Prevalence of Graduate Transfer in Division I

Division I student-athletes are earning their undergraduate degrees in record numbers and doing it more quickly than ever due to enhanced NCAA academic progress-toward-degree standards, increased financial aid for summer coursework at many schools, and arriving on campus with college credits from either dual-enrollment or advanced placement coursework, among other factors. This has led to more student-athletes completing their undergraduate degree requirements before exhausting their athletics eligibility. These students may continue to compete in NCAA sports if they enroll in graduate coursework or a second degree program.

Student-athletes who have earned their bachelor’s degree may also participate in athletics as a graduate student at another Division I college provided they meet certain criteria (NCAA Bylaw 14.6.1) or obtain an NCAA waiver. This so-called “graduate transfer” rule was intended to assist academically high-achieving students in pursuing a degree of interest that may not be offered at their undergraduate college. But it has become controversial in football and men’s basketball due to high-profile cases and as data have emerged showing that many transfers in those two sports earn few graduate credits and leave school when their athletics eligibility expires.

Just how prevalent are graduate transfers? From 2011 to 2016, the number tripled in men’s sports and doubled in women’s sports. However, the number of graduate transfers is still low relative to the total number of participants in Division I sports. There were only 443 graduate transfers identified in the 2016 Division I academic performance data out of nearly 110,000 Division I student-athletes, which equates to less than one-half of 1 percent.

Outside of beach volleyball where an initial influx of graduate transfers has been noted, graduate transfers are most prevalent on a percentage basis in men’s basketball (1.9 percent of current players are grad transfers), women’s basketball, men’s and women’s track and field, and football. Only one-half of 1 percent of men’s football student-athletes were graduate transfers in 2016. However, the number of such cases has increased sevenfold since 2011 (17 in 2011, 117 in 2016). Trends across all Division I sports are shown in the full study results.

Download the full study results: Changes in the Number of Division I Graduate Transfers.
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