National Evidence on the Relationship between Transferring and Athletic Performance within Division I Men's College Basketball

Francis Pearman, PhD, Stanford University
Kendall Cole, MA, Stanford University

Given the privileged role that athletics occupies within U.S. colleges and universities, as well as the social, financial, and symbolic rewards associated with excelling in competitive athletics, both during college and beyond, it is unsurprising that student athletes have long prioritized seeking out the "best" athletic opportunities available to them. This dynamic has become even more pronounced in an environment where transferring from one college to another carries few penalties and where new policies allow athletes to financially benefit from their talents. Recent NCAA policy changes have not only made transferring easier but also more attractive to student athletes, leading to a surge in public attention on transfer student athletes, particularly within revenue-generating sports like basketball and football (Clay & Handy-Hamilton, 2025; Gleeson, 2021; Hummer & Zenitz, 2025; Olsen, 2023; VanHaaren, 2022). Despite widespread agreement that transferring is affecting the competitive landscape of college basketball, many important questions remain about long-term transfer patterns and trends and the relationship between transferring and how well a student athlete does after transfer, especially with regard to their athletic performance. The purpose of this paper is to begin to fill this literature gap. Using national publicly available data on individual- and team-level athletic performance in DI men's college basketball, this paper aims to further our understanding of patterns and trends among transfer student athletes between the 2002-03 and 2023-24 seasons.

Data & Methods

In this study, we utilize national publicly available data of all DI men's college basketball players between the 2002-03 season and the 2023-24 season to examine the relationship between transferring and athletic performance outcomes. This data allows us to understand long-term trends in transfer behavior, as well as to examine recent changes in transfer trends related to the new policy environment. Specifically, we aim to address the following research questions:

1. How have transfer rates for men's basketball student athletes changed in the period under study?
2. What is the relationship between transferring and athletic performance? How does this relationship vary based on previous performance and beginning conference level?
3. Has the relationship between transferring and athletic performance changed following the 2021 change in transfer policy (immediate eligibility post-transfer)?

Our individual- and team-level data come from two main sources: Sports Reference/Stathead and RealGM. Both sources compile reliable historical individual- and team-level performance data for a variety of college and professional sports. The majority of our data comes from Sports Reference, which has been used in previous research in the field (Pifer et al., 2021; Turcott & Pifer, 2019). Our master dataset for this project combines five individual datasets from Sports Reference, Stathead, and RealGM. We have a total of 114,339 unique student-year observations.

We define a new transfer as a player in the current season who played at a different DI institution in the previous season. We separately identify players both as new transfers in the current season (transfer_current) and as having transferred in the current or a previous season (transfer). Across DI men's college basketball, we define the transfer rate each season as the number of new DI transfers divided by the total number of players in the current season who played at a DI institution in the previous season. Our transfer rate only accounts for transfers between DI institutions. Given the limitations of our data, we are unable to identify transfers from outside DI. Additionally, we define underperformers as those who average the same or fewer points per game than their team's average in a given season and overperformers as those who average more points per game than their team's average in a given season. To further understand the relationship between transferring and athletic performance, we disaggregate our data by individual performance prior to transfer.

Results

Our descriptive results largely confirm what we, and the public, suspected to be true given changes in NCAA transfer policies in recent years. The transfer rate across DI men's college basketball has steadily increased between the 2003-04 season and the 2023-24 season, with a much steeper rate of increase since the introduction of the transfer portal in 2018. The transfer rate in the 2003-04 season was about 1%, while it has risen to nearly 30% in the 2023-24 season. Notably, we see a significant increase after the introduction of the transfer portal in 2018 and the initial change to the transfer policy in 2021, with a transfer rate of 13.7% in the 2018-19 season and a transfer rate of 29.3% in the 2023-24 season.

Associations between transferring and athletic performance outcomes reveal no clear relationship in the sample overall, with only limited evidence of a slightly negative relationship between transferring and points per game and games started. These findings contradict prior research suggesting men's basketball transfers average significantly more games and minutes played post-transfer (Pifer et al., 2021). Similarly, we find no clear relationship between transferring, athletic performance, and conference level. However, disaggregating based on prior performance yields more clear relationships, suggesting prior performance is a clear driver of differences in performance outcomes post-transfer.

Among underperformers, transferring is associated with an increase of roughly 2.4 points per game, 5.2 minutes per game, and 5.9 games started per season. These increases are slightly higher among underperformers who began at a non-high major program compared to those who began at a high major program. Among overperformers, transferring is associated with a decrease of 2.0 points per game, 4.6 minutes per game, and 5.3 games started per season. Overperformers who began at a non-high major program experienced slightly larger decreases in performance than those who began at a high major program, though results are similar across the two subgroups. Notably, we do not find significant changes in the relationship between transferring and athletic performance in the period following the initial 2021 transfer policy change relative to the pre-policy period.

Discussion

Our findings highlight notable changes in rates of transferring relative to recent policy changes but suggest the association between transferring and performance remains unchanged amid the changing policy landscape. Additionally, our findings suggest transferring may be beneficial for some student athletes and not others, and one's prior performance and potential for growth should be considered when deciding whether, and where, to transfer. These results reveal the need for further analyses to understand the impact of individual policy changes on the athletic performance of transfer student athletes, especially as the policy environment continues to evolve. The nearly simultaneous implementation of several policy changes across the NCAA makes it challenging to identify causal effects of any one policy on the athletic performance of student athletes. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that while the proportion of men's basketball student athletes transferring each year has significantly increased, the relationship between transferring and athletic performance has held fairly constant. In an environment inundated with public discussion of transfer student athletes, we argue the public, institutions, and student athletes themselves should think more critically about the implications of transferring on their personal outcomes. While there are myriad other factors to consider, we provide some of the first evidence to help student athletes make better informed transfer decisions, especially as they continue to prioritize athletic opportunities in the transfer process.

This paper provides the first academic analysis of long-term patterns in transfer behaviors among Division I men's basketball players and examines the relationship between transferring and athletic performance across time, including in the current, rapidly changing policy environment. More work is needed to understand the relationship between transferring and *academic* performance among transfer student athletes, as earning a college degree is the most direct path to future economic success for most student athletes. We are currently in the process of securing the data needed to address this question in the next phase of our research.

References

Clay, B., & Handy-Hamilton, X. (2025, April 21). *Women's basketball transfer portal rankings: MiLaysia Fulwiley enters top 25 amid possible South Carolina exit.* CBS Sports. https://www.cbssports.com/womens-college-basketball/news/womens-basketball-transfer-portal-rankings-milaysia-fulwiley-enters-top-25-amid-possible-south-carolina-exit/

Gleeson, S. (2021, April 20). *Five most impactful men's college basketball transfers so far in wild offseason*. USA Today. https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2021/04/20/mens-college-basketball-five-most-impactful-transfers-2021-22/7288986002/

Hummer, C. & Zenitz, M. (2025, April 19). *Transfer portal intel: The latest on top available college football players after day 3 of spring window*. 247Sports. https://247sports.com/article/transfer-portal-intel-the-latest-on-top-available-college-football-players-after-day-3-of-spring-window-248976001/

Olsen, M. (2023, August 11). *College football's transfer portal cycle in review: 10 trends, lessons, and takeaways.* The Athletic. https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4768694/2023/08/11/college-football-ncaa-transfer-portal-statistics/

Pifer, N. D., Huml, M. R., & Asada, A. (2021). Switching schools: examining the networks, antecedents, and on-court outcomes of NCAA Division I men's basketball transfers. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 14(1), 30.

Turcott, R., & Pifer, N. D. (2018). The preferred players: A theoretical and comparative analysis of men's basketball recruits at the NCAA's mid-major level. *Journal of Contemporary Athletics*, 12(3), 151-173.

VanHaaren, T. (2022, November 9). *College football's new transfer portal windows, explained*. ESPN. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/34967085/college-football-new-transfer-portal-windows-explained