

THE PORTAL PUZZLE: IS IT RIGHT FOR COLLEGE?

AD ADVISORS



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About AD Advisors:

AD Advisors is a circle of support for athletic directors, led by former Auburn University AD and 2017 NACDA Athletics Director of the Year Jay Jacobs, former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, international high-performance well-being expert Carlette Patterson, and C-level major league sports executive Jeff Holbrook. We have a combined 100 years of experience working in the sports industry.

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Executive Summary

The NCAA transfer portal has become a new normal in college athletics. Thousands of athletes enter every year in hopes of finding a new place to continue their college athletic career.

In recent years, the popularity of the portal has surged, fueled by key changes that included the introduction of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) deals, the elimination of the one-time transfer rule, and the NCAA granting extended years of eligibility because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This newfound freedom, paired with a financial market that puts a monetary value on a student-athlete, has led to a spike in transfers. The portal has provided both opportunities and headaches for schools, teams, coaches, and players, and it has deeply disrupted the college athletic landscape, leaving stakeholders grappling with how college and athletics go together.

This white paper is the most comprehensive study ever undertaken to examine the portal and how it's used. We studied over 800 FBS football portal entrants dating back to the 2020-2021 portal windows. AD Advisors focused on 10 Power 5 schools and five Group of 5 schools and tracked the football career of every student-athlete who used the portal, employing databases from 24/7 Sports, On3, official school rosters, and sports information sites.

AD Advisors assessed how many times the student-athlete entered the portal, how many teams the student-athlete played for in his career, and whether or not the student-athlete transferred up in competition, down in competition, or remained on the same level. We also included student-athletes who transferred outside the NCAA, to include NAIA, junior colleges, or community colleges — transfer destinations that the current NCAA transfer portal does not capture.

The quantitative data we collected was supplemented by qualitative insights gathered in numerous interviews with coaches, administrators, athletic directors, and student-athletes, all with firsthand experience with the transfer portal.

We found the portal is good for some student-athletes, but not for all.

Our findings show that a significant majority, 60%, of student-athletes who enter the portal transferred down (for example, transferred from a Power 5 school to a Group of 5 school), and 10% transferred out, meaning no one picked them up. For those 10%, the transfer portal is a dropout portal. Approximately one-third of entrants transferred multiple times, playing for three or more teams in their careers. Those who transferred multiple times also faced an increased likelihood of transferring down in competition.

The portal can also be a destination of deceit, with promises made that aren't kept.

For a minority, the portal is a route up. But for most, it's a path to a lower level of competition, which is fine for some students but an undesirable result for others.

The sample of schools AD Advisors researched were Kansas, Georgia Tech, Texas Tech, Michigan State, Colorado, Indiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisville, Oregon, Ball State, Boise State, East Carolina, Arkansas State, and Western Kentucky.

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Introduction

In recent years, the NCAA transfer portal has become one of the most hotly debated topics in college athletics. As the portal's influence has grown, so have discussions around its implications, with NIL deals adding financial incentives for student-athletes to transfer to another school, and the NCAA removing transfer restrictions that were previously in place.

At the core of this new and evolving landscape lies the question of how best to manage the portal for the benefit of the student-athletes and the broader college football community.

This white paper specifically focuses on Power 5 and Group of 5 football programs. We chose to focus on the FBS level because the data is more accurate and available, and FBS football transfers generally garner the most attention and have the most transfers.

By providing this comprehensive look into the transfer portal, this white paper provides data, trends, and insights to help all college athletic stakeholders navigate this new landscape.

Our methodology was rooted in robust data collection from reputable online databases that included 24/7 Sports, On3, social media, school rosters, and sports information sites. We went

through the 10 schools we selected dating back to 2020 and tracked where each student-athlete that used the portal transferred to from that point in time, from that specific team.

We followed the student-athletes' transfer journey documenting every team they played for, the number of times they entered the portal, and compared where they transferred from to their final destination. If a transfer resulted in a change in competition level, we recorded that as well.

For student-athletes with a transfer history predating the 2020 window, we tracked their movements that led them to enter the portal again during the 2020-2023 windows. The data was virtually the same, but this gave a comprehensive history for each student-athlete.

Additionally, the majority of the data we collected was separated by Power 5 and Group of 5 schools. This is because the two groups do not have equal variables. For example, a Power 5 student-athlete is unable to transfer up in competition because they are already at the highest level that we ranked in this study. A Group of 5 student-athlete, however, can transfer up.



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Roster Management

“It is hard to prepare for free agency every six months.”

— Marshall Malchow, Oregon Football Chief of Staff

How a roster is developed and managed has become a challenge for coaches, staff, and school administrators since the popularity of the portal has grown. In speaking with Marshall Malchow, Oregon Football’s chief of staff, he emphasized that in addition to recruiting high school kids and developing them in the program, coaches and recruiters are now also focused on retaining players on the program’s current roster: “In addition to recruiting kids to come to our school, you now need to recruit kids already on your roster to make sure they stay.”

The transfer-happy environment is a shift in how college football rosters are normally managed, and the effects are seen across the entire FBS.

A coach at the Group of 5 level mentioned that “a good player at the Group of 5 level is increasingly challenging to keep on the roster. Money is a big factor, and we always worry about losing kids to Power 5 programs. Our kids are always being tampered with even before they enter the portal.”

“The onset of the transfer portal has really made coaches go gray,” said Dave Didion, former associate director of athletics at Auburn University and former director of enforcement at the NCAA. “With the influx of transfers, and transfers moving between lower and upper divisions, I don’t think the coaches are in favor of the transfer portal and the removal of the one-time transfer rule.”

The constant worry about losing kids to the portal was highlighted by a major trend that our study revealed — the frequency of student-athletes transferring.

On average, across the entire data set we collected, a student-athlete will enter the transfer portal more than once and play for more than two teams in his college career.

Additionally, nearly one-third of student-athletes in our entire data set entered the portal two or more times and played for three or more teams.

Average Portal Entries	1.36	Average Team Amount	2.27
Percentage of Multi-Time Entrants	31%	Percentage of 3+ Teams	30%
Max	4	Max	5

The above table shows that the average student-athlete in our study enters the portal more than once, and the average number of teams a student-athlete plays for is more than two. “Percentage of Multi-Time Entrants” notes the percentage of student-athletes in our data set who have entered the portal two or more times, and the “Percentage of 3+ Teams” notes the percentage of student-athletes in our data set who have played for three or more teams in their college careers.

Additionally, the “Max” row in the table represents the highest number of transfers, and teams played for, in our data set. As shown, the maximum number of times a student-athlete transferred in our study was four, making the maximum number of teams played for five.

One such student-athlete, John Blunt Jr., started his career at McNeese, transferred out of the NCAA to Cisco College, transferred back into the FBS to Western Kentucky, then transferred to Eastern Kentucky before finishing his career at Texas State. He played for five different teams from 2018 to 2023.

Here are the same figures broken into Power 5 and Group of 5 student-athletes.

Power 5:

Average Portal Entries	1.34	Average Amount of Teams	2.26
Percentage of Multi-Time Entrants	30%	Percentage of 3+ Teams	29%
Max	3	Max	4

Group of 5:

Average Portal Entries	1.4	Average Amount of Teams	2.26
Percentage of Multi-Time Entrants	33%	Percentage of 3+ Teams	32%
Max	4	Max	5

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The frequency of multi-time transfers suggests the transfer portal does not always provide the change a student-athlete desires, prompting the student-athlete to transfer again. This cycle can repeat itself and does not always lead to an improved situation.

One student-athlete in our study, Jason Harris, started his career at Colorado in 2020. He then entered the portal and transferred to Arizona. He played sparingly with Arizona according to the school, and then transferred to Marshall in January, where he quickly entered the portal again in the spring window just months after signing.

One multi-time transfer student-athlete that we spoke with who transferred from a Power 5 school and ended up at the FCS level warned of the false verbal offers and promises that student-athletes receive when they are in the portal. He mentioned that recruiters will tell you what you want to hear, but what is promised is not always delivered when you get to that school.

“Before anyone announces their commitment, have everything in writing. Have everything on paper, before committing. There are a lot of false verbal offers out there,” the student advised.

“There is a lot of dishonesty in the portal,” echoed a Group of 5 student-athlete who successfully transferred. “Go where you are needed, not wanted. Student-athletes now need to do their research on the teams that are offering [for] them and make sure they are a fit for the program.”

The large percentage of multi-time transfers support these sentiments as student-athletes can be lured with the promise of money or more playing time, or overlook important factors of a program such as culture and coaching staffs, and then find a different reality when they transfer to that school, prompting them to transfer again.

This was seen recently when it was reported that the UNLV starting quarterback was promised a six-figure financial commitment to transfer to UNLV, but when he transferred, never received the money. The quarterback then chose to redshirt the rest of the year after three games and entered the portal again.

Approximately one-third of portal entrants in our study who entered the portal multiple times reflects the reality that the freedom to transfer must be met with realistic expectations and a cautious approach for the student-athlete, along with new strategies and methods for coaches to recruit and maintain a winning roster.

Dorian Mausi, Jr, a student-athlete who spent four seasons at Duke before transferring to Auburn University with the goal of entering the NFL and playing among the best athletes in the country, advised that when entering the transfer portal “make football your priority. This is a football decision. It’s not a money decision, and if you’re in it for the right reason, it’s going to turn into a life decision, and you can’t really have outside factors swing into your thoughts.”

Mausi Jr also spoke to the benefit of being focused on important factors when in the portal, including how a student-athlete will fit into the program and how the student-athlete will succeed on the field, instead of the glitz and the glam seen in college football today.

“The facilities and everything are great, but when I came, that’s not what I was looking for. I didn’t care about that. I wanted to sit down with the linebacker coach and defensive coordinator and talk about the defense and how I would fit in. So, all the glitz and glamour are cool when you are younger, but when you transfer, there’s only certain things on your mind, and that’s what was on my mind.”

These sentiments were also echoed by Griffin McDowell, a student-athlete who spent five years at the University of Florida before transferring to Chattanooga to finish his



career with more playing time, who said that “The portal should be entered with the right approach. Student-athletes should not jump the gun when entering the transfer portal. Don’t just go to a different school after one year because you are not playing. Fight for your spot, and you will have time to develop.”

McDowell signed with the Kansas City Chiefs as an undrafted free agent after a successful season with Chattanooga, and Mausi Jr currently leads Auburn in tackles and is an NFL prospect. Both approached the portal with thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and realistic expectations.

The frequency of multi-time transfers also reflects the current reality of college athletics being a business, and the invaluable role student-athletes play in keeping that business alive. Dave Didion, former Auburn associate director of athletics and former NCAA director of enforcement, commented, “If student-athletes want to transfer from one school to another to another, to me, it is no different than a coach moving from one job to another to another. If a kid wants to make a better deal for themselves, I am OK with that. I think that’s fair, and student-athletes are what makes this entire enterprise possible.”

Talent Migration

“The portal distributes talent more. A lot of kids enter with the intention of playing at a better school, but do not get there.”

- Dan Gritti, Senior Offensive Assistant, Analytics Coordinator, Special Advisor to the Head Coach, Rice University

Our research revealed the clear trend that the majority of portal entrants transfer to a lower level of competition. This is true both in the Power 5, and in the Group of 5, and is also magnified with multi-time transfers.

The table below breaks down Power 5 student-athlete transfers and where they ended up or where they are playing currently relative to where they were playing when they entered the portal in the years we looked at. It also breaks down data of unsuccessful and successful transfers. In this study, a unsuccessful transfer is a student-athlete who entered the portal window in the year we collected data from and either did not find a new team, withdrew, or remained in the portal.

% of Portal Entrants Who Migrate Down	60%
% of Successful Transfers Who Migrate Down	66%
% of Portal Entrants Who Remain in P5	31%
% of Successful Transfers Who Remain in P5	34%
% of Unsuccessful Transfers	9%

A strong majority, 60%, of all portal entrants transferred down in competition level. This majority increased to 66% when just counting successful transfers. The difference in an entrant and a successful transfer is an “entrant” is a student-athlete who has entered the portal, and a “successful transfer” is a student-athlete who entered the portal and transferred and enrolled at another school.

Migration to the Group of 5 was the most common action, making up approximately 52% of all down transfers, followed by migration to the FCS level, which made up approximately 31% of all down transfers.

The previous chart represents where the student-athletes ended up relative to where they were when we analyzed the data team by team, year by year. The table below represents a slightly adjusted data set that accounts for some Power 5 student-athletes in our study who had a transfer history before 2020. If the student-athlete began his career in the Group of 5, we added that student-athlete to the Group of 5 data set. If the student was not in a Power 5 Conference or Group of 5 Conference to start his career, he was removed from the data set. The data is virtually the same.

% of Portal Entrants Who Migrate Down	60%
% of Successful Transfers Who Migrate Down	66%
% of Portal Entrants Who Remain in P5	30%
% of Successful Transfers Who Remain in P5	34%
% of Unsuccessful Transfers	10%



Here is the same breakdown for the Group of 5 schools we analyzed.

% of Portal Entrants Who Migrate Down	44%
% of Successful Transfers Who Migrate Down	53%
% of Portal Entrants Who Transferred Up	20%
% of Successful Transfers Who Transferred Up	24%
% of Portal Entrants Who Remain in G5	19%
% of Successful Transfers Who Remain in G5	23%
% of Unsuccessful Transfers	17%

The variables here are slightly different from the Power 5 data, as the Group of 5 student-athletes have the ability to transfer up in competition level.

Still, the majority transferred down, even if they could transfer up. Over 50% of successful transfers transferred down a level, and 23% remained in the Group of 5. So, 76% of student-athletes in the Group of 5 who were successful in their transfer either moved down a level or remained the same.

The remaining 24% transferred up to the Power 5.

Looking at all portal entrants, 80% either transferred down, remained at the Group of 5, or were unsuccessful.

Migration to the FCS level was the most common, making up approximately 66% of all down transfers, followed by migration to the Division II level, which made up approximately 25% of all down transfers.

The above chart again represents where the Group of 5 student-athlete was when we analyzed the data team by team, year by year. The following table represents a slightly adjusted data set that accounts for some Group of 5 student-athletes that had a transfer history before 2020. If the student-

athlete was at a Power 5 school, we included that student-athlete in the Power 5 data; if it was neither a Group of 5 nor Power 5 school, the student-athlete was removed. The data is again similar.

% of Portal Entrants Who Migrate Down	42%
% of Successful Transfers Who Migrate Down	51%
% of Portal Entrants Who Transferred Up	21%
% of Successful Transfers Who Transferred Up	26%
% of Portal Entrants Who Remain in G5	19%
% of Successful Transfers Who Remain in G5	23%
% of Unsuccessful Transfers	18%

The majority of portal entrants transferring down, regardless of level, represents a realistic view of the players' talent level and demand. The transfer portal provides a market, and when student-athletes enter, their value is tested.

"Every kid is different, but a lot of kids will transfer because of playing time, and some will enter the portal to test their value in the market," said Marshall Malchow, Oregon Football's chief of staff.

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“A lot of kids enter with the intention of playing at a better school,” said Dan Gritti, offensive assistant at Rice, “but do not get there.”

Our data from this study shows that it is unlikely that a student-athlete entering the portal will transfer to a higher level.

This is not necessarily a negative, as many transfers who move to a lower level of competition find success if they have the right approach. McDowell, who moved from the Power 5 level to the FCS and then signed with the Kansas City Chiefs, said:

“I think that the transfer portal, with the right approach and after putting a lot of thought and research into it, can be a great asset. The reason to enter should be a good reason, not ‘I have been here for a year, and I am not playing’ or ‘I am not being paid enough.’ Try, develop, and if it is not right for you after a couple of years, use the portal to better yourself.”

Additionally, the trend of transferring down a level in competition is heightened when we dive deeper into multi-time transfers, which speaks to the lack of a development phase in a program since the portal has become popular.

The chart below represents the data we collected for each Power 5 student-athlete, separated by how many times they entered the portal. It should be noted that data for the student-athletes who transferred more than two times was not sufficient to reveal a trend. We used the NCAA threshold (50 students minimum) to arrive at this conclusion.

Power 5:

# of Portal Entries	Total Entries	Down Transfers	Remain on level	Unsuccessful
1	414	59%	32%	9%
2	161	64%	27%	9%



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As seen above, those who enter the portal once transfer down at a rate of 59%. Those that enter again will transfer down at a higher rate of 64%.

For example, Cooper Shults, who began his career at Oregon, entered the portal and transferred to Nevada, then entered the portal again after the 2022 season and transferred to the University of San Diego (FCS).

Or a student-athlete could transfer to another Power 5 school, then enter again and transfer down, like Jonathan Denis, who transferred from Oregon to Miami (FL), and then entered again and transferred to the University of Central Missouri, which is a Division II school.

Entering the portal again also lessens the chances of a Power 5 student-athlete remaining in the Power 5.

Below is the same categories of data for Group of 5 student-athletes.

Group of 5:

# of Portal Entries	Total Entries	Down Transfers	Up Power 5	Remain on Level	Unsuccessful
1	144	44%	20%	15%	21%
2	59	49%	20%	24%	7%

As shown, those who enter the portal once transfer down at a rate of 44%. Those who enter again transfer down at the higher rate of 49%.

For example, Tyler Smith transferred from Western Kentucky to Chattanooga (FCS) then entered again and transferred to Valdosta State, a Division II school.



Or a student-athlete could transfer to another Group of 5 school, and then transfer back down. Jaret Frantz transferred from Ball State to Toledo, then reentered and transferred to Edinboro, which is a Division II school.

Additionally, the chances of transferring up do not increase or decrease when entering again.

This means talent is distributed more across the Power 5 and Group of 5. A common factor in a student-athlete's decision to transfer is to try to get more playing time, and the move to a lower level of competition would theoretically provide that.

One Group of 5 coach noted, "Talent is dispersed more, and we can recruit better quality players than in the past because of the portal. We can target higher level kids."

Only about 20% of Group of 5 portal entrants transfer up to the Power 5 level, but as mentioned already, the majority of Power 5 portal entrants transfer down to the Group of 5 level, theoretically adding more talent to the Group of 5 than the Group of 5 is losing.

Conclusion

The NCAA transfer portal has transformed the landscape of college athletics, particularly in football, where the influx of transfers has reshaped roster management, recruitment strategies, and the distribution of talent. Our comprehensive analysis of over 800 FBS football players reveals that the majority of student-athletes who enter the portal transfer down in competition level. This trend is even more pronounced among those who transfer multiple times.

Moreover, the frequency of multi-time transfers shows that student-athletes don't always find what they're looking for when they transfer to another school — such as better money, more playing time, or a better fit with staff or culture — and they resort to “school-hopping” as a result.

With all the possibilities the portal offers, it is often unstable, littered with empty promises, unfulfilled financial commitments, and exaggeration, underscoring the need for student-athletes to approach the portal with realistic expectations and thorough research.

For coaches and programs, the portal has both redistributed talent and created new opportunities for recruitment and roster management, particularly for Group of 5 schools. However, it also complicates long-term team-building efforts, as frequent transfers disrupt continuity and school loyalty.



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In conclusion, the NCAA transfer portal offers both opportunities and pitfalls for student-athletes and schools alike. While it grants athletes unprecedented freedom to pursue new opportunities, it also requires careful consideration and strategy from all stakeholders involved. The portal isn't always a ladder leading up; it's also a chute that goes down, and sometimes out.

