

The Unintended Consequences of the NCAA College Athletics Transfer Portal

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Abstract: This article examines the unintended consequences of the NCAA College Athletics Transfer Portal. For decades, college sports abided by a uniform set of NCAA rules that only changed incrementally over the years. The advent of the transfer portal dramatically changed this orthodoxy seemingly overnight. It is the revolving door caused by this platform that has had nightmarish consequences for administrators in college athletics and coaches. The universal reason that one attends college is to be a student, and what is lost in the portal fanfare is the stability of the student-athlete's experience as a student. Two of the most problematic aspects of the portal are that there is no mandatory orientation session for prospective transfer portal applicants that highlights the pros and cons of their decision, and there are few guardrails that protect student-athletes from making impulsive decisions. Student-athletes must be protected from themselves. Moreover, there were few rules that existed at the time this article was written that prevented coaches from exploiting this new platform in negative ways. This article examines the concept of bureaucracy and how bureaucratic principles are needed to provide guidelines and standard operating procedures with this new platform. There must be clearly defined rules and regulations, even in the free market. While the portal has certainly created excitement among many, the purpose of this article is to clearly show how the costs of this platform, in its current form, outweigh the benefits.

Keywords: NCAA transfer portal, one-time transfer portal, college athletics transfer portal

The New Frontier of College Athletics

Players coming and going has become part of everyday life in college football, especially with Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) and liberal Transfer Portal rules that have made switching teams almost as easy as free agency at the professional level (Walsh, 2022, p. 1). This article examines the concept of bureaucracy and how bureaucratic principles are needed to provide guidelines and standard operating procedures with the NCAA College Athletic Transfer Portal. There must be clearly defined rules and regulations, even in the free market. While the portal has certainly created excitement among many, the purpose of this article is to clearly show how the costs of this platform, in its current form, outweigh the benefits.

I write this article as a participant observer. As a university professor for 27 years, a Faculty Advisor for the athletic department at Cal Poly Pomona, and a former football player at Vanderbilt University in the mid-1980s, I have a deep-rooted interest in the affairs of college sports in the United States (U.S.). As a former Division I football player, I marveled at how college football

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was guided by the same rules and regulations for decades before and after my playing days. With the exception of the helmet-to-helmet targeting rule, noticeably smaller shoulder pads, and pants with no knee pads, during the three decades since I played, college football had remarkably been the same product with the same standard operating procedures until recently. For decades, student-athletes were restricted from transferring to other schools. In many cases, they had to sit out a year if they transferred. This rule acted as a deterrent for student-athletes transferring.

As writer Matthew Shaw stated, “For years, college athletes were essentially owned by the universities that they attended. They had no rights to their name, image, and likeness and could not transfer from school to school without facing a year-long sporting ban” (Shaw, n.d., para. 1). This all changed when the transfer portal was implemented by the NCAA in October 2018. More specifically, the NCAA’s April 2021 One-Time Transfer Rule gave athletes on all levels the chance to transfer one time without penalty (Dodd, 2022). This development was a result of a contemporary athletes’ rights movement that began in 2015 and crystallized in the wake of the George Floyd death (May 25, 2020) and the protests that ensued.

The transfer portal process begins with the student-athlete contacting the college’s compliance office to notify them of their intent to transfer. A compliance officer registers this notification within two days (Elman, 2021). This intent to transfer is then posted on a number of transfer portal platforms, most notably 247Sports.com. There were two transfer portal windows established by the NCAA in the Summer of 2022. For example, in Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), December 5-January 18 and April 15-30 were the set dates for players to enter the transfer portal. In what seemed like an overwhelming juggling act, coaches and staff were in constant motion retaining their current rosters while expanding them with portal players (Dellenger, 2022).

In an effort to give athletic departments a more feasible timeline to manage the chaotic transfer portal process, in October 2023, the NCAA Division I Council narrowed its transfer portal window from 60 days to 45 days. Players in each sport have 45 days throughout the year to enter the transfer portal, which is divided up differently by each sport. For example, under the new rule, for men’s and women’s basketball, a 45-day window opens the Monday after Selection Sunday. For football, there will be a 30-day window after the season – after the College Football Playoff teams have been announced in early December and a 15-day window in the Spring from April 15-30 (VanHaaren, 2023).

There are definitive pros and cons of the NCAA Transfer Portal. Writer Trent Wood (2002) stated, “Depending on who you talk to, the NCAA Transfer Portal is either the greatest thing to happen to college football, or the worst” (para. 1). The NCAA implemented the NIL policy a few months after its One-Time Transfer decision. The One-Time Transfer and NIL policies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of college football. Speaking about the transfer portal and the NIL policy, writer Bill Wasinger (2022) stated, “By those metrics, both decisions have been huge successes. However, for every success, there’s a dark side. And, for the NCAA’s football programs, the cracks in the mirror are just now beginning to appear” (para. 1). *Sports Illustrated* writer Ross Dellenger (2022) stated that the “NCAA changes have essentially created year-round free agency in college football, bringing its own set of ramifications” (para. 1).

Sportcasting writer Jake Elman (2021) summed up the positives and negatives of the portal, “The college football Transfer Portal giveth, and the portal taketh away” (para. 1).

The “One-Time” Transfer Portal was an inaccurate name for the initial rollout of the platform because DI athletes were allowed to transfer multiple times without consequences. Quarterback J.T. Daniels was an example of this phenomenon. Daniels was the starting quarterback with the University of Southern California Trojans before playing for three other universities: the University of Georgia, University of West Virginia, and Rice University (as a graduate transfer). In 2023, the NCAA began incremental changes in enforcing the “One-Time” transfer concept. The policy below represents the most up-to-date NCAA policy regarding the “One-Time” transfer rule at the time this article was written.

On the NCAA’s website in October 2023, their “Eligibility Center’s NCAA Division I One-Time Transfer FAQs” stated the following about multiple transfers:

Q: What if a student-athlete previously transferred from a four-year school and would like to transfer again?

A: Generally, a student-athlete who has not previously transferred from another four-year school would not qualify for the one-time exception. There is an exception to this application if their previous transfer was due to the discontinuation or no sponsorship of their sport at their original school. (NCAA, 2022)

Literature Review

The Bureaucracy

There is endless criticism of the *the bureaucracy*. The bureaucracy is characterized as an organization or a system that is inefficient, unhurried, and impersonal. The ubiquitous concept of bureaucratic ‘red tape’ refers to a process that is bogged down in its own insular policies. Writer Michael Lutzkerer stated, “...the term has come to signify the multiplication of agencies staffed by narrow-minded and high-handed officials whose work is characterized by innumerable tortuous procedures.” Lutzkerer went on to state, “All of us have experienced the frustration of dealing with bureaucracy, and everyone has their favorite horror story” (Lutzkerer, 1982, p. 120). Over the years, critics have accused the NCAA of being a highly insular and bureaucratized Leviathan, which has resisted change, innovation, and new ideas.

Max Weber, the father of the concept of ‘bureaucracy,’ would retort to its critics that rules, systems, insularity, and uniformity create its own type of efficiency and stability. One of Weber’s six fundamental principles of a bureaucracy is the concept of formalized rules, which describe policies, procedures, and stable rules that govern managers. The rules are standardized and should detail the organizational structure and the specialized tasks of staff (Ward, 2021).

The negative connotation of the concept of “bureaucracy” has endured. As writer Patrick Ward stated, “In spite of modern distaste for the term, most businesses are still modeled on bureaucratic principles, and most large corporations display at least some characteristics of bureaucracy, as defined by Weber.” The absence of Weber’s bureaucratic principles creates

uncertainty, instability, and potential chaos. Chaos Theory describes the opposite phenomenon of Weber's bureaucracy.

Chaos Theory is the science of surprises, of the nonlinear and the unpredictable. It teaches us to expect the unexpected. While most traditional science deals with supposedly predictable phenomena like gravity, electricity, or chemical reactions, Chaos Theory deals with nonlinear things that are effectively impossible to predict or control, like turbulence, weather, the stock market, our brain states, and so on. These phenomena are often described by fractal mathematics, which captures the infinite complexity of nature (Fractal Foundation, n.d., para. 1).

The transfer portal has increasingly made college athletics nonlinear and unpredictable and program variables have effectively become impossible to predict or control.

For decades college athletics has relied on a predictable process of recruiting and cultivating player development. The new mode of operations is uniquely vague. Ambiguity creates its own type of inefficiency. If there are no defined rules, then the system is susceptible to abuse and exploitation. The old rules provided by the NCAA provided guard rails, consistency, and uniformity to a potentially chaotic system. With the diminished role of the longtime ombudsman (the NCAA) in the new landscape, chaos has ensued. In their ongoing assessment of the new transfer system, the NCAA and athletic administrators will increasingly have to apply the principles of Chaos Theory.

Moreover, the NCAA is quickly transitioning from a bureaucracy to an adhocracy. An adhocracy is an organization that is defined by a highly organic structure, scant formalization of behavior, low standardization of procedures, and selected decentralization (Towers, 2011). The cascading changes in the rules are seemingly now driving the organization, and the organization is sprinting to keep up with these changes. Scholar Peter Blau (1956) stated, "If we want to utilize efficient bureaucracies, we must find democratic methods of controlling them lest they enslave us" (p. 118). Indeed, Blau's principles can be applied to the NCAA's adhocracy.

In the current case of college athletics, the old adage "Be careful what you ask for" is magnified. For years, it seemed that everyone railed against the NCAA. From the first executive director of the NCAA, Walter Byers (1951-1988), to Cedric Dempsey, Myles Brand, and Mark Emmert, the leaders of the NCAA seemed to be the enemies of the state. In hindsight, we realize the complex jobs that these leaders had in providing rules, structure, and standard operating procedures for hundreds of member schools and tens of thousands of student-athletes. Under their leadership, institutions, and programs were penalized for not following the rules. These penalties, as well as the financial loss and institutional embarrassment stemming from these penalties, compelled programs to follow the rules.

The NCAA's national headquarters is in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it has 500 employees. Their primary charge is to support member legislation, advocate for student-athletes, and coordinate and manage all NCAA championships. The organization consists of 1,098 colleges and universities and 102 athletic conferences. There are 350 Division I, 310 Division II, and 438 Division III schools that make up the NCAA. According to the NCAA's website, there are nearly

a half million athletes that make up the 19,886 teams that compete for 90 NCAA championships in 24 sports that span across three divisions. One of the NCAA's missions is "Prioritizing academics, well-being and fairness so college athletes can succeed on the field, in the classroom and for life" (NCAA.org). College athletic programs consist of the following staffing categories:

- (a) Academic Support Staff: to prepare athletes for the classroom and future careers
- (b) Coaches: to develop student-athletes on and off the field
- (c) Sports Information Directors: to document and share player and team achievements
- (d) Health and Safety Personnel: to support college athlete well-being

The perception of the NCAA is that it is an unmalleable and unforgiving bureaucracy that dictates orders and punishes those who are out of compliance. This perception belies the reality of the organization. The reality is that the NCAA is fundamentally run on democratic principles. NCAA members make the rules, and they make rules to enforce these rules. The criticism that the organization has received over decades is unwarranted because the athletic conferences themselves create the rules that the NCAA enforces as a body. In other words, the NCAA is the voice of its member teams and conferences. Representatives from member campuses serve on committees that create the policies for the organization in the context of issues such as recruiting, compliance, academics, and championships (NCAA, n.d., a). For example, in April 2023, the NCAA Playing Rules Oversight Panel approved a rule change for the 2023 football season that will allow the clock to run after first downs in all divisions except Division III. The rationale for this decision is to speed up the games (Dinich, 2023). This is virtually how all rules in NCAA sports have been created. The rules have been created by member teams and conferences that have representatives who sit on committees and subcommittees. The NCAA functions much like the United States Congress.

The NCAA Transfer Portal

Student-athletes register into the NCAA Transfer Portal to change colleges. There is a myriad of reasons why a student would transfer to another university. When they enter their names into the portal, their home schools have the right to rescind their scholarship. Notably, even if they wind up staying at their university, their scholarships can be rescinded or reduced (Fuller, 2023).

In the context of the transfer portal and NIL developments, it is the member teams and conferences, through committees, that advocated for these changes – not the 'NCAA.' And it is the NCAA member teams and conferences that have shortsightedly created a situation that has so many negative consequences. It will be up to these same member committees to implement rules and regulations that provide structure and mitigate the chaos and dysfunction that is currently undermining the stability of programs and disrupting the academic experience of student-athletes.

It was the NCAA Division I Board of Directors that made the rule change that college football, men and women's basketball, baseball, and men's ice hockey were immediately eligible to transfer to a different institution without the punishment of sitting out for a year. In the past, the student-athlete's institution had the right to veto a request to transfer. The NCAA had to issue a waiver to override this veto. As writer Timothy O'Brien stated, the institution's exercise of its "veto power" in a few high-profile cases received negative publicity. The public opinion was that

the power to reject a student-athlete's desire to immediately transfer to another university was unfair to the student-athlete. These high-profile cases were the impetus for a robust discussion on the longtime transfer rules in Division I college athletics (O'Brien, 2021).

Claudine McCarthy captured the sentiment of college athletic experts in interviews with the members of the College Athletics and Law Advisory Board. A summary of this discussion stated, "Although the NCAA transfer portal has given student-athletes more freedom, it's also created more challenges for coaches and staff." One conclusion by this board was that the losses tend to outweigh the wins with this new platform. In this discussion, Michael Scarano, Associate Director of Athletics/Director of Compliance at California Baptist University, stated that the transfer portal has "certainly opened more doors for student-athletes." He went on to say, "But like any new legislation, you don't know what you're encountering until you go through the process. It's a beast" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 5).

A National Public Radio (NPR) story entitled "Welcome to the Portal Where College Athletes Can Risk it All at a Shot at Glory" examined the risk versus the reward of the portal. Writer Jason Fuller stated, "It's the ultimate leap of faith and not everyone sticks the landing." The NPR story featured Myles Hinton, a football player from Georgia who was on a full-ride scholarship at Stanford. Hinton, a 6 feet 7 inches, 320-pound offensive lineman, started 16 games with Stanford. In the interview with NPR, Hinton stated, "I'm not going to lie to you, because, like, I love my coaches, I love my teammates – there wasn't any qualms with the athletic facility." Hinton wanted to leave Stanford because the student body did not come to the games like they did in the Southeastern Conference. He successfully transferred to the University of Michigan. But Hinton was one of the lucky ones (Fuller, 2023, para. 3).

Over 1,500 DI basketball players entered the transfer portal after Selection Sunday in March 2023. According to *On3 Transfer Portal* (n.d.), as of May 2023, 2,336 football players entered the NCAA transfer portal. Of this number, 1,164 (50%) were offered commitments to new teams and 50 players (2.14%) withdrew their entrees (On3, n.d.). At the beginning of the 2023 Division I football season, there were still over 1,000 football players who had not found a home. Mental health professionals should track these individuals and proactively offer counseling to them.

The fact is that there are overwhelmingly more players in the portal than scholarships that can be offered. We often hear about the exciting and glamorous side of the portal but the tragic side of this phenomenon has been less discussed. By the end of the 2022 transfer cycle in college football, there were more than 3,000 FBS transfers – 20% of all FBS players (Hummer, 2022).

When the player enters the portal, they give up their scholarship at their current school. The school has the discretion to reallocate this scholarship. If the player changes their mind and decides not to transfer, the school can retain the player's scholarship, which rarely happens, according to David Marsh (2021). If there is one trait that coaches universally preach is loyalty to the team. If a player enters the portal, there are two primary reasons why a team will not retain their scholarship if they change their mind: there is a sense of disloyalty to the team and teams have a timeline/sense of urgency to replace a player with someone else.

To its credit, the NCAA has a “Want to Transfer” icon on its homepage, which begins by giving student-athletes the following message:

The decision to transfer to another school is an important and often difficult one in your college career. Before you act, do your homework. Make sure you understand how transferring will affect you, so you don’t negatively impact your education or your chances to play college sports (NCAA, n.d., b).

This page goes on to list the “Steps to Take Before You Transfer” and portable document formats (PDFs) of transfer guides, transfer best practices, transfer rules, transfer flowcharts, and transfer tips for coaches (NCAA, n.d., b). Although the information that the NCAA provides on transfer policies and procedures is extensive and detailed, it will not fully caution student-athletes or protect them from their own impulses. College Athletics administrator Timothy Neal, from Concordia University Ann Arbor, shared thought-provoking questions that we should ponder. Neal stated, “Ask student-athletes if they’ve thought through making a permanent decision on a temporary issue” (McCarthy, 2022, p. 6). This is at the core of the problem: athletes are not thoroughly thinking through the potential consequences of their decisions when entering the portal.

Discussion and Implications

Unintended Consequences

In the context of the FBS in college football, the new rule is that teams have 85 scholarships to give, which means they can aggressively rework their entire roster to recruit from the Transfer Portal. Not only does this mean more chaos and uncertainty, teams will invariably use this new rule to gut their rosters and run off existing players to make room for new portal recruits. This new change in recruiting practices lays the foundation for the callous and insensitive treatment of current players (Hummer, 2022).

In responding to the survey question on whether teams would rework their rosters due to being allotted 85 scholarships per recruiting cycle, a representative from the American Athletic Conference (AAC) stated, “1,000%. It’s a one-for-one mentality...Guys that aren’t a fit are going to be helped out of programs.” There is now constant gamesmanship with personnel required to get a competitive edge. Another representative from the AAC stated, “This gives schools an opportunity to completely flip the bottom half of their roster, and there’s no doubt there will be schools who take advantage of it” (Hummer, 2022, para. 36). Student-athletes should have some level of protection from this type of exploitative behavior.

Coach Deion Sanders is a ‘prime’ example of the bleak consequences and the Machiavellian approach that some have adopted in this new system. Coach Sander, also known as Coach Prime, told his football players when he arrived at the University of Colorado that “we’re going to try to make you quit,” that “we’re gonna move on” from some players, and he wanted them to “get ready to go ahead and jump” in the transfer portal to leave. On his arrival at the University of Colorado, Coach Prime had 51 scholarship football players on his roster, and 31 of these players opted to leave the university (Schrotenboer, 2023, para. 2).

In all, 71 of the eligible players on CU's football roster had left the program before the team's first game in 2023. Coach Prime did what he was hired to do, which was to transform CU football. But the big picture question is, at what cost? What is lost in the discussion of the portal is the stability of the student-athlete's experience as a student. How can an athlete excel at being a student with so much uncertainty, instability, and insecurity in their position?

In the context of the transfer portal, critics of the NCAA should be careful what they wish for. For coaches, the new system potentially levels the playing field and creates parity among teams. However, the lack of loyalty to a program and the unpredictability of a coach's current and upcoming roster might mean that the costs of the new system would outweigh the benefits. Coaches have been able to coach and mentor athletes throughout the years because they maintained a certain level of leverage, influence, and agency over their players. This phenomenon has been dramatically diminished. With the constant fear of players leaving for The Portal, it is coaches who have to be constantly vigilant and sensitive to every player's needs. This task seems to be overwhelming and unsustainable. As Sports Administrator at Concordia University, Ann Arber stated, "Coaches' biggest challenge is having to keep recruiting their student-athletes just to keep them from leaving" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 5).

For the players, the portal is ostensibly a win. Coaches can be petty. Many of them play *doghouse politics*, which means that a player can be in the coach's *doghouse* for the simplest of reasons, e.g., having a bad turnover in basketball, fumbling in football, forgetting a play, being late to a meeting, or missing practice for a wedding or a funeral. Many coaches have little tolerance for topics and issues other than the game. This is surprisingly true in many programs that are academically-oriented.

There are consequences for a player who prioritize their academics over athletics. For example, a player cannot be late for practice because of a physics lab. Moreover, it is taboo for players to express their grievances to a coach. There are potential repercussions for complaining or being critical of a program's philosophies, policies, or procedures. The portal now gives the student-athlete leverage in these scenarios – especially for players who are actually contributing to the team. The unfair and uneven-handed behavior of coaches is put in check by the portal. Today, coaches have to be just as conscious and accountable for their behavior as the players. This creates a less dictatorial and more progressive environment for the players.

The transfer portal is exciting for college sports fans in a myriad of ways. It gives them constant content for discussion and debate. It gives them hope for a better roster and a better outcome for their team's upcoming season. The portal has given college athletes the opportunity to leverage their talents in the free market:

Free market is a summary term for an array of exchanges that take place in society. Each exchange is undertaken as a voluntary agreement between two people or between groups of people represented by agents. These two individuals (or agents) exchange two economic goods either as tangible commodities or nontangible services (Rothbard, n.d., para. 1).

Three of the four Heisman Trophy finalists in 2023 were products of the transfer portal: Bo Nix (University of Oregon), Michael Penix, Jr. (University of Washington), and the Heisman Trophy

winner, Jayden Daniels (Louisiana State University). Each player and their new team benefited immensely from their capacity to transfer. The portal is a collegiate sports free agency, and there are few ideals more American than the free market concept. It empowers college athletes to take full advantage of their talents. Players' rationale for transferring to another team could range from wanting more playing time, wanting to be on a more competitive team, signing an NIL agreement with another team, changing coaches on their current team, or simply wanting to compete in a different college environment.

Whatever their reasons are for wanting to enter the transfer portal, this platform has made it possible for second chances and restarts for hundreds of players. The portal is also good for teams that want to fill holes and strengthen their rosters with transfers. *Sports Illustrated* writer Sam Connon called the portal the "New Age Team Building Avenue" (2022). On paper, the portal will equalize the playing field for teams that cannot compete with the recruiting prowess of other teams in their conferences. And the portal certainly makes the game more entertaining for college sports fans.

Every Division I school, until recently, was allotted 85 scholarships, and each year teams had 25 scholarships to offer incoming players. Until the implementation of the portal, almost all of the 25 offers had gone to high school seniors (with the exception of a few junior college players). Hundreds of high school football players have become casualties of the transfer portal and college football's shift from the developmental model to the free agency model. From the time the first college football rules were written by a group of Ivy League schools in 1876, recruiting high school players to college teams has been an American tradition (Parlier, 2023). The current transfer portal has interrupted this 146-year-old high school-to-college-football recruitment pipeline.

There is more pressure on college coaches to win now, and this pressure is affecting how they recruit. Given the enormous pressure to win, the logic of coaches is simple and understandable. College programs will opt to recruit more seasoned players that are in the transfer portal than develop high school players. The consequence of this new model is teams that have far fewer high school recruits. Jack Welch, a former high school and college coach of 39 years, stated that college programs are now saving five to ten scholarships for transfers:

Colleges coaches are prudent to search the transfer portal for top athletes to fill spots. These transfers are already playing college football and understand the college game. They are proven in the classroom and have practice and/or game time under their belt. These are players who were offered big time scholarships versus a high school recruit who is unknown (Welch, 2022, para. 5).

Coaches now want to recruit players who can make an immediate impact. But even this new means of recruitment for coaches will come at a cost. One unintended consequence of the portal will be the burnout rate of coaches, athletic support staff, and administrators keeping pace with the revolving door of this platform. The burnout rate among managers of athletic programs will be correlated with the rate of change in each program (McCarthy, 2022).

The Realities of the Portal for Student-Athletes

With all the excitement generated by college sports, mental health is often overlooked. Because they are physically fit and athletic, the student-athletes seem invincible – and they seem to be living their best lives. This is not always the case. Between March and April 2022, at least five student-athletes died by suicide, and there are data that show that college athletes are increasingly grappling with depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide.

The 2022 NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study shows that the rate of mental health concerns among student-athletes was 1.5 to 2 times higher than the historic rates reported before the COVID-19 pandemic. The Zone writer stated, “For athletes stuck in a situation that deteriorates their mental health, the transfer portal offers new opportunities to change lives” (Shaw, n.d., para. 1). The problem is with athletes who enter the portal and cannot find an athletic home. If they are escaping a situation because of mental health issues, these issues will only be exacerbated if they do not find an athletic home or if they are dissatisfied with their new athletic home.

It will take us a few years to assess the mental health consequences of portal decisions. People who are caught up in the potential of the portal being a boost to the winning percentage of their teams without thinking about the hidden cost of this platform should look at the big picture. I hypothesize that the disappointment, embarrassment, depression, anger, and rage resulting from portal decisions will have the most tragic of consequences for student-athletes.

Many college athletes have rolled the dice on the portal with unfortunate results. Imagine having a full-ride scholarship to a school such as Stanford, Notre Dame, Duke, or Vanderbilt and giving up this scholarship to enter the portal with an uncertain outcome. Elite schools cost over \$80,000 to attend annually, and a full-ride scholarship means that all costs are paid by the student-athlete’s scholarship. A transfer to any school without having a scholarship is cost-prohibitive for many student-athletes – even with partial financial aid. If the player wants to travel out of state to play football without a scholarship, the situation is even more dire because of the out-of-state fees that they will have to pay. As David Marsh stated,

We are only beginning to see the negative impact of the Transfer Portal, and it will continue to grow. This cycle we will see a larger percentage of those student-athletes in the Transfer Portal not finding a new home, and they won’t necessarily be able to return to their original school either, as they surrendered their scholarship upon entering the Transfer Portal. Many players will see the end of their college football careers, and in some cases, it may be the end of their college careers entirely if they find themselves unable to pay for their education (2021, para. 5).

While people tend to focus on the players who are leaving and going to other teams, Marsh highlights a reality that seems to be muted in the excitement of portal dialogue.

More players entered the 2024 D-I college football transfer portal than in 2023, which means the stories of worst-case scenarios have yet to resonate and become a deterrent to entering the portal. Imagine the lifelong psychological impact of being a talented D-I college athlete and making a decision that abruptly ends a person’s athletic career and possibly their

academic career at a desirable school. This risk-reward decision is only as good as its outcome. And, based on the numbers, the probability of the entering portal producing a positive outcome is low. Most DI football players strongly believed that they should be playing in one of the power conferences. So, even if they enter the portal and find an athletic home, the chances are the new team that they sign with will not be the most desirable team for them, which will be another challenge for these players. In the context of the portal, chasing greener grass has more negative than positive consequences for the average player.

In an article titled “The Grass Isn’t Always Greener Through the Transfer Portal,” writer Chris Walsh examined how 20 transfers from the University of Alabama fared on their new teams in the 2022 season. The article quoted Alabama’s coach Nick Saban who spoke about the realities of the portal:

My dad used to say the grass is always greener on the top of the septic tank. It always looks better someplace else. So you think, instead of facing your fear and overcoming adversity and making yourself better through competition, you go someplace else thinking it’ll be better there. Until you face your fear, you’re always going to have some of those issues and problems (Walsh, 2022, para. 10).

According to Saban, some of his players who transferred begged him to come back to Alabama after leaving for other schools (Walsh).

Former Alabama Offensive Coordinator, Bill O’Brien, said the transfer portal was similar to free agency but without rules (Schreiber, 2022). In a similar vein, CBS Sports’ Dennis Dodd (2022) summarized his sentiments about the portal in the title of his article, “Coaches worry tampering, inducements, and 24/7 free agency have turned the Transfer Portal into the Wild West.” In an article titled, “The Transfer Portal Will be a Disaster for Student-Athletes,” David Marsh commented, “With each passing year, more players are entering the transfer portal, and if the scholarship rules around recruiting do not change, the transfer portal will negatively impact players” (Marsh, 2021, para. 1). Indeed, it seems that Marsh’s assessment is correct. Though exciting in theory, the multiple challenges caused by the transfer portal are virtually unmanageable in practice.

Conclusion

What is lost in this new urgency for coaches to win now and the prominence of the Transfer Portal is the ‘student’ in student-athlete. The universal reason that one attends college is to be a student. For players who attempt to transfer to another school for more playing time or other non-substantive reasons, their priorities are muddled. For coaches and fans who want to win by any means necessary, their priorities are misaligned.

The fact that coaches can now gut and rework their current rosters tells us that the new rules a potential disaster for student-athletes. Imagine being recruited by a program, enrolling at that university, taking courses for one or two semesters, and finding out that your scholarship has been terminated because you were not a ‘good fit’ for the team. Not being a good fit can certainly

mean being injured. Consider the level of psychological disruption and emotional trauma this scenario can cause a student-athlete.

In an interview with CNN's Chris Wallace, former Notre Dame women's basketball coach and NCAA champion Muffett McGraw candidly discussed the state of NCAA athletics. In speaking of the transfer portal, she stated that it is ruining college sports. She went on to state that the so-called 'One-Time Transfer' was being exploited by athletes who were transferring multiple times without consequences: "You see that women have place in two, three, and sometimes 4 schools." Muffett went on to highlight the big-picture questions that have gone unanswered by college sports administrators.

What about the education? What about that degree? What are we teaching these kids? They come in with one foot already out the door and they can go where they want if it doesn't work out for them – if they don't like what they are doing. What are we teaching them about commitment and staying and fighting through adversity and all the things that sports really teaches you? (McGraw, 2023).

I agree fundamentally agree with Coach McGraw. From a bigger perspective, what has made the U.S. unique is that the nation has thrived because of a robust rules-based federalist system. There are tens of thousands of laws on the federal, state, and local levels that guide the behavior of American citizens, businesses, and organizations. There are virtually no activities in the U.S. that are not guided by a set of rules. College athletics has recently bucked this tradition. The system is operating with minimal rules, little guidance, and seemingly no leadership.

We have speed limits on our streets and highways to protect us from ourselves. Imagine the consequences of not having this regulation. The NCAA will, in a short time, have to revise the Transfer Portal or the costs of this platform will far exceed the benefits. Like many well-intentioned policies that have not been simulated for various real-world outcomes, the portal will prove to be counterproductive for far too many student-athletes. With no guardrails with this policy and without a 'hard facts' campaign for student-athletes to assess their decisions, there is no buffer for them in making what could be the worst decision of their lives.

There is currently a lack of scholarly research on the dynamics of the NCAA transfer portal. It is only after sports science researchers begin collecting empirical data and producing studies on the effects of the portal will we understand the true costs and benefits of this platform.

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