on connection over complexity. Now in its third year, Cavalier CARE brings together personalized degree planning, proactive enrollment monitoring, faculty mentoring, counseling resources, and cross-campus collaboration into a coordinated system operated by a seven-person athletic department.

The key insight is that most institutions already possess the resources required to build something like this — faculty, advisors, coaches, enrollment data, counseling services, and learning-management systems. The innovation is in connecting those resources intentionally around each student rather than allowing them to function in separate lanes. The results has been a 98-plus % graduation rate for two consecutive years, every athletic team maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or higher for the first time in department history, and 100% of students transitioning into continued athletics, continued education, or the workforce.



Bossier Parish Community College student-athletes in the College's Learning Commons Library, where access to study spaces, research materials, and academic resources supports their success in the classrooms.

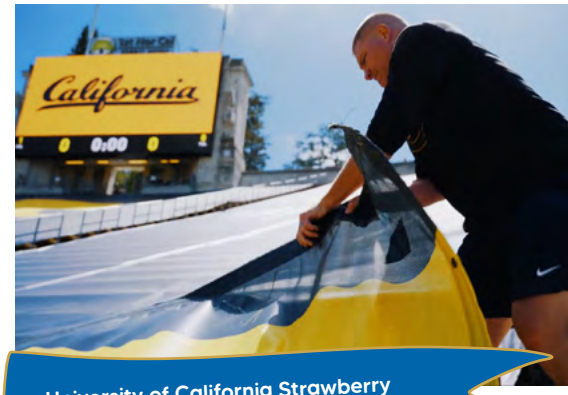
A more immediate and practical barrier to academic success — one that often goes unacknowledged in formal support structures — is food insecurity. **College of DuPage** in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, identified that a significant portion of its 500-plus athletes were managing food insecurity alongside their academic and athletic demands, but that the campus Fuel Pantry was located at the opposite end of campus from the Physical Education Center.

The solution was a Micro-Pantry: a miniature refrigerator in the PEC stocked with grab-and-go snacks and beverages that student-athletes can pick up between practice and class. In its first year, the pantry served 47 unique individuals in its first month alone, growing to 795 total check-ins across the first half of 2026 — roughly half the entire student-athlete population. Beyond nourishment, the pantry has opened conversations that might otherwise never have happened: athletes who quietly struggled with food access have begun talking to staff about broader concerns, leading to counseling referrals, community resource connections, and nutrition education workshops run in partnership with the Culinary and Hospitality School. A small refrigerator in a hallway has become an entry point to the entire support ecosystem.



TELLING THEIR STORY:
ATHLETICS COMMUNICATIONS AND THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE





University of California Strawberry Creek Studios screenshots

College athletics has always been a storytelling enterprise. What has changed is the number of platforms, expectations of audiences, and media resources available to departments at every level of competition. The two institutions highlighted here have approached the new media landscape from very different institutional contexts, but both have recognized the same fundamental truth: the ability to tell a team's story well is not a nice-to-have. It is central to recruiting, community connection, revenue, and the student-athlete experience itself.

What one person with creativity, consistency, and a clear vision can build is evident at **Southwestern College** in Winfield, Kansas, where Director of Athletic Communications Mike Abasolo has transformed a traditional sports information operation into a full multimedia enterprise. Under his leadership, Southwestern launched Game Day Live, which provides live pregame coverage at every home football game; Courtside Countdown, offering live pregame coverage for home women's and men's basketball games; and Builder Sports Live, a weekly show dedicated to telling the stories of Southwestern Athletics throughout the academic year.

Away-game basketball previews, coach and student-athlete interviews, and live postgame coverage rounded out the operation. Southwestern became the first KCAC institution to routinely produce a live pregame football show at every home game and one of the few conference institutions providing consistent live pregame basketball coverage. The numbers reflect a genuine audience built over time: 121,279 total views across 171 streamed events, averaging 709 views per event, with more than 80% of them coming live — a figure that indicates real-time audiences choosing to watch, not archived content occasionally browsed. Graduate assistants and student workers are not simply helping behind the scenes; they are gaining real experience in broadcasting, production, social media, and live event operations, developing career-ready skills in a professional media environment built specifically around the programs they represent.

The **University of California** operates at a different scale — 30 varsity sports and the financial pressures of modern high-major athletics — but was grappling with a version of the same underlying challenge: a fragmented model of communications, marketing, and creative services that was no longer adequate for the environment shaped by revenue sharing, NIL, the transfer portal, and mounting pressure to develop new and sustainable revenue streams.

Strawberry Creek Studios is the result. Rather than simply asking each existing unit to perform its traditional function more efficiently, Cal reimagined leadership, responsibilities, and team structures around two shared objectives: authentic storytelling and revenue generation. The initiative is built around four strategic pillars — student-athlete recruitment and retention; brand and revenue partnerships; donor, fan, and alumni engagement; and elevating the Cal and UC Berkeley brand — each of which is now served by integrated teams rather than siloed departments.

Strawberry Creek Studios also enables a 365-day approach to audience development: rather than concentrating storytelling around six or seven home football games, the model treats recruiting classes, transfer additions, student-athlete personalities, and offseason access as year-round opportunities to build affinity and commercial value. In today's recruiting environment, prospects evaluate not only coaching and facilities but how an institution will help them build their personal brand and develop NIL opportunities.

By making individualized storytelling and brand development part of the athlete experience from the moment they arrive, Strawberry Creek Studios becomes both a retention tool and a competitive differentiator — proof that in modern college athletics, the communications operation is no longer just supporting the program. It is helping to build it.

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