

Presidents Brief



Intelligence to Inform Your Institutional Strategy

MARCH 2026

FOCUS:

Rethinking “Non-Athletes”: The Myth That’s Costing Colleges Enrollment and Retention

Many institutions identify recruitment of “more non-athletes” as a priority in their enrollment strategy. However, enrollment and participation data suggest this framing is disconnected from today's student reality and is predicated on a very narrow view of the term “athlete.”

Introduction

For more than a generation, college athletics has become one of the most powerful cultural forces in American life. Millions of families follow varsity sports. Game days dominate college town communities. Media coverage, social platforms, and national brands create a shared language for prospective students long before they ever apply.

Regardless of whether they play sports, the connection for students is personal.

- They grew up watching their favorite teams.
- They wear the branded gear.
- They engage in friendly rivalries with their friends and families.

Labeling prospective students as “non-athlete” personas is culturally disconnected from the experience economy; data tells a very different story:

- 50-60% of adults played an organized youth sport before age 13.
- More than half of U.S. high school graduates participate in organized athletics.
- Fewer than 8% will compete in a rostered college sport.

The overwhelming majority will arrive as former participants who remain connected to the culture, language, and energy of sports competition and teamwork. These students also attend college at higher rates than students who did not play organized athletics.

So, why has higher education built enrollment and retention models for a student persona — the “non-athlete” — that no longer dominates our campuses?

This disconnect shows up in visit numbers, application behavior, yield rates, retention efforts, and institutional positioning. In this brief, we examine three viewpoints on why the “non-athlete” framing is misguided — and why institutions should include every prospective student on a “team” to improve enrollment results.



1. Recruiting the "non-athlete" market is a myth.

More than 53% of U.S. high school graduates participate in athletics, and participation is strongly associated with college-going behavior. Yet only about 7.7% compete as varsity athletes in college.

This creates a structural reality:

- Approximately 2 million high school seniors have an athletic background.
- Roughly 156,000 will likely play varsity intercollegiate sports.
- More than 1.2 million will enroll without competing – but still identify with athletics.

When you extend the criteria of "athletics" to traditionally non-competitive high school sports, such as weightlifting, dance, and e-sports, these data points are even more pronounced.

Labeling these students as "non-athletes" in recruitment models leads to different communication styles, different recruitment streams, and ultimately retention strategies. In reality, nearly all students are former athletes, recreational participants, or cultural supporters of athletics.



The traditional "athlete vs. non-athlete" segmentation simply does not reflect the market reality.



Strategic Implications

- Institutions are mis-categorizing a majority of their prospective students.
- Recruitment messaging and tactics often ignore a core aspect of student identity.
- Yield strategies built around "non-athlete" assumptions underperform or backfire completely.
- Thinking only of those on a college roster as athletes means that approaches to retention and student life are completely misaligned with these students' mindsets. *Imagine how different retention would look if we connected with our former athletes as athletes.*





Question to Consider

Are our enrollment and retention strategies aligned with how students actually see themselves?



Strategic Response

- **Recruit all students at high school sporting events.** The athlete-minded students are there, whether it's on the field, on the court, on the ice, or in the stands.
- **Embrace Name Image Likeness (NIL) marketing with varsity athletes as a pillar in your institutional recruitment strategy.** Meet students in the moments when school pride and future dreams collide.
- **Bring school spirit and traditions into every aspect of your recruiting efforts.** Treat your campus visit experience more like a sport or cultural event than a real estate tour. Turn up the music. Offer photos with the mascot. Wear the branded gear.
- **Collaborate with nearby minor league and professional sports teams to extend students' athletic experiences beyond your campus.** Attending those games can also be part of their college experience.
- **Weave in arts and culture experiences, both on campus and in your local community.** Arts, culture, and sports tap into the same mindset by creating a powerful sense of tribe, identity, ritual, and emotional intensity around a shared story. Make every fan a co-creator in their own story and the institutional story.

Sources

National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. "Return on Athletics: Prospect Research Briefs." NAIA.org.

National Collegiate Athletic Association. "Estimated Probability of Competing in College Athletics." NCAA.org, last updated April 1, 2024.

National Federation of State High School Associations. "Record Participation Numbers Indicate Importance of High School Sports in Students' Lives." NFHS.org.





Retention Is Re-recruitment

- **Elevating club sports** to a varsity-level experience is taking hold throughout the country. Your club sports teams have coaches, access to resources such as strength and conditioning facilities, and a competitive schedule competing against other institutions. These **participation-focused programs** allow the former athlete to remain an athlete even though they are not rostered on a varsity team. They, too, can achieve athletic excellence. Creighton University and High Point University are excellent examples of extending the benefits of sport to a much broader slice of the student body. The Virginia Tech men's rugby club team won the Division I-AA Men's Collegiate Rugby Championship, competing against varsity teams.
 - This is also a valuable component of **enrollment marketing**.
- Single or weekend events also **elevate student engagement**. Organize a pick-up basketball tournament, ping-pong tournament, or a race around town. N.C. State University hosts an annual Krispy Kreme Challenge — 12 doughnuts, 5 miles, 1 hour.
- **Treat all students as former athletes** with a chance to exercise this part of themselves and connect with other students.
- **Tap into the competitive spirit** through campus competitions. Offer watch parties for collegiate and professional sports; perhaps even build a sports café.
- For most institutions, retention needs to be reframed altogether. **Every student, every semester, needs to be re-recruited.** *If you reframe retention as re-recruiting, what would you do differently?*
- **Invest in athletic facilities** as if all students care about them. Consider yoga centers, dance studios, e-sports rooms, and club fields of equal importance to varsity facilities. Partner with local or regional spaces off campus.



2. Most recruitment strategies underserve former athletes.

The largest enrollment growth segment is students who played sports in high school but will not compete in college. These students:

- Value structured communities.
- Respond to team-oriented messaging.
- Seek activity-rich campuses.
- Expect visible school spirit.
- Engage strongly with digital and social content.

Yet most recruitment campaigns fail to recognize this group as a targeted segment.

Studies show that **students who engage with institutional social media are three times more likely to apply**, and that athletics-centered content drives disproportionate engagement.

Strategic Implications

- Recruitment content is often misaligned with student interests.
- Visit programs fail to showcase student life through athletics.
- Digital strategy underutilizes culture-based storytelling.

Institutions that adapt see higher visit conversion, application volume, and deposits.

Question to Consider

Are we recruiting former athletes as a distinct strategic segment – or ignoring them?

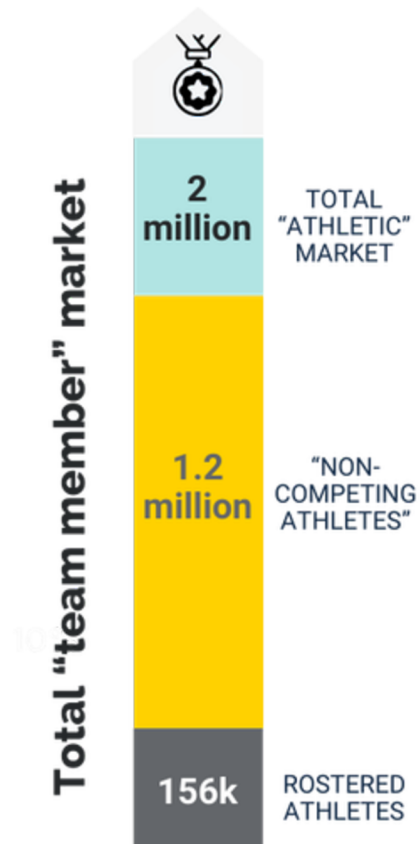


Strategic Response

- **Identify students who played organized athletics during high school and treat them as a distinctive segment.**
- **Improve your social media presence by intentionally focusing on student events that will connect with the athlete mindset** — sports competitions, fraternity and sorority events, cook-outs, engineering contests, etc.
- **Bring the spirit of athletics into your enrollment marketing.** Add more action images, stories, microsites, and videos of school events and traditions. Show them a vibrant community they can join.

You're not only offering academics—you're offering an identity. For former athletes, it's personal, and they don't want to leave it on the sidelines.

 **Offer them a new identity — and put everyone on the team.**



3. Athletics is a primary driver of campus identity.

Athletics has become a primary driver of campus identity — for everyone.

For today's students, athletics is no longer simply an extracurricular activity. It is a unifying force of campus life. Students consistently associate athletics with:

- Energy
- Belonging
- Visibility
- Pride
- Community
- Tradition
- Momentum

These attributes matter deeply to students — especially to those who once competed and still think like athletes. The data shows that prospective and enrolled students are shaped by three overlapping segments:

- Rostered athletes
- Active participants (club, intramural, e-sports)
- Athletic culture champions (friends and family, supporters, sports-related majors)

Together, these groups represent a significant number of applicants, enrollees, and students on campus. In other words, many students are not "outside" athletics. **They are connected to it — even if they never suit up.**

They want:

- Visible school spirit
- Recognizable traditions
- Shared experiences
- A sense that “this place matters”

This is one (but not the only) reason why flagship and Power Five institutions continue to outperform the market. They embrace the fact that they are not simply offering academics and promising small class sizes. **They promise an identity for every student — complete with a stage, a story, and a sense of belonging.**



Many regional and private institutions, by contrast, are not leveraging athletics and the broader sports landscape in their enrollment and re-recruiting efforts — at a time when students value them most.

Strategic Implications

- Athletics and champions of athletics now function as a primary brand signal.
- Campus culture is inseparable from enrollment and re-recruiting outcomes.
- Institutions that downplay school spirit and experience lose relevance.

Question to Consider

If a prospective student follows your campus on social media, visits on a Saturday, or talks to current students, do they see energy and pride, or a place that feels low-energy and uninspiring?

Strategic Response

- **Invest in athletic events for all students.** It may take time but pick certain games and go all out to drive attendance. Bring out the band, give out the T-shirts, leverage the DJ, and get your student clubs to own the half-time activities. Create fun and healthy FOMO.
- **Move beyond sports.** This same school spirit can be built around music, performing arts, and poetry. Think, Battle of the Bands, for example. These events can connect with former athletes who appreciate being on a team and competing, as well with students who do not relate to sports but do value these other types of experiences.
- **Take students into your surrounding town or city.** Whether you are a major flagship or a small institution, take advantage of the athletic and arts events and facilities around you. You handle the logistics, let them deliver the experience. *With a vibrant community, stronger recruitment and retention will follow.*
- **Build recognition of community champions and formally recognize them** — faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and local community influencers.
- **Plan for three personas, and let go of the terms “non-athlete” and “athlete.”**
 - Rostered athletes
 - Active participants (club, intramural, e-sports)
 - Athletic culture champions (friends and family, supporters, sports-related majors)



Presidential Perspective: A Needed Shift in Enrollment and Re-Recruitment Strategy

The data supports a clear conclusion:

Many institutions are building enrollment strategies for a shrinking student segment while overlooking their largest opportunity.

To compete effectively, **leaders should consider six actions:**

1. **Reframe** the "non-athlete" strategy.
2. **Replace** outdated segmentation with identity-based models that reflect participation, culture, and engagement.
3. **Integrate** athletics into institutional positioning.
4. **Treat** athletics and student life as strategic assets, not auxiliary functions.
5. **Modernize** recruitment content.
6. **Expand** storytelling around community, teams, events, and student involvement.
7. **Redesign** campus visit experiences.
8. **Ensure** campus visits surface student energy, participation, and culture.
9. **Strengthen** digital engagement.
10. **Invest** in consistent, high-quality social and experiential content that reflects campus life.
11. **Align** enrollment and student affairs.
12. **Connect** recruitment messaging with actual co-curricular infrastructure.

These shifts are structural, not cyclical. Institutions that adapt will **gain market share** among engaged, motivated students; the rest will continue to struggle with yield and retention.

Closing Thought

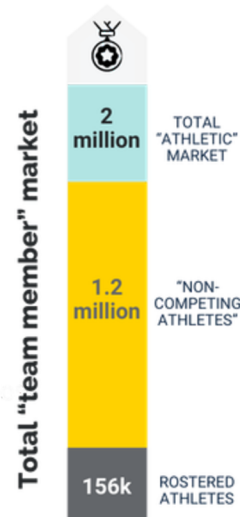
The question is no longer:

How do we recruit and retain more non-athletes?

The better question is:

How do we recruit the modern student—who is deeply shaped by athletics, community, and experience?

 **Institutions that answer that question well will build stronger classes, healthier cultures, and more resilient institutions.**



3E Intelligence Team



James Rogers, Co-Founder & CEO
3 Enrollment Marketing



With three decades of experience in modern marketing strategy and execution, Jim leads 3 Enrollment Marketing with a forward-thinking approach. He has a unique ability to anticipate industry shifts, integrating emerging technologies while staying grounded in core strategy. Passionate about the transformative power of higher education, Jim is committed to helping institutions harness the power of modern marketing to drive student success and institutional growth.



Patricia Maben, Co-Founder & President
3 Enrollment Marketing



With 25 years of experience in enrollment management, Patricia has seen firsthand the transformational impact of higher education on individuals, communities, and society. As an on-campus enrollment practitioner, an enrollment marketing consultant to more than 60 institutions, and a creator of innovative enrollment solutions, Patricia has built a career dedicated to helping institutions navigate the growing complexities of student recruitment. She co-founded 3 Enrollment Marketing to provide a smarter, more effective approach for enrollment leaders facing today's challenges.



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A leader in strategic planning, enrollment management, and marketing, Mary drives transformative change in higher education. With decades of experience conducting institutional audits and market analyses, she helps senior leaders identify and strengthen their competitive positioning. Mary specializes in crafting modern strategic plans that align with each institution's unique challenges and opportunities, ensuring long-term success in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape.

