

October 9, 2025

Executive Summary

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.

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 on gender equity needed:** 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 offering 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.

Survey Methodology

This survey was developed by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics and the Elon University Poll. It was fielded by the Elon University Poll as a Qualtrics, web-based, self-administered survey between July 29 and August 22, 2025. Those invited via email to take the survey included representatives at 364 NCAA Division I colleges and universities. There were 376 respondents (26% response rate), including 61 presidents or chancellors, 94 athletics directors, 79 senior woman administrators and 142 faculty athletics representatives. The respondents included 51 individuals from Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Power 4/autonomy conferences, 83 from the FBS Group of Six conferences and FBS Independents, 128 from the Football Championship Subdivision and 114 from Division I basketball centric (no football) schools. The overall margin of error for this poll is +/-4.4%, with larger margins of error for subgroups. Access the full report, charts, survey topline and methodology at: bit.ly/D1leaderspoll.

About

[The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics](https://knightcommission.org), founded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in 1989, is an independent group that leads transformational change to prioritize college athletes' education, health, safety, and success. The Commission has a legacy of influencing NCAA policies that have helped propel record-high graduation rates of Division I athletes. The Commission's ongoing efforts focus on governance, equity, and financial reforms, as well as providing education on the changing landscape of college sports. knightcommission.org

[The Elon University Poll](https://www.elon.edu/elonpoll) was established in 2000 as a public policy research initiative. The Elon University Poll conducts North Carolina and national surveys on important issues, sharing the results with media, citizens and public officials to facilitate informed public policy making through the better understanding of citizens' opinions and attitudes. The poll is fully funded by Elon University and is a charter member of the Transparency Initiative, a program created by the [American Association for Public Opinion Research](https://www.aapublicopinionresearch.org). www.elon.edu/elonpoll.