

FoSI INSIGHTS: REIMAGINING SPORT

Revenue Sharing in College Sports:

Insights and How to Lead Through Change



DATA. INSIGHTS. ACTION.

Evidence to navigate a new era in college sports.



SPRING 2026

FUTURE OF SPORT INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY



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LETTER FROM FoSI DIRECTOR

For several years, I've taught research methods at the graduate level, and if I'm being honest, I don't meet many students who are excited to take the class. That's why when we launched this new course for undergrads, I wanted to do it differently. My goal was for students to leave the class with real skills they could use in their careers and a product they could take ownership of and bring into job interviews.

That's how FoSI Insights: Reimagining Sport came to life. This brief was researched and drafted by students in an undergraduate research and insights course, and produced for publication by the Future of Sport Institute (FoSI) at the University of Kentucky.

In the course, we worked with sports questions that students already cared about. We practiced turning those conversations into researchable problems, weighing evidence, and translating what we found into insights that real decision-makers could use. We did it through topics like load management and, yes, the GOAT debate. For the record: MJ is the GOAT!

From there, the class took on the challenge of producing a student-led brief on one of the most disruptive shifts in college sports today, revenue sharing.

Students conducted industry interviews, built and fielded a fan poll, and collected 290 fan responses to understand how fans view revenue sharing and what decisions it's forcing leaders to confront.

I'm proud of the work these students produced, and I'm excited for where they take these skills next. We hope this brief helps you see what's changing, what's still unsettled, and what it takes to lead through it well.

With gratitude,

Dr. Kwame J. A. Agyemang

George and Betty Blanda Endowed Professor
Director, Future of Sport Institute (FoSI)
University of Kentucky

1 BRIEF OVERVIEW & KEY TERMS

What this brief is:

This brief is a decision-focused guide to revenue sharing in Division I college sports. It summarizes what is changing, why it matters, and the practical tradeoffs leaders will need to navigate.

METHODS & LIMITATIONS



Sources used: desk research (public sources), anonymized interviews, and fan poll data.



Sample size: fan poll completed by 290 respondents.



Ethics: Participation was voluntary, and we did not collect confidential or non-public information.



Interpretation: results reflect perspectives captured during the study period; this landscape is evolving.



Limits: convenience sample for the fan poll; Interview themes reflect the perspectives we heard; they don't represent every stakeholder.

Key Definitions:

 Revenue Sharing	Direct school payments to athletes from sports revenue, within the settlement rules/cap.
 NIL	Third-party pay for an athlete's name, image, or likeness (endorsements, appearances, content).
 House Settlement	The antitrust settlement that enables direct athlete pay and related structural changes.
 Revenue Sharing Cap	The annual maximum a school can pay athletes through revenue sharing (may change over time).
 Collective	A donor-backed group that helps arrange and fund NIL opportunities.
 Roster Limits	Limits on how many athletes can be on a team roster under the new framework (separate from scholarships).
 Non-Revenue Sports	Sports that typically generate limited direct revenue and are often funded through the department.
 Competitive Balance	How evenly competitive success is spread across programs, shaped by resources and rules.
 Title IX/Equity	Federal requirements for equitable athletic opportunity; relevant to resources and participation.
 Decision-Rights	Who decides, who approves, and who is accountable for revenue sharing implementation.

2

QUICK START: 3 MOVES TO MAKE IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS

Immediate actions to stabilize planning, protect participation, and maintain confidence.



MOVE

1

BUILD YOUR CAP-READY BUDGET IN PERCENTAGES (NOT DOLLARS)

OWNER

Athletic Director + CFO/Business Office + sports Finance Lead

FIRST STEP (WEEK 1)

Convert the athletics budget into percentage allocations tied to the expected revenue sharing cap (by category and sport).

30-DAY OUTPUT

1-page cap-ready budget map: % by category (athlete pool, aid, staffing, ops, travel, facilities)
3 scenarios: (low / likely / high) and what would change in each.

WHY IT MATTERS

Percent budgeting keeps plans stable when totals change, so you can adjust fast without rebuilding the whole model.

EVIDENCE ANCHOR

Peer comparisons via the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database.



MOVE

2

RUN A ROSTER LIMITS + NON-REVENUE SPORTS IMPACT CHECK

OWNER

Sport Administrator + Senior Woman Administrator/Title IX lead + Compliance + Finance

FIRST STEP (WEEKS 1-2)

Identify where roster limits could affect participation opportunities, operating costs, and sport-sponsorship decisions.

30-DAY OUTPUT

1-page memo by sport (football/ basketball; Olympic/ non-revenue) answering: **1)** what roster limits change, **2)** which costs move first (aid, travel, staffing, ops), and **3)** key equity/ participation risks to watch.

WHY IT MATTERS

This surfaces the roster and participation pressures early, before decisions get forced in-season.

EVIDENCE ANCHOR

Knight-Newhouse Database + House settlement overview/ summary.



MOVE

3

LAUNCH A TRUST + TRANSPARENCY PACKAGE FOR DONORS AND FANS

OWNER

Athletic Director + Development / Philanthropy Lead + Communication Lead

FIRST STEP (WEEK 1)

Schedule a top donor briefing and publish a plain-language "what's changing" explainer for fans (what you can share, what you can't, and why).

30-DAY OUTPUT

Donor Impact Snapshot (≤2 pages): what's changing, priorities, protections, and what donors can fund.
Fan FAQ: fairness, competitive balance, and how decisions are made.

WHY IT MATTERS

A short, consistent message set reduces rumors and protects donor and athlete confidence.

OPTIONAL ADD-ON

One-page governance map ("decision rights") showing who approves what (AD, president/ chancellor, board, conference, compliance).



NOTE: Execute these three moves in the next 30 days to strengthen decision-making, protect participation opportunities, and maintain stakeholder trust as the revenue sharing landscape evolves.

3 THE DISRUPTION:

WHAT'S CHANGING AND WHY IT MATTERS

PART A WHAT'S CHANGING



WHAT REVENUE SHARING IS

Revenue sharing is the shift toward schools directly paying college athletes from athletics-related revenue, alongside scholarships and third-party NIL deals.



WHAT'S NEW VS. NIL

- **Financial:** The new model introduces a school-paid pool under an annual cap (commonly cited as starting around \$20.5M per school in 2025-26).
- **Operational:** Athletic departments must now operate with cap-style constraints, allocating resources, setting internal rules, and building processes that can withstand scrutiny and change.
- **Cultural:** Compensation is more visible and easier to compare, raising pressure on perceptions of fairness, roles, and trust across teams and stakeholders.



WHAT WE KNOW VS. WHAT REMAINS UNSETTLED

KNOWN / OBSERVED

- The settlement framework enables direct revenue sharing and sets key changes for Division 1 operations.
- Implementation changes include roster limits that replace scholarship limits for schools that opt in.

UNSETTLED / STILL EVOLVING

- Roster limits drew significant scrutiny during settlement approval.
- Enforcement is still evolving, especially NIL review standards and "fair market value" tests.
- Equity and participation impacts remain unresolved, as schools decide how to allocate funds across sports.

THE DISRUPTION:

WHAT'S CHANGING AND WHY IT MATTERS

PART B WHY IT MATTERS

Revenue sharing is a major structural shift. It changes how athletic departments govern and budget, compete, plan participation, and manage institutional risk. It also widens the circle of decision-makers, pulling finance, compliance, Title IX, communications, and university leadership into the day-to-day work.



WHY THIS MATTERS FOR UNIVERSITIES & ATHLETIC DEPARTMENTS

- **Budget pressure:** Direct pay creates recurring costs and forces tradeoffs across staffing, operations, facilities, and sport offerings.
- **Governance complexity:** Slow approvals and unclear decision rights drive misalignment, mixed messaging, and rework.
- **Competitive pressure:** Resource gaps and uneven implementation can widen competitive gaps in recruiting and retention.



WHAT THIS CHANGES

- **Budget model:** Decide what's protected, what's cut, and how athlete pay fits.
- **Roster & participation:** Roster limits change planning across sports.
- **Non-revenue sports:** Defend, redesign, or grow (don't assume legacy funding).
- **Transparency:** Explain how decisions are made, even when details can't be shared.

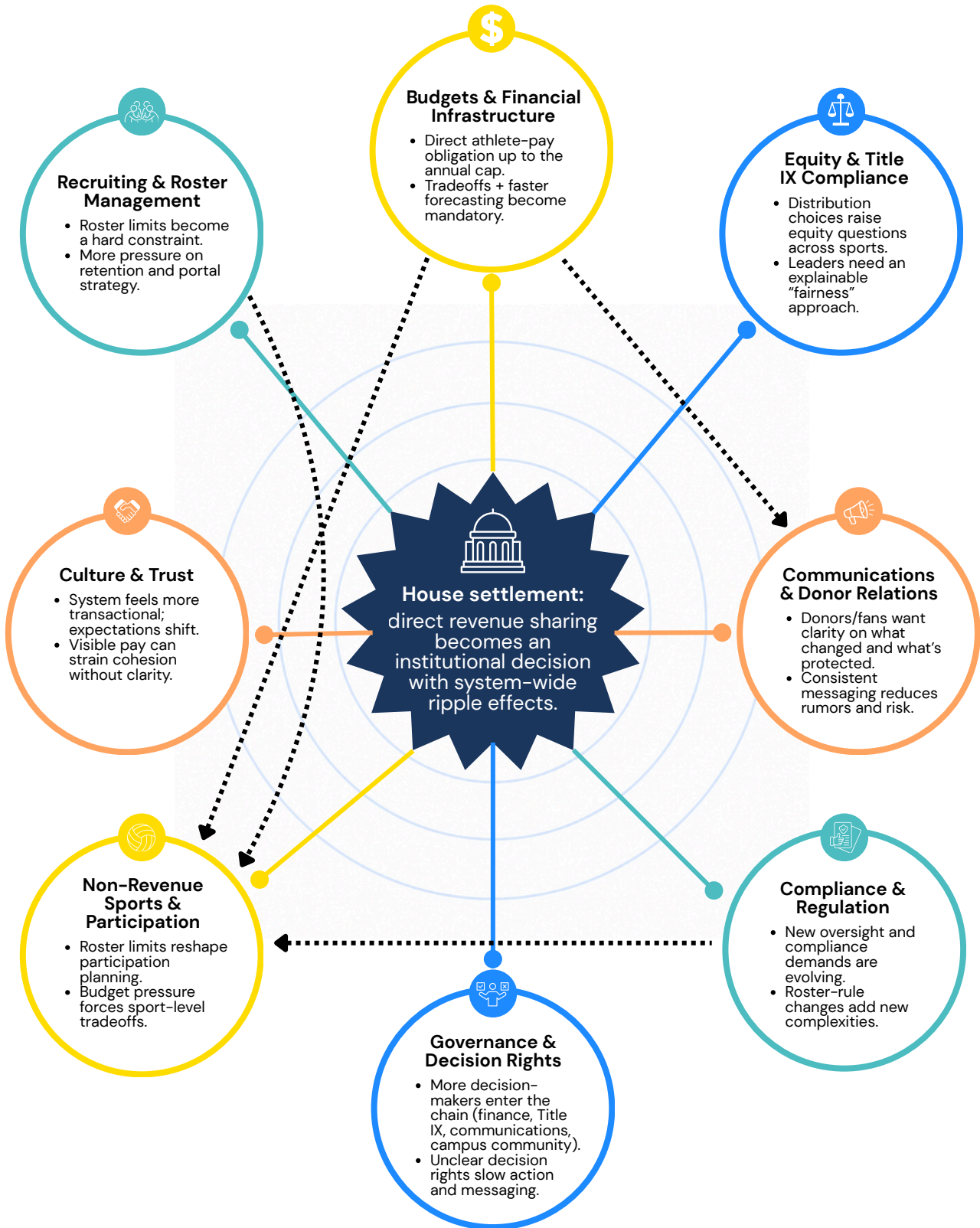


WHERE LEADERS TYPICALLY GET STUCK

- **Allocating the pool:** who gets paid, by what rules, and how it affects roles, performance, and retention.
- **Revenue vs. participation:** staying competitive while protecting broad sport offerings and opportunities.
- **Uncertainty:** move without over-waiting; avoid delays and unforced errors.



4 RIPPLE MAP



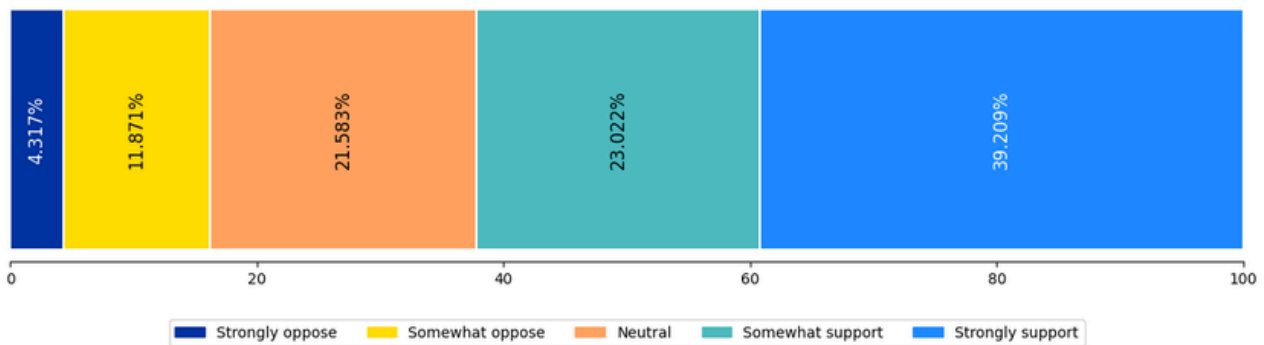
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EVIDENCE: DATA YOU CAN'T IGNORE

Key findings from our fan poll on revenue sharing in college sports.

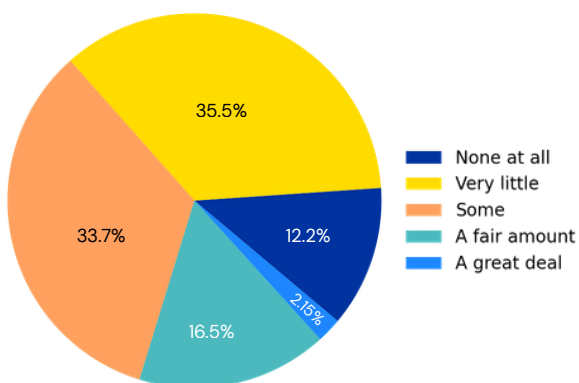


1 To what extent do you support or oppose revenue sharing with college athletes?



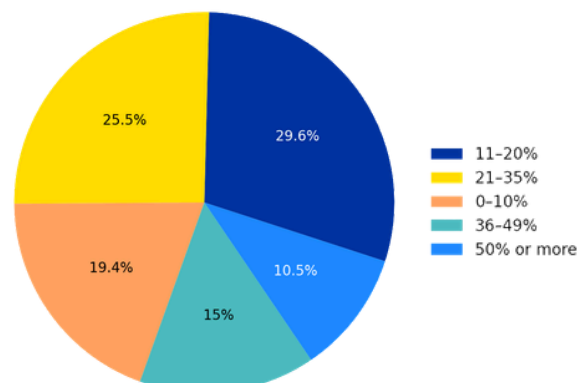
SO WHAT: Support is strong, but the middle is sizable. Implementation details will drive acceptance.

2 How much do you trust college athletic departments to distribute revenue fairly?



SO WHAT: Trust is a constraint; leaders need transparency and clear rules to earn legitimacy.

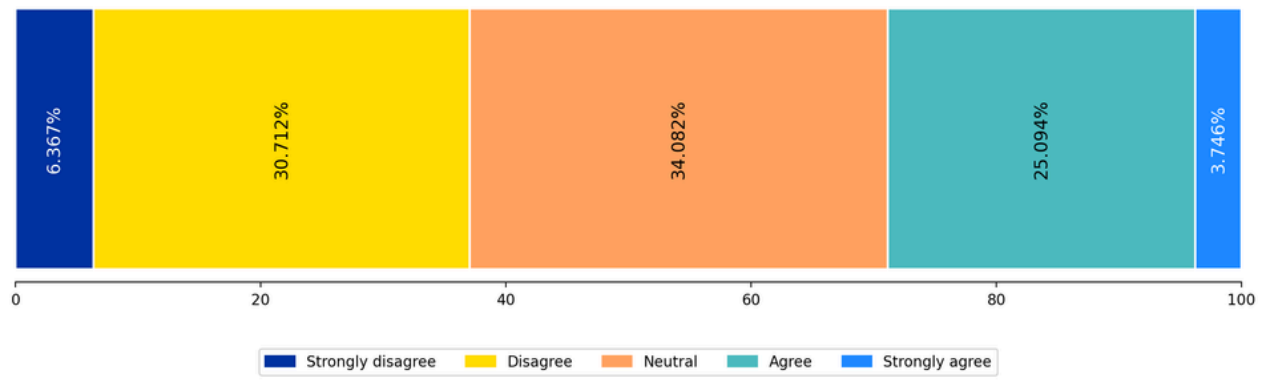
3 What percentage of athletic revenue do you think should go directly to athletes?



SO WHAT: Fans' "fair share" expectations vary. Any policy choice will create winners and skeptics.

4

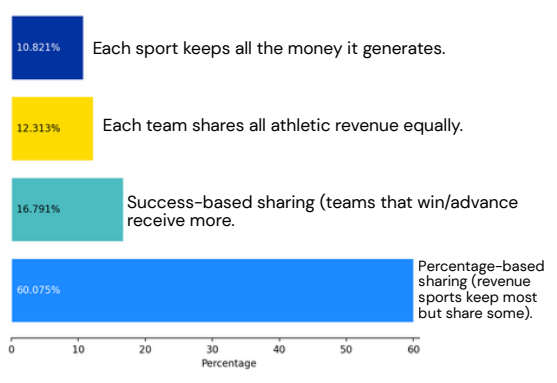
Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "NIL deals are a sufficient substitute for direct revenue sharing."



➔ **SO WHAT:** Many fans don't see NIL as enough, while a similar amount are neutral.

5

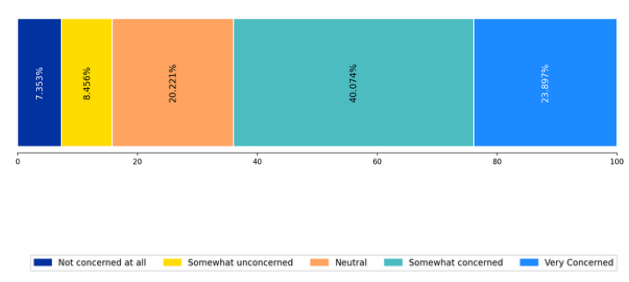
Which approach feels fairest for how athletic revenue should be shared within a department?



➔ **SO WHAT:** "Fair" is contested. Leaders should expect pushback unless they explain the rationale clearly.

6

How concerned are you that revenue sharing will negatively impact non-revenue sports?



➔ **SO WHAT:** Non-revenue sport risk is a top concern. Participation protection will shape credibility.

METHODS SNAPSHOT

Sample: n = 290 self-identified college sports fans

Field period: approx. 2 weeks (online poll)

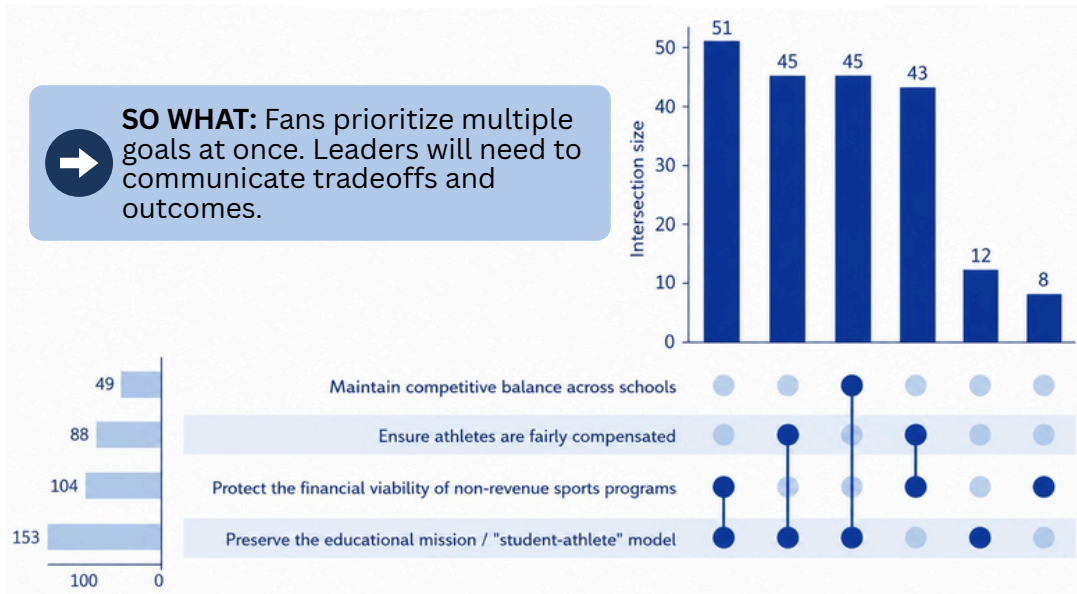
Instrument: Mix of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and limited open-response items

How to read these charts: Results are descriptive (not nationally representative) and should be interpreted as directional fan sentiment. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Visualization Methodology: Responses were cleaned and analyzed in Python (pandas) and visualized using Matplotlib and Plotly; multi-select items were also summarized using an UpSet-style intersection view (where applicable).

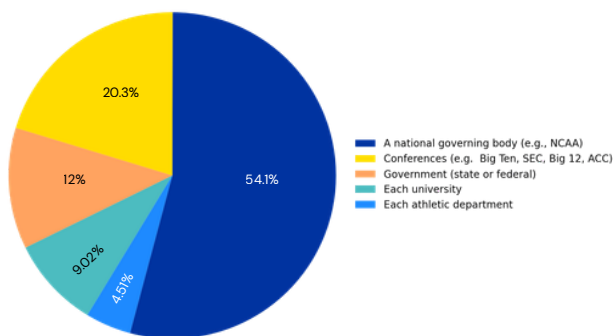
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Which TWO goals should leaders prioritize most? (Choose up to 2)



8

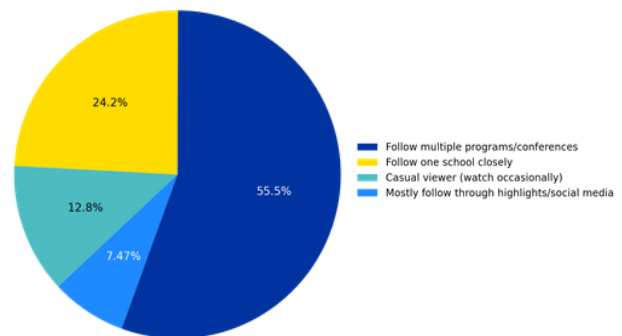
Who should be responsible for setting and enforcing revenue sharing rules?



SO WHAT: Fans want clear rule-setters. Ambiguity in governance fuels skepticism.

9

Which best describes your college sports engagement?



SO WHAT: Most responses come from engaged fans. The results reflect informed viewpoints.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Support w/ Skepticism:** While most people (62%) support revenue sharing; there is a major "trust gap," as approx. 48% of fans don't trust athletic departments to distribute revenue fairly.
- ▶ **Worried About "Small" Sports:** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of people fear that paying athletes in sports like football will lead to budget cuts for non-revenue sports.
- ▶ **Disagreement on Pay:** There is no consensus on exactly how much money athletes should get. While many suggest 11–20% of revenue, people's opinions on what is "fair" is widely split.
- ▶ **A Need for a "Referee":** Over half of the public (54%) wants a single national organization to step in and create clear, enforceable rules for everyone to follow.
- ▶ **The Balancing Act:** When looking at the future, fans believe leaders must balance three main goals: protecting the college athlete model, sustaining non-revenue sports, and pay athletes fairly.

6

WHAT WE LEARNED: 6 INTERVIEW TAKEAWAYS

Insights from interviews with college sports leaders and stakeholders.

Note: Professional identities from interviews have been anonymized to protect source confidentiality.

1

Budget Pressure

What we heard: Leaders described a simple reality: new expenses are arriving faster than new revenue. Departments are cutting variable costs and perks first, while avoiding reductions in what athletes need to succeed.

So what: Build a cap-ready budget now and decide what gets cut, before those tradeoffs happen mid-season.



“When the AD arrived, the athletic department budget was around \$48 million, but today it is roughly \$200 million... the athletic department has recently added around \$40 million in new expenses without new revenue sources tied to those costs, which has created significant financial pressure. (paraphrased)”

- Deputy AD, Power 4 Athletic Department

2

Revenue Sharing and NIL Will Work Together

What we heard: Departments are treating revenue sharing as the baseline and NIL as the “top layer.” NIL gets used strategically when athlete expectations exceed what’s budgeted inside the cap.

So what: Align the department, collectives, and compliance so offers are consistent and defensible.

“If a guy wants \$500,000, we might give him \$400,000 and use NIL to fill the margin.”

- Senior Financial Administrator, Power 4 Football Program

3

New Realities: Recruiting in a Cap Era

What we heard: Recruiting (especially in the portal) now centers on financial packages. Leaders frame NIL as a “job” where pay scales with proven value, noting that top performers naturally “consume more money.”

So what: Define what you’re paying for (i.e., role, retention value, performance expectations) before you negotiate.

“Athletes are encouraged to view the NIL like a real-world job, where players must prove their value over time before earning higher compensation.”

- Head Coach, Non-Revenue Sport, Power 4 Program

4

Culture Shift

What we heard: College sports is in a generational shift, and departments are still adjusting. Athletes are getting paid, agents are now part of the day-to-day, and schools and brands are writing bigger checks. Moreover, when money becomes visible, it can pull focus toward status and make expectation management with 18–22-year-olds harder, even in healthy programs.

So what: Treat culture like an operating priority. Set expectations early and give coaches a simple playbook for handling pay talk, agents, and comparisons.



“

I used to joke with friends of mine who worked in the NFL ... 'I love college football because I don't have to deal with agents,' and now all of a sudden every kid has an agent!

- College Sports Business Reporter

”

5

Non-Revenue Sports Face Risk & Opportunity

What we heard: Leaders pointed to the vulnerability of non-revenue sports in a tighter budget environment, but also noted that some sports are growing and could “close the gap” with smart investment.

So what: Treat non-revenue sports as a strategic portfolio. Specifically, protect what matters, invest where growth is real, and avoid default cuts without a plan.

“

If a university has an opportunity to build non-revenue generating sports, it should take the opportunity and do so creatively rather than discard those sports.

- Senior Leader, University Administration

”

“

Revenue sharing decisions should include athlete support services, such as money management education. Without this, some athletes may make poor decisions.

- Wealth Management Professional (Former Power 4 Football Player)

”

6

Effective Revenue Sharing = Integrated Athlete Support

What we heard: With athletes earning meaningful money earlier, interviewees emphasized the need for support services. They highlighted financial literacy to help athletes avoid avoidable mistakes that follow them long-term.

So what: Build financial education and support into your revenue sharing plan from day one. This should not be merely an optional add-on.

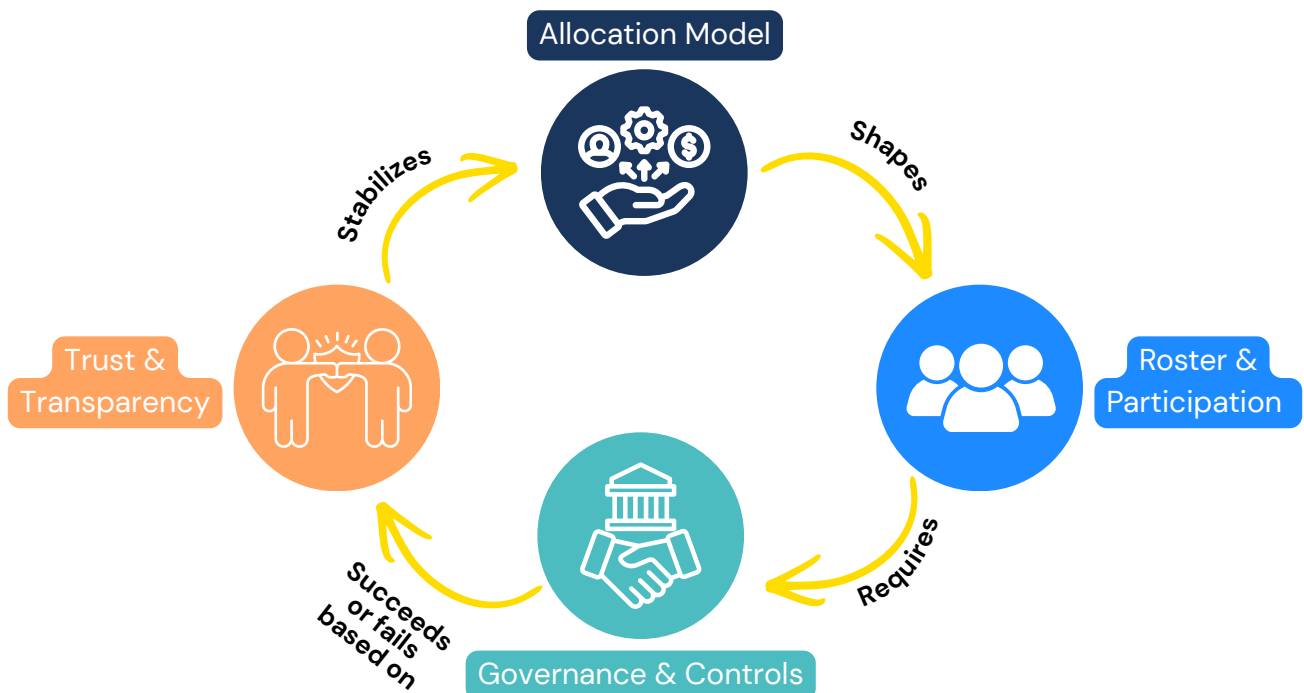
7 THE 4 KEY DECISIONS

Several choices will shape how revenue sharing actually works in practice.

PART A OVERVIEW

Direct revenue sharing moves athletic departments into a managed compensation model. Under the House v. NCAA settlement's roughly \$20.5 million annual cap, leaders face a linked set of choices: define the **Allocation Model**, manage the resulting **Roster & Participation** under new sport-specific limits, build **Governance & Controls** that keep decisions consistent and enforceable, and lead with **Trust & Transparency** through clear communication with athletes, staff, donors, and fans.

HOW THEY CONNECT



PART B

DECISION AREAS 1 & 2

Decision 1 – Allocation Model: How will we allocate the athlete-pay pool?

Decision: Set a clear internal logic for who gets paid, how much, and why.

Options

- **A) Role / performance-based:** Pay tied to role value, contribution, and retention risk.
- **B) Consistent rules by sport:** One approach for revenue sports; a defined approach for non-revenue sports.
- **C) Hybrid:** Baseline payments + limited role/performance adjustments.

Tradeoffs

- **A)** More differentiation can improve retention, but increases fairness disputes.
- **B)** More uniformity can feel fairer, but may weaken competitive positioning in key sports.
- **C)** Hybrid works best when rules are simple and set early.

Start here: Draft a 1-page allocation policy (scope, decision rights, guardrails).

Decision 2 – Roster & Participation: What changes will we accept, and what will we protect?

Decision: Decide how roster limits and participation pressure will reshape sport offerings and team building.

Options

- **A) Protect participation first:** Preserve broad offerings; adjust other budget lines.
- **B) Growth oriented approach:** Safeguard our revenue generating sports and formalize a support framework for non-revenue sports.
- **C) Program diversification:** Securing our foundational sports while optimizing the logistical framework for Olympic and emerging programs.

Tradeoffs

- **A)** Protects breadth, but spreads resources thin and can weaken flagship competitiveness.
- **B)** Revenue focus secures solvency but risks cultural division and fairness disputes.
- **C)** Tailored models increase efficiency but require simple, early rules to succeed

Start here: Create a 1-page per-sport impact check (changes, first costs, risks).

PART B

DECISION AREAS 3 & 4

Decision 3 – Governance & Controls: Who has decision rights, and how will rules be enforced?

Decision: Clarify who approves what and how exceptions, documentation, and enforcement will work.

Options

- **A) Centralized:** A small leadership group sets rules and enforces consistently.
- **B) Distributed with guardrails:** Sport-level discretion within clear boundaries.
- **C) Hybrid:** Central rules + limited sport-level flexibility with documented exceptions.

Tradeoffs

- **A)** Centralized increases consistency, but can be slower and more political.
- **B)** Distributed is faster; however, it risks inconsistency and “special-case” decisions.
- **C)** While a hybrid is realistic, it only works with documentation and accountability.

Start here: Create a 1-page decision-rights map (approvals + exceptions).

Decision 4 – Trust & Transparency: What will we explain, and how will we keep stakeholders aligned?

Decision: Choose a transparency posture, focusing on what you will share, to whom, and at what level of detail.

Options

- **A) Principles-first transparency:** Explain rules, rationale, and process (not individual amounts).
- **B) Minimal disclosure:** Share only what’s required; limit commentary.
- **C) Structured transparency:** Consistent messages + FAQ + milestone updates.

Tradeoffs

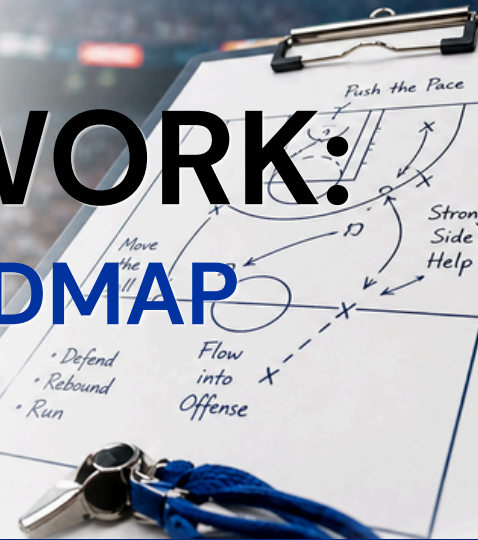
- **A)** More clarity reduces rumor cycles, but it requires firm boundaries.
- **B)** Minimal disclosure protects privacy; can increase skepticism and misinformation.
- **C)** Structured transparency balances consistency and control.

Start here: Agree on a 1-page transparency stance (audiences, boundaries, owner).

8

MAKE IT WORK: A 90-DAY ROADMAP

Athlete-first execution, built on a sustainable operating model and clear rules that strengthen trust.



Days 0-30

Lock the System Design

Days 31-60

Build the Infrastructure

Days 61-90

Launch and Stabilize

Allocation Model

Policy:
pay rules + guardrails (in/out, adjustments, exceptions)

Scenario test:
portal timing, retention cases, injuries

Review:
rule-based updates only (document changes)

Roster & Participation

Memo:
impact check by sport group (rev. vs. non-rev.) + top 3 risks

Operating update:
staffing, travel, recruiting, scheduling assumptions

Dashboard:
participation, cost spikes, roster turnover

Governance & Controls

Map:
decision rights + approvals + exception owner

Process:
docs, review cadence, compliance checks, exceptions

Tracker:
exception log + close gaps early

Trust & Transparency

Message kit:
transparency stance + core message + draft FAQs

Playbook:
internal guidance + external Q&A + who says what

Storylines:
one internal + one external narrative (repeatable)

Failure Traps to Avoid

- Limit exceptions; document every one.
- One message (no fragmented communication).
- Don't back into cuts; set non-revenue protections up front.

Decision-Readiness Checklist

- Allocation rules written and understood.
- Decision rights + exceptions defined.
- Assess roster/participation impacts.
- Be clear on what you'll share w/ the public.

9

MOVING FORWARD SCENARIO + SIGNALS TO WATCH (12–24 MONTHS)

Scenario

Revenue sharing becomes a new operating environment shaped by capital pressure, tighter governance/enforcement, and rising labor/legal momentum. Many programs now face “stacked compensation” (revenue sharing plus NIL), while roster constraints and scrutiny over “who gets what, and why” intensify. Stability depends on consistent rules, clear messaging, and fewer exceptions.

5 Signals to Watch

- 1. Private equity (PE) moves from talk to deals**
Revenue advances, facility-backed financing, PE-style structures
- 2. Federal action gets more specific/forceful**
Clearer guardrails or formal agency guidance
- 3. Employee-status / collective bargaining momentum increases**
Filings, organizing, and negotiated frameworks
- 4. NIL enforcement disputes become more public/frequent**
Investigations, test cases, public disputes
- 5. Roster-limit fallout shows up at scale**
Transfer spikes, cuts, reshuffles, and staffing strain

Potential ⚠️ Wildcard

* **Conference realignment and sport-specific restructuring could move faster than expected.**

If conferences reshuffle or sports split into new tiers, revenue sharing assumptions can shift quickly. This could impact schedules, media value, travel, and roster planning, with the biggest effects landing on non-revenue sports.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We extend our sincere thanks to the 290 individuals who completed our survey and to the sport industry professionals who generously gave their time to be interviewed and support student learning. Your insights were essential!

ABOUT FoSI

The Future of Sport Institute (FoSI) exists to help reimagine what sport can be for everyone. We're builders of what comes next, rooted in the real places where sport happens and the systems around it, from teams and leagues to campuses, communities, and media. We convene athletes, coaches, engineers, designers, technologists, and students to test ideas, learn fast, and share what works.

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