2025-2026 ACC-CRIA Innovation Initiative Grant Summaries

White Papers & video overviews of all five funded projects from the 2025-26 Innovation Initiative can be found on the CRIA Website.

Understanding Staff Perceptions of the Collegiate Transfer Portal

Authors:

- Alex R. Piquero (University of Miami)
- Jessica K. Brougham (University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point)
- Elizabeth A. Taylor (University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point)

Overview:

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. Through 15 interviews with Division I staff members, the study found that the constant rule changes across the NCAA necessitates a more flexible organizational structure within departments. 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.

Full White Paper & Video

ACC INNOVATION INITIATIVE

Betting, Bullying, and Burnout: Examining Online Harassment from Sport Wagering and its Impact on Student-Athletes' Well-Being and Coping

Authors:

- Bo Li, Ed.D. (Southern Methodist University)
- Sarah Stokowski, Ph.D. (Clemson University)
- Kevin K. Byon, Ph.D. (Southern Methodist University)

Overview:

Through 16 interviews with ACC athletes this study found:

- Gambling-related online harassment occurred primarily through Instagram direct messages and was most commonly reported following competition.
- Messages ranged from criticism of athletic performance and blame for gambling losses to threats of physical harm.
- Student-athletes varied in how they interpreted these experiences, with some viewing harassment as expected or relatively harmless and others describing negative effects on their well-being and ability to focus.
- Student-athletes primarily relied on individual coping strategies and trusted family members, friends, and teammates rather than coaches or formal institutional resources.
- Participants identified opportunities for athletic departments to improve reporting mechanisms and provide practical, targeted education about gambling-related harassment.

Researchers suggest:

- Low-barrier mechanism for reporting abusive messages
- Departments identifying a clear point of contact which athletes can know where to turn when an incident occurs
- Departments should include gambling-related harassment education into current programming

White Paper and Video

How Academic and Athletic Status Shape Transfer Portal Responses in Division I Men's Basketball

Authors:

- Francis Pearman, PhD (Stanford University)
- Kendall Cole, MA (Stanford University)

Overview:

This study researched how institutions are responding to this changing environment in the way they recruit and manage team rosters and whether that response differs based on an institution's academic and athletic status. Findings revealed that Elite Academic institutions engage less with the transfer portal, drawing 13.5% less of their incoming class from other institutions. Academic and Athletically Elite institutions have taken on asymmetric risk of transfer reliance to remain athletically competitive. Transfer reliance pays off modestly on the court, and it pays off about equally regardless of institution type. The costs, however, may not be symmetric. Institutions whose status rests primarily on athletic success may have less to risk by building rosters largely through the portal, while institutions seeking to maintain competitive academic reputations may face additional challenges and compromises—in admission standards, student outcomes, and public metrics—to pursue athletic success in the transfer portal era. The researchers encourage institutions to consider the potential academic costs for student-athletes associated with unrestricted transfer movement and to thoughtfully examine their academic support structures to ensure the growing population of transfer student-athletes have the resources needed to succeed on and off the court.

White Paper and Video

Perceptions of Addictions Among ACC Student-Athletes and Administrators

Authors:

- Dr. Colin Lopez (University of North Carolina)
- Dr. Jackson Sears (University of North Carolina)
- Dr. Bryan Clift (North Carolina State University)

Overview:

Through interviews with ACC athletes and administrators, this study researched their perceptions of sports gambling in relation to drugs, alcohol, and social media. Both student-athletes and administrators were asked to rank their perception of severity of potentially addictive products or activities: sports betting, drug use, alcohol use, and social media use. Interviews revealed these populations find current gambling and mental health programming weak and "just checking a box". Additionally, interviewees stated that they agree betting is an issue but think it must be an issue for another population. Finally, student-athletes explained their fear of punishment for gambling strongly limits their attempts at getting help if they are having trouble.

Researchers recommend:

- Departments take a proactive, harm-reduction approach to betting education
- ACC protects athletes who self-report and seek gambling help
- Normalize mental health conversations around problem gambling

White Paper and Video

Extending the Athlete Brand Through NIL Endorsement Fit and Role Congruity

Author:

- Peter Schlittenhardt, Ph.D. Student (Virginia Tech)
- Mario Pandelaere, Ph.D. (Virginia Tech)

Overview:

The project's central question is whether endorsement fit influences student-athlete brand equity through expectations about the student-athlete role. Three initial experiments consistently found stronger brand-equity evaluations for higher-fit endorsements, while athlete gender did not reliably change the fit effect. A related role-congruity experiment distinguished what audiences consider typical from what they consider acceptable for student-athletes. Higher fit endorsements received more favorable evaluations on both dimensions, and injunctive role congruity helped explain the relationship between fit and brand equity. Together, the findings support incorporating brand management into NIL advising. ACC institutions can help athletes evaluate the connection between a proposed partnership, their public identity, and audience expectations while avoiding unsupported assumptions about gender-specific endorsement penalties. For ACC athletic departments, the findings support incorporating endorsement fit and audience approval into NIL advising, helping athletes assess how potential partnerships align with their public identities alongside financial benefits.

White Paper and Video