

College Sports at a Crossroads:

Insights from Division I Campus Leaders



Knight Commission
On Intercollegiate Athletics
A PROJECT OF THE JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION



ELON
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Elon University
Poll

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NCAA Division I leaders survey

In summer 2025, the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics partnered with faculty and staff of the Elon University Poll to develop a survey of key athletics leaders of NCAA Division I institutions.

The survey was conducted via an online Qualtrics form that was available from July 29 to August 22, 2025. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent to respondents representing 364 Division I institutions.

A total of 376 university presidents and chancellors, athletics directors, senior woman administrators and faculty athletics representatives responded to the survey, a 26% response rate that provides a statistically representative sample of these Division I leadership positions within a +/-4.4% margin of error.

Survey respondents

Role	Number of respondents	Percent of total respondents
College and university presidents/CEOs	61	16%
Athletics directors	94	25%
Senior woman administrators	79	21%
Faculty athletics representatives	142	38%
Total	376	Overall survey response rate: 26%

63% of respondents were from public institutions and 37% were from private institutions. The Division I competitive classifications were as follows:

Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Autonomy or Power 4 Conference (ACC, Big 10, Big 12, SEC) or Notre Dame: 51 respondents

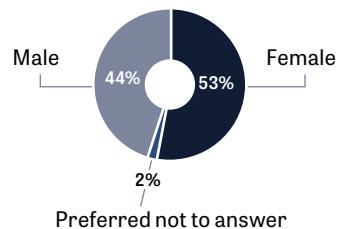
FBS "Group of Six" (American Conference, Conference USA, Mid-America Conference (MAC), Mountain West Conference (MW), Pac-12 Conference (Pac-12), Sun Belt Conference) and FBS Independents: 83 respondents

Football Championship Subdivision: 128 respondents

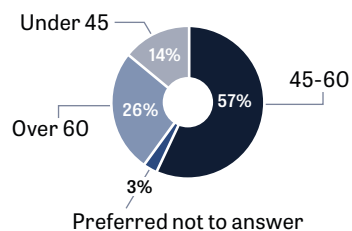
Division I basketball centric – no football: 114 respondents

Respondent demographics:

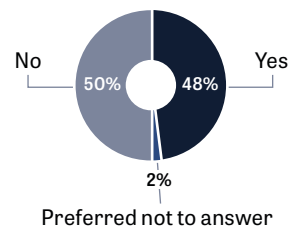
Gender:



Age:



Have competed in college athletics:



Key findings

» Mission, finances and structure of college sports

Is Division I headed in a positive or negative direction?



62% Negative
9% Positive
28% Unsure

What will be the impact of the House settlement on Division I sports as a whole?



76% Negative
16% Positive
8% Neither positive nor negative

Importance of academics



98% Important for athletes to be enrolled full-time and taking classes
99% Important for athletes to graduate
95% Important for teams to graduate at least half of athletes to be eligible for postseason competition

Concern about your athletics program's reliance on institutional funds and student fees



86% of presidents/chancellors concerned
80% of athletics directors concerned

Agree or disagree?: "The Division I structure continues to be viable as a single division within the NCAA."



62% of all DI leaders disagree
69% of presidents/chancellors disagree
55% of athletics directors disagree

Ability of your institution to sustain its current competitive classification level



48% of FBS leaders concerned
60% of non-FBS leaders concerned

DI leaders support for this federal legislation:



86% National standards to regulate athlete NIL compensation
78% Laws to prevent college athletes from being classified as employees
77% National rules that supersede conflicting state laws
69% Limits on how much each institution can spend on specific sports or budget categories

Providing university compensation to athletes for playing their sport, separate from NIL payments*



(*Current rules don't permit this)

FBS Leaders: 45% support 42% oppose
Non-FBS Leaders: 27% support 64% oppose

Creation of a new governing entity for Power 4 football teams separate from the NCAA



50% of FBS leaders agree
57% of non-FBS leaders agree

FBS football having a single executive or commissioner to provide unified leadership for the sport, not just for its national championship (the CFP)



(Responses of only FBS leaders)

58% support
26% neither support nor oppose
16% oppose

Key findings

» Policies on athlete transfer, NIL compensation and seasons of competition

Impact of the transfer portal on Division I



- 86% Negative
- 8% Positive
- 7% Neither positive nor negative

Allowing athletes to transfer between schools as often as they choose with immediate eligibility to compete and no penalty



- 84% Oppose
- 11% Support
- 4% Neither support nor oppose

Enforcing strong penalties for tampering with athletes or providing recruiting inducements before the transfer portal opens



- 94% Support
- 3% Oppose

Important to limit athletes to four full seasons of eligibility



- 77% of all DI leaders agree
- 90% of presidents/chancellors agree
- 69% of athletics directors agree

Impact of (NIL) compensation for athletes on Division I



- 50% Negative
- 36% Positive
- 14% Neither positive nor negative

How should new institutional NIL and revenue-sharing payments be distributed?



Based on how much money an athlete's sport generates or an athlete's marketability

- 78% Athletics directors
- 58% FBS leaders
- 41% Non-FBS leaders

Included with institutional financial assistance and distributed equitably to female and male athletes

- 9% Athletics directors
- 26% FBS leaders
- 33% Non-FBS leaders

Key findings

» Women's and collegiate Olympic sports

Collegiate Olympic sports are important to DI leaders



- 93%** Important for universities to offer sports other than those tied to generating revenues
- 92%** Collegiate Olympic sports are important to the success of Team USA
- 82%** Favor federal tax or fees on sports gambling operators to support collegiate Olympic sports programs
- 73%** Favor federal funds to support collegiate Olympic sports programs

Impact of the *House* settlement on the overall experience of Division I athletes in these sports:



Athletics directors responses:

FBS football	75% positive	15% negative
Men's basketball	63% positive	25% negative
Women's basketball	50% positive	33% negative
Non-FBS football	25% positive	49% negative
All other women's sports	7% positive	72% negative
All other men's sports	5% positive	73% negative

How have colleges and universities done in providing female athletes with equitable opportunities, financial assistance and treatment?



- 44%** Been about right
- 43%** Have not gone far enough
- 6%** Gone too far
- 8%** Unsure

Will female athletes be in a worse or better situation with NIL, revenue-sharing and greater scholarships?



- 55%** Worse
- 25%** Better
- 20%** About the same

Executive summary, topline data, methodology and more available on the survey website: bit.ly/D1leaderspoll »



Executive summary of findings

College Sports at a Crossroads

Majority of NCAA Division I campus leaders believe the House settlement terms will have a negative impact on college sports

An overwhelming majority of NCAA Division I campus leaders express negative views about the direction of college sports, indicating that new rules and trends will disproportionately harm collegiate women's and men's Olympic sports. Those leaders are also concerned about the growing reliance on student fees and other institutional funding, and they are strongly opposed to the current athlete transfer rules.

At the same time, these leaders strongly affirmed their unwavering commitment to the historic academic mission and standards of college sports.

These findings emerge from a national survey of Division I leaders conducted in early August 2025 by the **Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics** and the **Elon University Poll**. A total of 376 university presidents and chancellors, athletics directors, senior woman administrators and faculty athletics representatives responded to the survey, a 26% response rate that provides a statistically representative sample of these Division I leadership positions within a +/-4.4% margin of error.

The survey captures leaders grappling with unprecedented change under terms of the *House v. NCAA* settlement that took effect July 1. The results reveal significant uncertainty and mixed views about the net impact of the new rules that allow greater athlete financial benefits to be provided by schools, setting the stage for a more professionalized model of college sports.

The outlook for the future of Division I

There is widespread agreement among leaders responding to this survey that the current framework of Division I is under severe strain. At the same time, nearly all campus athletics leaders hold strong views that basic academic

standards for athletes and the achievement of graduation are important.

- A significant majority (**62%**) of leaders believe **Division I is headed in a negative direction**. This frank assessment is most pronounced among university presidents and chancellors (80%), reflecting a concern at the highest levels of institutional leadership about the stability of college sports.
- Leaders question the sustainability of the Division I structure, with **62% of all respondents expressing doubt that Division I remains viable as a single entity** within the NCAA. This sentiment from a majority of presidents (69%) and athletics directors (55%) may signal that the current alignment of Division I institutions is seen as increasingly unworkable.
- The changing landscape has created concern about the ability of institutions to maintain their competitive positions. More than half of all leaders (**56%**) are **concerned about whether their schools can sustain their classification levels** in Division I, a figure that rises to 60% among leaders at schools whose athletics programs do not include Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football.
- **Intense budgetary strain:** Division I leaders indicate overwhelming concern (79%), with 48% saying they are “extremely concerned,” about their athletics programs' future reliance on institutional funds and student fees to balance their budgets. Expressing the greatest amount of concern were the leaders most responsible for finances – presidents (86%) and athletics directors (80%). The survey responses did not show significant difference between the views of FBS leaders (74%) and non-FBS leaders (82%) on this question, signaling a

financial sustainability issue that is affecting schools at all Division I levels.

- **Mixed views on an even more professional sports model:** There is a substantial difference between the views of leaders at FBS and those at non-FBS schools on whether the current “pay for play” prohibition should change to “allow universities to provide compensation to Division I college athletes for playing their sport, separate from NIL payments.” FBS leaders are split on that scenario, with 45% supporting and 42% opposing. The majority of non-FBS leaders oppose such a change with 64% opposed and only 27% supporting.
- **An unwavering commitment to the academic mission and standards:** In a clear statement of priorities, leaders overwhelmingly reaffirmed the importance of the educational component of college athletics. Their strong support for athletes being enrolled full-time (98%) and graduating (99%), and teams meeting academic standards for postseason competition (95%) serves as a crucial anchor, reinforcing that the academic mission remains central to the purpose of college athletics.

The college athlete experience: Impact of new athlete financial benefits, transfer rules and institutional budget decisions

- Leaders were asked their views on changes impacting athletes, including policies that essentially allow college athletes to transfer between schools without restriction and maintain immediate eligibility at their new schools; NIL (name, image and likeness) compensation; and the *House* settlement, which allows schools to provide NIL compensation and other new payments directly to athletes.

A consensus for a more regulated transfer system:

Leaders made their negative views clear about the current college athlete transfer rules and trends, and their impact.

- 86% of leaders say the transfer portal is having a negative effect on Division I college sports.
- 84% of leaders oppose current rules that allow athletes to transfer as often as they choose with immediate eligibility to play for their new schools.

- 94% support the NCAA, conferences, or institutions taking actions that can “enforce strong penalties for tampering with or providing recruiting inducements to current players before the transfer portal opens.”

Impact of the *House* settlement on Division I college sports as a whole:

- **A disruptive financial and operational shift:** The vast majority of leaders (76%) believe the overall impact of the *House* settlement on Division I will be negative. That negative outlook includes 88% of college presidents and chancellors.

Impact of the *House* settlement on the overall college athlete experience:

- **FBS football athletes:** A majority (60%) believe the *House* settlement will have a positive impact on the experience of FBS football athletes, with athletics directors holding an even more optimistic view (75%).
- **Men's and women's basketball athletes:** Division I leaders hold mixed views about the impact of the *House* settlement terms on the overall experience of men's and women's basketball players. Nearly half (48%) see a positive impact for men's basketball athletes and 40% see a negative impact. Only 38% of Division I leaders see a positive impact on the overall experience for women's basketball athletes and 45% see a negative impact. Among the overall respondents, athletics directors have a different viewpoint, with the majority (63%) seeing a positive impact for men's basketball athletes and half (50%) seeing a positive impact for women's basketball athletes.
- **Collegiate Olympic sports athletes:** Leaders overwhelmingly foresee a negative impact on athletes in men's sports other than FBS football and basketball (80%) and women's sports other than women's basketball (78%). Even athletics directors who generally show a more optimistic viewpoint on many issues responded similarly to all other respondents, with nearly three-quarters saying that the *House* settlement terms will have a negative impact on the experience of athletes in collegiate Olympic sports.

Executive summary of findings

Support for providing new resources to fund collegiate Olympic sports

One of the most striking findings is the consensus around Olympic sports. Nearly all respondents (93%) believe universities must continue offering Olympic sports such as gymnastics, swimming, track & field, and others not associated with generating revenue. Leaders also highlight the national interest, with 92% agreeing these programs are vital to Team USA's Olympic success.

Strong support extends to new public financing mechanisms: Seventy-three percent (73%) favor federal funds to help finance collegiate Olympic sports and scholarships and 82% support using revenues from a federal tax on sports gambling operators to sustain them.

Support for new financial incentives from College Football Playoff (CFP) revenues: A majority of FBS leaders (57%) support creating a new allocation from a share of CFP revenues to provide new incentives for schools that develop U.S. Olympians and “offer broad-based sports opportunities.”

In a separate question to athletics directors at institutions abiding by the *House* settlement, 86% said that “new or more financial incentives provided by the NCAA, conference, or other entities to reward an institution for its number of participants or number of sports” could help their institutions maintain their current number of NCAA varsity sports.

The threat to gender equity

The survey highlights gender equity as a critical area of concern, with leaders signaling a serious risk that progress could be undermined in the new Division I model.

- **More work needed on gender equity:** More than four in ten Division I leaders (43%) believe that institutions “have not gone far enough” in providing female college athletes with equitable opportunities, financial assistance and treatment compared to male athletes. While 44% believe institutions “have been about right,” only 6% of leaders believe institutions “have gone too far.”
- **A warning sign for the future of women's sports:** The majority of campus athletics leaders (55%) predict that

Division I female athletes will be in a worse situation under the new rules that allow institutions to provide new athlete NIL and “revenue-share” payments as well as offer more scholarships. The concern that women's sports will be in a worse situation was even stronger among university presidents (64%).

- **A fundamental challenge in applying Title IX:** The deep division on how to allocate new revenue-sharing and NIL payments exposes one of the most complex legal and philosophical challenges ahead. Among all respondents, 47% say new types of institutional payments to athletes like NIL compensation and “revenue-share” should be **“based on how much money an athlete's sport generates or the athlete's marketability.”** However, 31% say the new payments **“should be included in the total amount of institutional financial assistance (e.g., athletics scholarships) and distributed equitably to female and male athletes.”** Nearly a quarter (22%) are unsure about how to allocate the new payments. As a subgroup, athletics directors hold different views on this question with more than three-quarters (78%) saying that these payments should be “based on how much money an athlete's sport generates or the athlete's marketability.”

A search for stability and structure: Reimagining governance, seeking enforceable policies and federal guardrails

Division I leaders show support for new governance models, enforceable rules, and federal legislation to bring order and predictability to the system.

- **A call for uniform federal standards:** Division I leaders indicate overwhelming support for federal intervention that creates national standards for athlete NIL compensation and other operational rules, and prevents college athletes from being classified as employees.
 - 86% support a national standard to regulate athlete NIL compensation.
 - 78% support laws to prevent college athletes from being classified as employees.
 - 77% support national rules that supersede conflicting state laws.

- 69% support limits on how much each institution can spend on specific sports or budget categories.

- **Openness to a new football governance model:** There is support (55% of all respondents) for creating a new, separate governing entity for Power 4 football. The idea finds backing from both FBS (50%) and non-FBS (57%) leaders, with support being highest among athletics directors with 66% holding this view. Additionally, 58% of FBS leaders favor having “a single executive or commissioner to provide unified leadership for the sport, not just for its national championship (the CFP).”

These responses suggest support for a more specialized governance structure for Power 4 or FBS football outside the traditional NCAA framework, particularly among athletics directors.

- **Openness to more regional scheduling:** Eighty-two percent (82%) of DI leaders support “loosening requirements for regular-season conference scheduling in sports other than basketball to allow greater flexibility for regional competitive alliances.”

In a separate question to athletics directors at institutions abiding by the *House* settlement, 91% said that “more regional competitions for sports to reduce travel costs” could help their institutions in being able to maintain their current number of NCAA varsity sports.

Financial pressures and difficult choices

Athletics directors at schools that are currently abiding by the *House* settlement terms shared their expectations and strategies:

- **Institutional athlete NIL and revenue-share payments:** Athletics directors responding to this survey provided insights into their strategies for new institutional athlete NIL compensation or revenue-sharing, with 47% expecting new athlete compensation at their school to be in a range from \$500,000 - \$5 million, and another 20% expecting to increase compensation from \$5 million up to the maximum allowed level of \$20.5 million.
- **Increased pressure for institutional funding:** More than half (54%) of athletics directors indicate they are pursuing an increase in institutional funding to help cover the new costs.

- **Pursuing revenues and cutting expenses:** When given choices on how to meet new financial demands, athletics directors indicate they are considering multiple strategies: increased fundraising (97%) and media partnerships (92%), increasing ticket prices (82%), seeking a greater share of their institution's operating funds (54%), reducing some sports' operating budgets (46%), increasing student fees (31%) and dropping some varsity sports (20%).

Comparing these views with public opinion

This survey follows a **national public opinion poll** on college sports conducted by the Knight Commission and the Elon University Poll in July 2025. Across the board, there is greater uncertainty and divided opinions among the general public on college sports issues. However, there is wide agreement among the public and Division I campus leaders on the importance of maintaining academic standards and graduation for athletes and for requiring college coaches to earn a credential certifying their knowledge and training.

The general public and Division I leaders differ on some specific issues, with the public being more favorable to unlimited transfer options and NIL compensation for athletes. The general public is less supportive than Division I leaders of using federal funds or sports gambling taxes to support collegiate Olympic sports, and they are less likely to support national NCAA rules on college sports that would supersede individual state laws.

Conclusion: A clear call for action

This survey presents a clear picture of a defining moment in college sports. The era of incremental adjustment is over, replaced by an urgent need for fundamental realignment. Navigating the path forward will require difficult decisions about finances, governance, and the core identity of college athletics. The risks are substantial, and the solutions are not yet clear. The survey reveals a leadership group that overwhelmingly sees federal legislation and new funding mechanisms as part of the solutions.

NCAA Division I leaders survey

» Comments collected in the survey

Nearly 300 survey respondents added comments on this question:

“What is the single most significant issue to address in college sports?”

Key Insights

Governance and NCAA rules were cited repeatedly, with concerns about inconsistent enforcement, lack of clarity, and the widening gap between “haves” and “have-nots.”

College athletes’ health and safety (including mental health) were highlighted in relation to increased travel, workload and stress from instability in the system.

NIL/Compensation and the transfer portal were strongly linked in the minds of respondents. Many emphasized the unsustainability of the current free-agency style model without national standards or guardrails.

The financial model of college athletics—particularly at the mid-major level—was seen as unsustainable, with escalating costs and reliance on a shrinking pool of students.

Academics and the “student” in “student-athlete” remain a central concern. Respondents worry about erosion of educational priorities and declining graduation outcomes.

Several called for leadership, vision and segmentation: distinguishing between commercialized revenue sports and the broader educational mission of athletics.

What is the single most important issue to address in college sports?

"College Athletics needs real leaders. Campus presidents and ADs turn over too fast and have too much self-interest to preserve the best interest of college sports at large. We need leaders who will look out for the greater good of college sports, and will be respected by presidents, ADs, administrators, coaches, student-athletes, and fans."

- *Director of athletics*

"The fully open nature of the portal is creating a challenging marketplace for college athletics, where many athletes in the revenue sports can make more than they would in professional athletics. It also discourages (and might punish) a focus on athlete development... Right now it is total Wild West, and making athletics economically unsustainable for all but those who are well-monied among the A4 conferences."

- *President/Chancellor*

"We need to get conferences (especially those below the P4) to aggregate their resources and formulate more regionality. Creating regionality and regional scheduling models will save money, increase revenue opportunities, but more importantly, will lessen the travel burden and increase the health and well-being for our student-athletes, coaches and staffs."

- *Director of athletics*

"The overall NCAA/Institutions of Higher Education landscape is increasingly without any passion for values tied to the greater academic mission of higher education (at its own peril). Mid-major conferences that have strength, great tradition and longevity are filled with institutions who are grappling with athletic budgets. If everybody describes athletics as the "wild west" it's time for the NCAA and college leaders to develop the framework for success going forward. This pathway is not sustainable and is resulting in a very volatile environment with no predictability."

- *President/Chancellor*

"The combination of the transfer portal/NIL Revenue Sharing is a deadly combination for mid-majors and is going to threaten a lot of mid-majors ability to stay Division I. We have all become a farm system for the next highest level to recruit right off of each other's rosters. At some point this will have a negative effect on graduation rates, academic performance. Fan interest and engagement, outside of the Power 4, will decline if rosters turn over annually. Other employees on college campuses, including those who work in athletics, will also become disenchanted when some of the athletes' salaries are higher than theirs. It is not a sustainable model at the moment."

- *Director of athletics*

"The whole enterprise is being tainted and jeopardized by money and power. Sports should give students access to higher education and to opportunities to compete and develop as human beings. I'm not opposed to paying athletes reasonable amounts in sports that generate a net profit for universities. But most D1 institutions lose money on sports."

- *Faculty athletics representative*

"Graduation does not seem to be the goal anymore, especially in revenue or marquee sports, but institutions are being held to NCAA academic standards that don't match the reality of what happens on campuses in terms of frequent-transfer students or students who otherwise aren't retained."

- *Senior woman administrator*

"We are treated like a business in the courts, but yet we are mandated by the federal government to offer equal opportunities (which I agree with, the equal opportunities). These two things are at odds with each other."

- *Director of athletics*

For full verbatim responses, visit
bit.ly/D1leaderspoll »





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