

Stanford University

Athletics at Stanford Going Forward

A Statement from the Committee on Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation September 2023

Stanford is unique among elite research universities. We are a liberal arts institution that houses world-class engineering and professional schools and, quite unlike our peers, we are also consistently successful at the highest levels of athletic competition. No other university can claim to have, collectively, as many Nobel Prize winners and Olympic or NCAA champions. We are audacious; we seek to be the best across everything we do. This is not an idle aspiration – our top five ranking among global universities, and our receipt of 26 Directors’ Cups, a national award for the top overall performance in men’s and women’s athletics, bear witness to our success. Athletics may seem a strange bedfellow with research and teaching, but it has long been a feature of our institutional culture and character. Excellence in the classroom, in the laboratory, and on the playing field together define Stanford’s identity.

For our student-athletes, such success does not come easily. We do not cut corners in admissions or standards for academic achievement. We treat our student-athletes as we do the rest of the student body despite the challenges of training, travel, and competition, and the physical and emotional demands of athletic performance. We fully expect our student-athletes to compete at the highest levels while achieving academic success, without any special compromises.

For the university, college athletics has changed markedly in recent years, and in ways that create meaningful new challenges and opportunities for Stanford. We have seen, among other things, massive changes in conference composition, the rise of new financial opportunities for individual student-athletes, and new transfer rules that have a major impact on recruiting and retention of student-athletes. There have also been material changes in funding sources, a development that, although not an issue today, may have an impact on the athletic department’s ability to support its activities in the years ahead.

We should not set aside our identity and core values as we meet those challenges. Stanford must remain committed to the proposition that our athletes are students who, like every other student, are here to earn a college degree. We must honor our student-athletes’ dedication to growth and achievement, both academically and athletically. We must also be realistic in defining an affordable path forward.

We suggest a set of five principles for moving forward:

- First, we should maintain the same standards for admissions of student-athletes that we currently use, and expect that our athletes will graduate at the same high rates.
- Second, the funding of athletics should never endanger the support and functioning of our research and teaching. For the most part, athletics has been self-funding, and should continue to be so to the greatest extent possible, but the university should provide funds when necessary, especially during this period of funding uncertainty.

- Third, while we fully expect the athletics department to operate in the most efficient fashion financially, the university should invest in athletics and fully engage our alumni and donors in a fundraising campaign to address needs raised by, among other things, Title IX commitments, changes in the intercollegiate athletics landscape (including the *Alston* decision by the Supreme Court and name, image, and likeness (NIL) developments for student-athletes), and the goal of continued competitive excellence.
- Fourth, in line with our commitment to meeting the needs of all of our students, we should recognize the unique needs of our 850 varsity student-athletes. With our upcoming move to the Atlantic Coast Conference, we must prepare for more travel and increased absences from campus for some of our teams, and potential impact on student-athlete health and wellbeing. We should explore all possible avenues for addressing these concerns through options such as early enrollment and creation of a more robust and holistic network for student-athlete support.
- Fifth, we should recognize that the new travel demands present a unique opportunity for Stanford to create an even more equitable and effective vision for instruction for our entire student community. We must commit to upgrading our classrooms and learning technology, and to developing learning tools that are both accessible and accountable, and that allow those who truly need remote access to keep up with the rigorous demands of classwork, while still maintaining our commitment to vibrant in-person learning.

We believe that, collectively, the University should adopt these principles without exception.

Stanford can and should support a robust athletic program where students compete at the highest level. It is part of who we are. We also believe that athletics can be a central contributor to a student’s development at Stanford. In this regard, we note a recent column by Matt Brown, titled *What is the Soul of College Sports* in the in the August 28, 2023, issue of a publication called *Extra Points*. He writes,

“Done correctly, there are few environments in American society as democratizing as a locker room, one that forces people of different races, different political affiliations, religious traditions, backgrounds and more, to work together towards a common goal. Done correctly, college athletics builds lifelong relationships, discipline, perseverance, and many other values that our society cherishes and values. It trains students for careers, teaches them to overcome obstacles, bond with people very different from themselves, and think outside of themselves. *That’s part of what college is for!*”

As a committee of faculty, students, and staff, we recognize that different members of our community – faculty, students, administrators, staff, and alumni - have different views about the place of athletics in an elite academic institution. We will continue to argue for the centrality of athletics not in opposition to research and teaching but as part of educating our students, and as central to Stanford’s unique identity. This is indeed an opportune moment for Stanford to demonstrate its ability to adapt to changing landscapes without sacrificing excellence across all domains.
