Understanding Staff Perceptions of the Collegiate Transfer Portal

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Hyperlink to a five-minute maximum video summarizing the results of the project

Much of the discourse around the transfer portal in college athletics has centered on the impacts for college athletes. Researchers have discussed the increase in power and autonomy for athletes, as well as the motivating factors behind transfer behavior. However, less research has explored how the transfer portal has affected the roles of individuals working closely with it in college athletics. Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to understand the current climate of college athletics in relation to the transfer portal and athlete mobility, and the implications on those working in college athlete academics, development, and within registrar's offices. Findings of the research are broken into micro, meso, and macro level implications, with micro level implications reflecting changes at the individual level. The meso level discusses changes to institutional level policy and culture, while the macro level discusses the broader changes and perceptions within college sport.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with 15 participants across Division I athletics. Individuals held roles within the ACC, Big 12, and Big 10. The participants represented athletics academics and development staff (n = 6), athlete compliance staff (n = 5), and registrar staff (n = 4). Several participants (n=5) served in senior leadership positions (director and/or campus roles such as chancellor), with another six participants serving as assistant or associate athletic directors at their institution. Other participants were earlier career individuals. Gender of the participants was 9 women, 5 men, and one non-binary participant.

Interviews lasted around 55 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was changed depending on the department the employee worked within, to ensure findings were representative of the different tasks of the employees. The interview guide was also updated throughout the interview process when new concepts or ideas were introduced and needed to be further explored.

Micro-Level Implications

The changes to the transfer portal significantly impacted the individual experiences of employees within college athletics, across their different career domains. For individuals working within the registrars office and with college athlete academics, more time was spent reviewing the academic records of transfer students. For those in the registrar's office, this was often to determine eligibility within the institution, and those within athlete academics would spend hours investigating what prior courses would count in the students new academic degree programs. A registrar employee shared, "For every transfer that we bring in, we review about three. So if we bring in 21 football student athletes in the spring, we've reviewed about 60 to 65."

For those in athlete academics, this represented a major change in their duties, as many referred to their role as a relationship-based position, and now they found more time was spent on paperwork.

> Whereas, summer I felt was like a little bit of a reprieve I don't feel rejuvenated anymore because all I'm doing for June, July, and even August before classes start is transfer evaluations, collecting all the syllabi to get the transfer credits, and then working through which major makes sense. (Compliance)

The change in their athlete academic position to being less relationship oriented was often discussed within the interviews, with some participants sharing that to the athletes they seemed to be viewed as less of a resource, and more of just someone to ensure eligibility.

> It's a little disheartening I guess that it's kind of more transactional than relationship-based. Don't get me wrong, you can still have great relationships with people, I think it's just now with football that it's so football focused instead of sometimes not as academically focused. So, they're spending less time over in academics just because the demand is greater over in football, especially now that they get money. (Academics)

The impacts to those in compliance are a little different. Individuals would see direct changes to the way their job was expected to function. Many individuals working in compliance saw changes in the day-to-day expectations of their job, with transfer work becoming more prominent. One participant discussed how prior to the portal, athletes were often emotional coming to compliance with exploring new opportunities, but over time that had changed as transferring was becoming more common.

However, it is critical to note, that these impacts were mostly seen within men's basketball and football. For employees working with Olympic sports, transfers and their impacts were seen much less often, "It depends on the sport. So, I don't really see much of a change in the academic experience of our Olympic sports student athletes."

Macro-Level Implications

Outside of the personal experiences of individuals working within college athletic departments, participants shared several changes to their athletic departments policies and protocols. Major changes included the modification of jobs and departmental traditions. For example, one of the interview questions asked participants about the jobs within their department, including whether they are fully staffed, hiring, or if they have developed any new positions. A positive finding was that all but one department interviewed was fully staffed. However, there was some nuance to this finding.

Some participants shared that they were not hiring because they were fully staffed, but they were actually functioning in certain areas with less staff. For example, one participant shared,

> We had two staff members who we removed almost from all of their other duties just to review transfers and then help the transfers get admitted and their courses moved in their audits and get them enrolled in the coursework that was hopefully degree applicable. (Academics)

In one compliance department, they had maintained the same number of staff but one individual was now solely dealing with transfer portal compliance and their prior workload was now divided among the other individuals within the department. These restructuring changes were necessary for the athletic departments to streamline the duties; however, they also came at a cost to the individuals working in the roles.

> So here we haven't cut any positions, and we haven't added any positions within the compliance office. The way I would describe it is more of my time now is taken up by the [revenue] share and the NIL…. We're an office of five individuals and it used to be five that worked exclusively in compliance, but now I would say most of my time has not been in compliance, so there's I guess one fewer person that's involved in the day-to-day compliance operations. (Compliance)

Regarding departmental traditions, this was best reflected through interviews with participants working in academic advising. Some participants shared that academics have become less involved in the recruiting process. Once participant shared, "there is less involvement from academics in the recruiting process than ever before," when probed about this, the participant further explained that,

> The messages around academics have changed. I think the reason people are picking schools and the reason people are moving around schools is for the best deal, right? And it's not about whether you can graduate from an institution, how many credits you have that would count there. (Academics)

Ultimately, this quote suggests that the messaging of recruiting has shifted from the academic and athletic experience that individuals can receive from an institution, to focus more on other factors. As a result of this, the broader culture on campus is impacted. A different academics individual indicated that this leads to broader conversations on campus, "even professors are kind of like, what are we doing? And so, so you're answering questions about the validity of maintaining college athletics in the higher ed space."

The final macro finding had to do with how institutions were navigating older transfer students. The registrar's role was to determine whether the student was eligible at the institution, and in many cases the students could be eligible at the school, but their progress toward degree completion would keep them off the field. At one institution, a major challenge was the residency rule where students had to complete 60 credit hours at the institution to graduate with the institution's degree. The registrars noted that there was a level of push-back regarding this; however, they refused to make exceptions.

Meso-Level Impacts

Beyond the impacts to job duties and institutional functioning, participants described a new culture of college athletics. Across interviews, respondents characterized college sport as an environment of continuous change requiring constant adaptation. Rather than viewing the transfer portal itself as the central problem, participants frequently framed the portal as one component of a larger cultural shift occurring throughout collegiate athletics. As one participant explained, “the transfer portal is not the issue,” but rather reflects wider changes in expectations surrounding athlete mobility, recruitment, and competition. Collectively, respondents described an increasing need to remain aware of evolving rules, practices, and athlete behaviors, creating a sense that organizational actors must continuously adjust to circumstances largely outside their control.

The cultural changes associated with the transfer portal were also perceived to influence the professional environment within athletic departments. Participants noted that college athletics has historically experienced substantial employee turnover, yet many suggested that transfer-related responsibilities have intensified existing workplace pressures. For example, one compliance employee stated, “My mental health has never been worse… athletic department staff members are already underpaid, overworked, and this is just added to it,” while another reflected that “it's a different job now.” These comments suggest that the transfer portal has become embedded within a broader organizational culture characterized by accelerating expectations, growing workloads, and the need for continual adaptation. Rather than representing a singular policy change, the portal appears to have contributed to a redefinition of how athletic department personnel understand and perform their professional roles.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that changes in the college sport environment affect employees across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. These findings have several implications for athletic departments and institutions as they consider how to organize work associated with student-athlete mobility.

First, institutions should recognize that centralizing transfer-related responsibilities does not necessarily eliminate workload; it can redistribute it. Participants described institutional efforts to consolidate transfer responsibilities within particular positions or offices. Such restructuring may create greater specialization and potentially streamline communication, but it can also shift substantial responsibilities onto the employees occupying those positions. At the micro level, employees may consequently experience greater workload, competing responsibilities, and less time for the other functions associated with their positions. At the meso level, the institution may appear to have streamlined its transfer process while simultaneously creating new capacity constraints within the position or department absorbing that work.

Second, administrators should recognize that the consequences of transfer activity may not be distributed evenly across sports. Although participants were asked broadly about the effects of the transfer environment across student-athletes, their discussions disproportionately centered on

men's basketball and football, with additional discussion of baseball and women's basketball. Participants consistently identified men's basketball and football as producing the most substantial effects on their work. This suggests that the organizational consequences of the transfer portal may be closely connected to the volume, timing, and competitive importance of mobility within particular sports. This finding has implications for how athletic departments assess staffing and workflow needs. A uniform institutional transfer process may not produce uniform demands across sports. Administrators may therefore benefit from examining where transfer-related work is concentrated rather than assuming that each sport contributes equally to employee workload. Understanding which sports generate the greatest volume or complexity of transfer activity could help institutions identify where additional administrative capacity, specialized expertise, or process improvements are needed.

Finally, the findings suggest that managerial responses should account for the broader organizational culture surrounding contemporary college athletics. Participants did not necessarily describe the transfer portal itself as the fundamental problem. Instead, they emphasized the broader expectation that college athletics is changing rapidly and that employees and institutions must continually adapt. Consequently, managerial responses focused solely on creating a more efficient transfer process may address only one component of a larger organizational challenge. Institutions may also need to consider how frequently changing expectations affect employee roles, departmental capacity, and the sustainability of existing organizational structures.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the managerial challenge is not simply how to process transfers more efficiently, but how to develop sufficient organizational capacity to manage an increasingly mobile and rapidly changing college sport environment without continually transferring new responsibilities onto existing employees.