

# Transfer Portal Turbulence Is On The Rise.

## Are Higher Education Institutions Prepared?



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**F**ree agency. Endorsement deals. Trade deadlines. These hallmarks of professional sports have become untethered from the big leagues. Thanks to milestone rulings around the transfer portal and name, image and likeness (NIL) laws, player mobility and financial incentives are now embedded in the college athletics experience.

Such sweeping change in a short timeframe has introduced new challenges for student-athletes, teams and institutions—and few clear solutions.

More than 31,000 student-athletes entered the transfer portal in 2023 alone, with approximately 45 percent successfully moving to new schools. That means more than half did not land with a new team, leaving their athletic and academic careers in question.

Media headlines emphasize the success stories, the high-profile transfers that give fans new hope for a team's next season. But those are the exceptions. Entering the portal is far from a guarantee that you'll make it through, which puts undeniable strain on individual players and the broader culture of college sports.

### The hope and risk of entering the transfer portal

Student-athletes choose to enter the transfer portal for a number of reasons: Some may want to compete closer to home, others may be looking for a different team fit, or the chance to see more playing time elsewhere. For the tens of thousands who enter, the potential reward outweighs the tremendous risk.

**45%**

of the 31,000+ student athletes who entered the transfer portal in 2023 successfully moved to new schools.

"[In 2023] over 17,000 student-athletes that entered the transfer portal were left with no option but to never play competitively again. They know it's a huge risk and it's really scary to enter. But for a lot of these students, the idea of having a new opportunity and finding a new school is worth it to them," said Cody Cater, a recent Wake Forest University graduate, former football player and entrepreneur.

Once a player enters the portal, there is no obligation for their current institution to keep them on the roster long-term or even maintain their scholarship should they stay.

"Players can be left on their own, with their athletic career cut short," said Claude Bragg, Cater's former teammate at Wake Forest. "It can damage their academic career because they don't really have a set path. They're unsure of what to do and it can put a lot of student athletes in crisis."

Beyond the lack of a safety net, student-athletes who opt into the portal become vulnerable to another force: public criticism. Since 2021's landmark NCAA v. Alston case that resulted in the first mainstream NIL policies, the conversation around transfers and endorsements have become inextricably linked. So much so that student-athletes may find their [loyalty and intentions questioned](#) by fans and coaches, exacerbating the mental health ramifications of this already volatile position.

## Individual decisions are reshaping college athletics

The implications of transfer portal transactions extend far beyond the student-athletes who enter it. Though the portal has only been operational since 2018, it has rapidly redefined the college athletics experience for players and coaches alike.

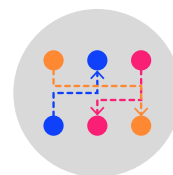
- » **Redefining recruitment:** The exponential growth in transfers has shifted coaches' recruitment focus from high schools to the portal itself. "We've seen high school recruiting become diminished because there's not a great reason for a coach to want to go and recruit a green high school kid when there are so many great players in the transfer portal who are trained well and have experience," said Bragg. Bringing on student-athletes with a couple years of collegiate play under their belt may create efficiency, but can impact the cohesion of a team who trained together from day one.
- » **Amplifying the player v. team mentality:** Earlier this year, new NCAA legislation eliminated limits on the number of times student-athletes can transfer throughout their careers—further opening the floodgates for players to make a move. Many are concerned that this unrestricted mobility discourages the loyalty and camaraderie that are so critical across sports. "There's been a shift from a team perspective to a really individualistic perspective, which is certainly unhealthy," said Bragg. "Players are shifting toward an attitude of 'What can I?' as they jump to different schools, jump to a better position, jump to a better NIL deal, etc."

Taken together, these changes pose a serious threat to the morale of student-athletes who choose to stay and don't even entertain a transfer in the first place. For coaching staff and athletics directors, this may increasingly distract from the shared goal of training, playing and winning as one team.



**Recruitment has shifted from high schools to the portal itself.**

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**No transfer limits could damage team camaraderie.**

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## Mitigating the effects of transfer portal mania

The transfer portal and NIL aren't going away (if anything, they'll become more complex). But none of this exempts athletics leaders, coaches and staff from doing everything they can to protect the wellbeing of their players—including those inclined to transfer who end up staying, and those who never intend to leave.

### *These are a few starting points:*

- » **Stronger compliance controls:** Despite NCAA regulations stipulating that schools cannot actively recruit student-athletes active on another institution's roster (until they're in the portal), "tampering" violations have piled up over the last few years. Complicating matters, the NCAA delineates between tampering and "impermissible contact," creating a vast gray area where questionable outreach can slip through the cracks. Athletics departments need more structured systems for supporting compliant communication between coaches and players, minimizing reliance on unregulated channels like social media—something Bragg and Cater are hoping to address through their startup, [UpNext](#).
- » **Supporting the wellness of students who withdraw from the portal.** Across institutions and NCAA divisions, [student-athlete mental health](#) is a growing concern. Even today, [only around half](#) of players feel their mental health is a priority to their athletics department, or would be comfortable talking to their coaches about these struggles. All student-athletes—including those navigating the aftermath of an "ineffective" transfer—deserve a chance to get help. Anonymous, two-way communication channels can remove the barrier to seeking support, particularly for players who may feel embarrassed or adrift when their transfer plans don't pan out.
- » **Actively checking in on team culture.** The surge in transfer portal activity and individual endorsements has quickly made a material impact on team cohesion. Whereas previously the same group of teammates may have played together for a few years, today's rosters are in constant rotation—forcing student-athletes to adapt to new personalities and playing styles. "The transfer portal is scary for a lot of players. And it creates some division, with some of your teammates getting NIL deals whereas you may not have that opportunity—and it's all happening in public," said Cater. More than ever, athletics staff need agile ways of surveying student-athletes to monitor morale and identify concerns proactively.

## In an era of "me," make space for voices across the team

The world of college sports is evolving, which is not inherently a bad thing. NIL and the transfer portal do open up unprecedented, life-changing opportunities for some fortunate student-athletes. But evolution is rarely smooth or asymptomatic.

There is no perfect playbook for managing some of the negative impacts of these massive changes. Institutional leaders, however, can always choose to listen to student-athletes. Their input just might inform some winning solutions.



**Compliant communication rules need to be better defined.**

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**Make mental health a priority for players with failed transfers.**

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**Transfers can create division so monitor the team's morale.**

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