



Athletics Matters: Name, Image, Likeness

May 2022





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Introduction

Athletics is one of the most celebrated traditions in higher ed, uniting students, alumni, and fans with campus pride.

On most college campuses, though, athletics is its own entity, separate from the academic side of the organizational chart. We hear often from campus pros that athletics isn't part of your job. Your focus is marketing literally everything else.

But [we've known for a while](#) that academics and athletics are never fully separate—in terms of your operations, your conversation volume, or how your audiences think about your campus. Regardless of enrollment size or team success, athletics mentions dominate most campuses' conversation volume and reach, driving brand awareness. In our [Social Listening Benchmarks for Higher Ed: December 2021](#) report, an average of 66% of conversation volume was related to athletics. To strategically market your brand, your campus should be considered comprehensively—and that includes athletics.

The National Collegiate Athletics Association's (NCAA) July 2021 announcement permitting student-athletes to profit from their name, image, and likeness added to the capacity to market your campus and heightens how critical it is to monitor your conversation.

Name, Image, Likeness (NIL) changed not only college athletics but the higher ed industry, and as campus pros, we need to change with it.



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Background

Following years of debate about the amateur status of student-athletes, NIL reflects a [change in policy](#) from the NCAA on July 1, 2021, that redefined college athletes' amateur status. The NCAA rescinded its policy previously prohibiting college athletes from profiting from their name, image, and likeness garnered through the influencer status that comes with the visibility of playing collegiate sports.

What is and isn't allowed through these new rules is ever evolving. NIL deals can encompass a wide range of services.

- [Advertising and endorsements](#) (including [digital ads](#) and [social media promotions](#))
- [Autographs](#) and [merchandise](#)
- [Camps and lessons](#)
- [Podcasts](#)

And that's just a few. Some companies even established partnerships with entire [teams](#) and [campuses](#). Even the [WWE](#) is offering partnerships.

There are rules and limitations to how a campus's name, logo, and conference affiliation can or can't be used, often to avoid legal conflicts with previously established corporate sponsorships. Generally, the campus name and branding can't be mentioned or used, and in the case of digital ads, filming and photography typically must be done off campus. (This [example](#) reflects how both can be achieved even with an established corporate sponsorship.)

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Yes, these rules are pretty [broad, inconsistent, and even confusing](#)—that's because, with no federal legislation in place (at least at the time of this report), the policies are so varied. Trackers share comprehensive lists of policies showing how they vary by [campus](#) and [state](#).

[State policy](#) is a major factor in how NIL is implemented because the NCAA's policy specifically states that “individuals can engage in NIL activities that are consistent with the law of the state where the school is located.”

Approximately half of U.S. states have NIL legislation.

But the states that didn't pursue policies leading up to the NCAA policy change often have more flexibility.

In October 2021, the National College Players Association created a [ratings system](#) to highlight which states offer the most freedom to college athletes to pursue NIL opportunities based on the flexibility of their policies. To remain competitive in the recruitment process, some states that implemented NIL prior to the NCAA's guidelines are actually working to [amend or repeal](#) it because the national legislation is less restrictive (e.g., [Alabama](#) and [Florida](#)).

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Another existing limitation is that colleges and universities are still prohibited from paying players directly, also known as pay-to-play. It's technically up to athletes to arrange their own opportunities, including working with agents or firms to help manage these activities. When it comes to student-athlete recruitment, NIL deals can't be (or at least are not supposed to be) arranged with high school recruits ahead of time—but they can certainly observe the opportunities and use those earnings examples to inform their eventual commitment decisions.

Campuses quickly found workarounds to this part of the policy, though.

- Student-athlete development through the [addition of independent firms](#) to prepare athletes for these opportunities, framing it as educational or training opportunities and professional development. Some campuses, like Washington State, [offer courses](#) to educate student-athletes about NIL.
- Private, third-party [collectives](#) (also called trusts) with connection to numerous Power 5 institutions, often initiated by alumni and former athletes with support of the current athletes in mind. Approximately [39 collectives](#) are now active—including multiples for some campuses, like Florida and Texas.

Those trusts introduce yet another layer of complexity about the relationship between NIL and campuses. Given that they are third-party organizations not directly affiliated with the campus, they've automatically created more demand in the alumni and donor marketplace, leading to unforeseen added competition for athletics and their booster clubs. Alumni and fans now have yet another source for donation consideration, upping the pressure on fundraisers.

NIL, and athletics as a whole, continue to be an ever-evolving part of higher ed. What's current at the time of this report may not be the same in six months or a year. This report will help you monitor this changing landscape and consider strategies to both support your student-athletes and most effectively market your campus with flexibility.

What to Know About the Sample

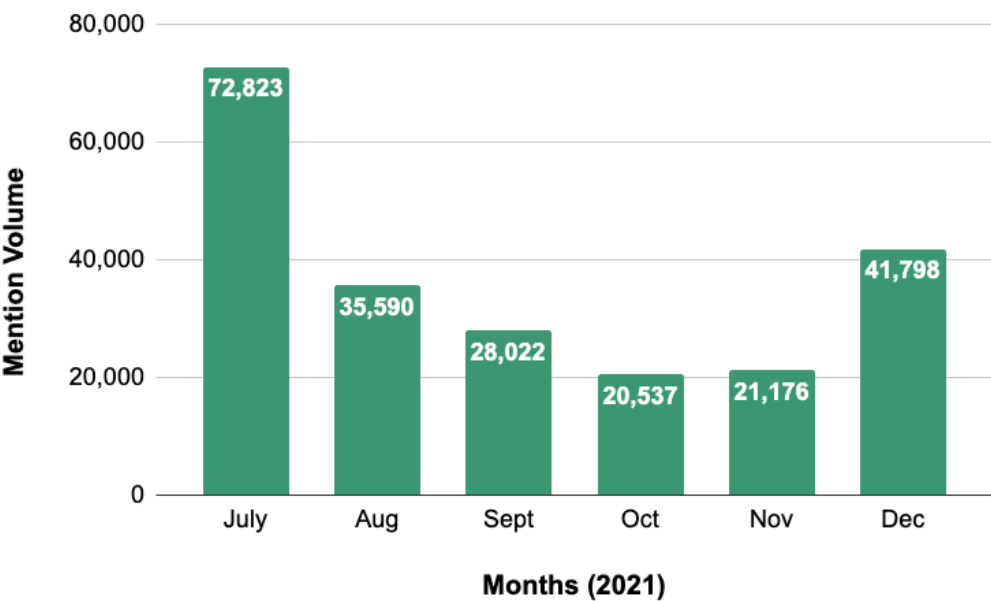
This report examines conversations across a six-month period from July 2021 through December 2021 that reference the NCAA and its NIL policies. The content sources for these mentions included social media, forums, news, and blogs. We focused on first-person mentions and, accordingly, excluded retweeted and shared content.

Conversation Behavior

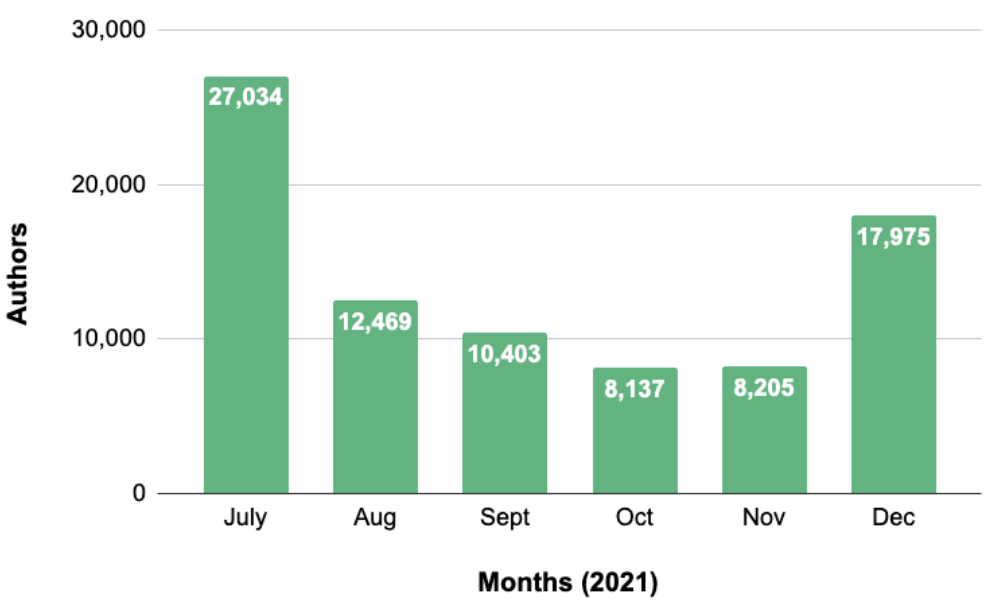
Volume Over Time

Overall, we found nearly 220,000 mentions about the NCAA and NIL from over 67,000 unique authors.

Conversation Volume Over Time



Unique Authors Over Time



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- July had the most mentions and 31% of total conversation volume.
- There were **12,777** NIL mentions on July 1 alone—5,786 mentions more than any other day.
- 28% of July's mention volume occurred on July 1–2.
- Between July and August, conversation volume dropped 51% and unique authors decreased by 54%.
- Volume was consistent in September (13%), October (9%), and November (10%).
- Between November and December, conversation volume nearly doubled (+97%), and unique authors more than doubled (+119%).

The quantity of unique authors trended similarly to conversation volume, with the largest volume of authors discussing NIL in July and December. Over the time period analyzed, the average number of mentions made by each unique author was 2.61.

The average number of mentions per author remained consistent with:

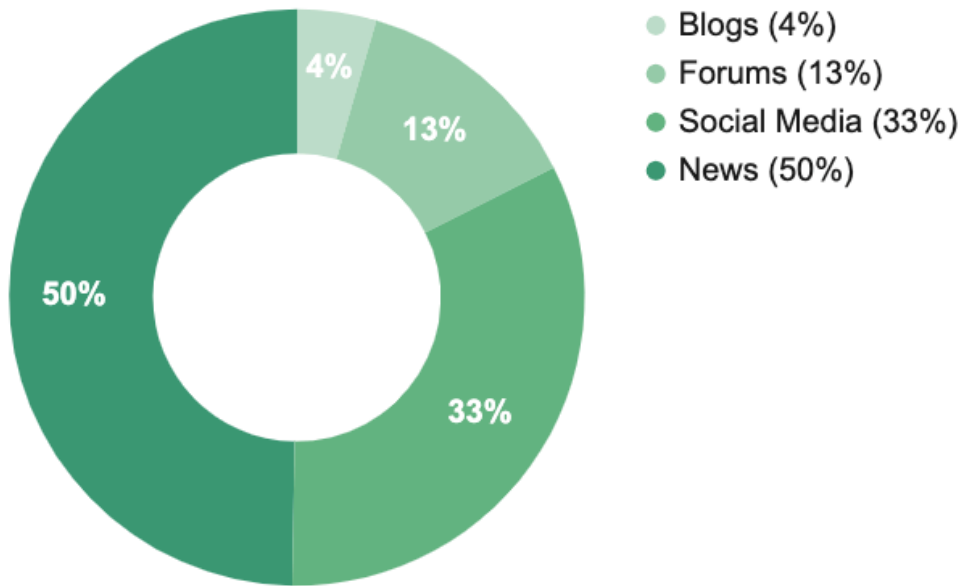
- A high of 2.85 in August.
- A low of 2.33 in December.

The similar trends in conversation volume and unique authors over time alongside the overall consistency in average mentions per author reflects more (or fewer) people discussing NIL during these spikes. Conversation trends over time are further assessed [later in the report](#) with insight to what drove the peaks and valleys in the NIL conversation.

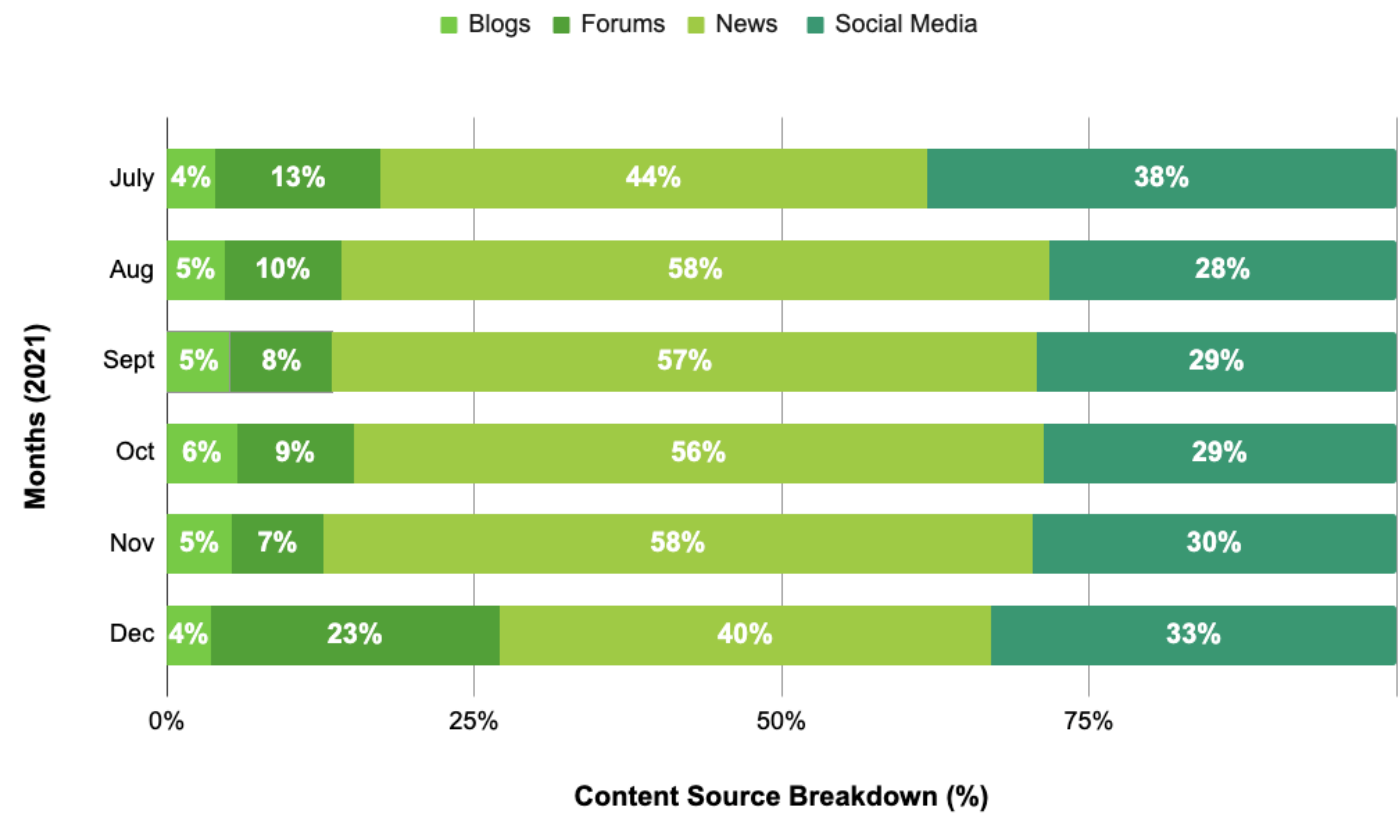
Content Sources

Across the entire dataset, half of NIL conversation occurred in news sources. Social media accounted for roughly one third of total conversation, with 13% of conversation occurring on forums and the remaining 4% in blogs. These proportions differ from traditional higher ed conversation. In our [Social Listening Benchmarks for Higher Ed: December 2021](#) report, social media accounted for 68% of overall conversation, while news accounted for 24% and forums produced just 2%.

Content Sources Overall



Content Sources Over Time



The proportion of conversation taking place in blogs remained consistent across the entire analysis period. While news maintained the greatest share of mention volume overall, its proportion was most consistent in August through November (56–58%). In July, the proportion of news shrunk to 44% due to increased social media conversation, while in December it was only 40% as forum conversation increased more than threefold. Social media conversation was highest in July (38%) but was otherwise also consistent, hovering around 30%.

NIL in the News

Conversation about NIL has been very newsworthy, producing double the expected conversation volume compared to our higher ed benchmarks. What's being discussed?

- **Many articles discussed NIL broadly.**
 - 12% of articles referred to July 1 (the day new regulations went into effect)
 - 4% discussed the “NIL era”
 - 0.9% of articles discussed that college athletes were now permitted to make money
- **News coverage also demonstrated the popularity of particular programs, athletes, and college sports figures.**
 - Alabama football head coach Nick Saban was mentioned in 5.6% of news articles, and his quarterback Bryce Young appeared 4.5% of the time
 - Ohio State University was mentioned in 14% of news articles
 - Notre Dame was mentioned in 7% of news articles

NIL Conversation on Forums

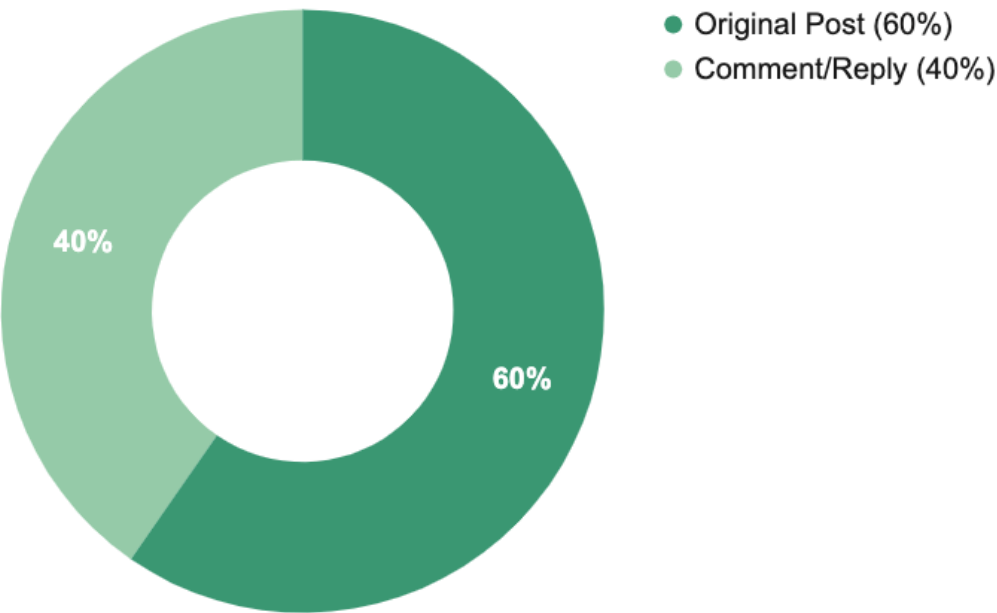
Audiences were also far more likely to converse on forums when discussing NIL. At 13%, the average share of voice for forums was roughly six times higher than what we typically see from higher ed audiences.

Similar to news sources, conversation on forums also highlighted the popularity of particular programs; three of the top 10 subreddits for NIL conversation were team specific, and an additional five team-specific pages appeared on the list of top forums.

Examining top topics in forum conversation, however, demonstrated that conversation was far more nuanced. Pay for play was one of the top topics, as users debated whether or not NIL afforded major programs the opportunity to purchase the top student-athletes. Monetary caps of several kinds—salary caps for coaches and NIL money-related caps for individual players, teams, and institutions were all discussed extensively. There was also little consensus on whether NIL would prove to be a “good thing” or a “bad thing.” Opinions were polarizing and often dependent on the school and/or player in question. The implications of NIL are still very much an evolving topic and accordingly, people are still debating it.

Mention Types

Mention Types Overall (News Excluded)

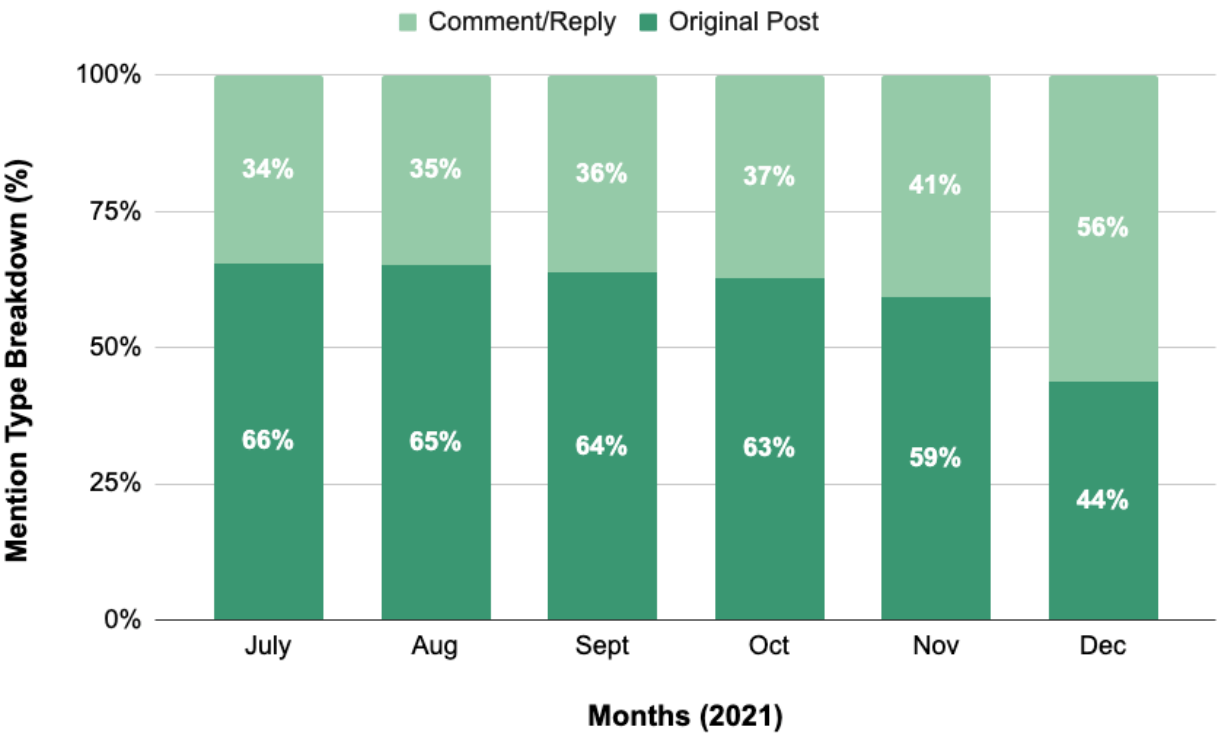


Information about the type of mentions being made is important to uncover how people are sharing information about a given topic as well as to how frequently they engage in conversations around those topics.

For this report, mention types include either original posts or comments/replies (retweets were excluded). News mentions can only be original posts and were removed from our breakdown accordingly.

Overall, nearly 60% of NIL mentions on social media or forums were original posts. The monthly proportional breakdown was consistent between July and October, with 63–66% of mentions classified as original posts and 34–37% of mentions classified as comments/replies.

Mention Types Over Time (News Excluded)



In November, the proportion of comments/replies began to increase (41%), which was followed by a significant swing in conversation such that comments/replies became the predominant (56%) mention type.

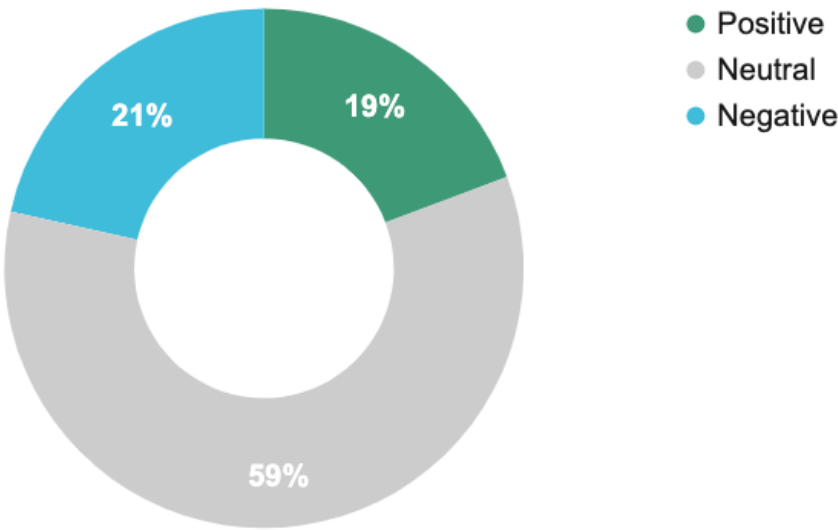
Questions to Consider

- How has the definition of student-athlete evolved on your campus? How has this shift affected your work?
- How is NIL changing roles in your marketing communications and athletic departments? How is your campus implementing staff training about NIL rules?
- How do limits and freedoms within your state's NIL laws influence student-athletes' decisions?
- Are your student-athletes taking NIL seriously? What are their attitudes toward it? How are those feelings influencing the resources made available on your campus?
- What do student-athletes need to advocate for themselves in this evolving landscape? What additional resources do they need from your campus to support their entire college experience, including their mental health?

Sentiment

Sentiment is a barometer of how a community feels about campuses, topics, or people and should be used as an at-a-glance metric to identify how they feel and understand broad trends over time. The machine learning in our social listening software automatically classifies each mention in our dataset as either positive, negative, or neutral, but it's not perfect and can't understand all the nuances of human language, such as sarcasm.

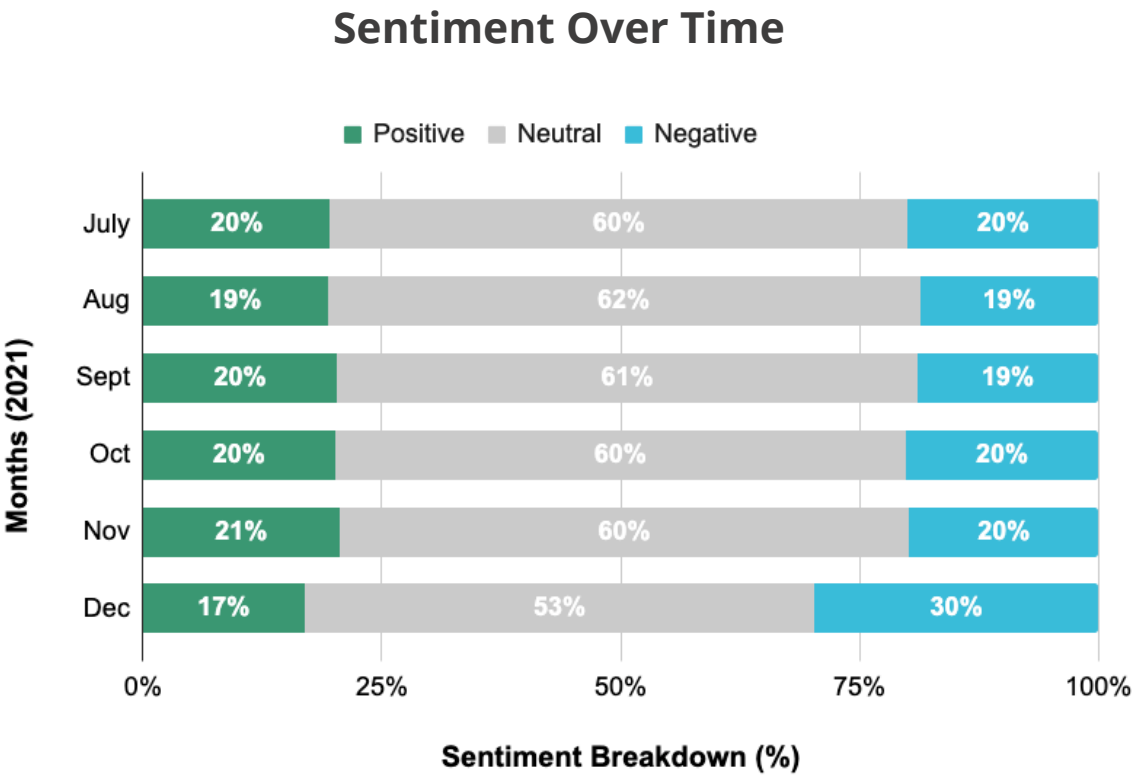
Sentiment Overall



In general, understanding the nuances associated with positive, negative, and neutral conversation helps you plan, prepare, and respond to all kinds of situations and conversation topics or anticipate when a crisis may be on the horizon.

Overall, sentiment relating to NIL was predominantly neutral with relatively equal proportions of positive and negative sentiment.

Sentiment Over Time



The proportional breakdown in sentiment was consistent in five of the six months we analyzed.

Between **July** and **November**, sentiment averaged:

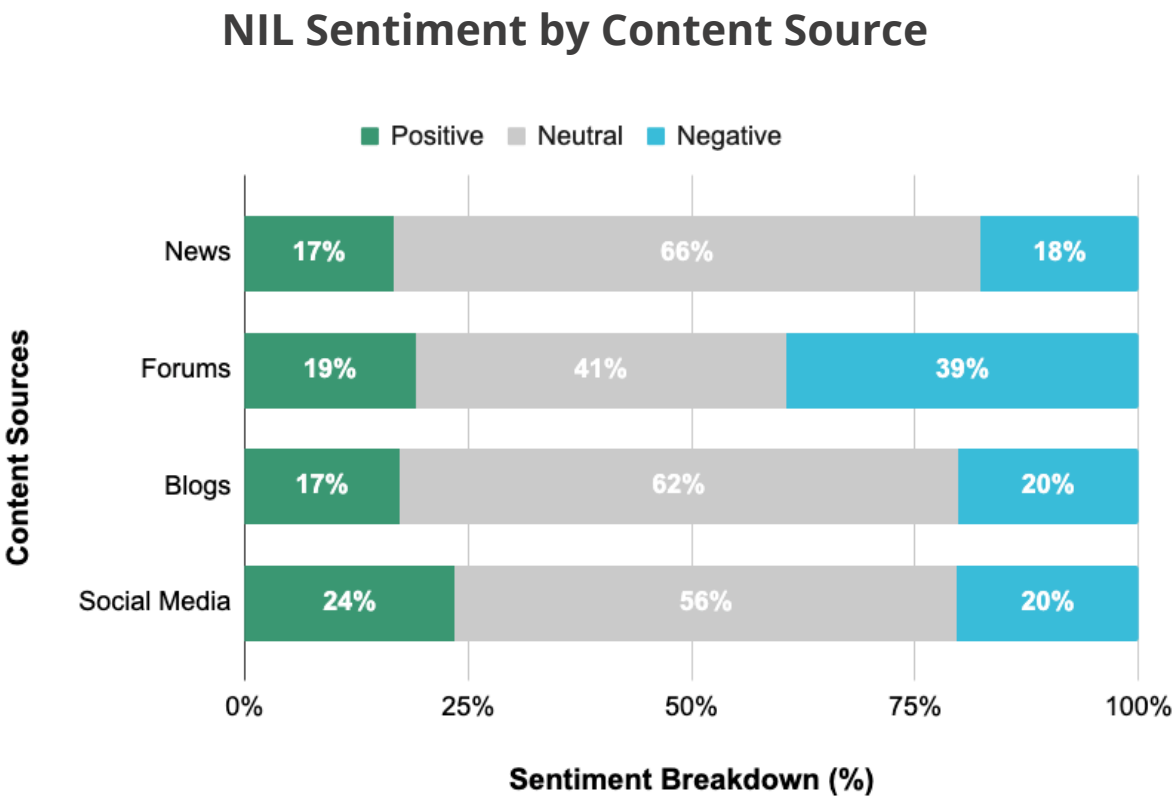
- 20% positive
- 20% negative
- 60% neutral

Between **November** and **December**:

- Negative sentiment increased 50%, from 20% to 30%
- Positive sentiment decreased 18%, from 21% to 17%

These trends are discussed in detail in the [Conversation Trends Over Time section](#).

Sentiment by Content Source



NIL sentiment was the most positive on social media (24%) and most negative on forums (39%).

News mentions, which traditionally trend neutral, are more polarized for the NIL topic. In our [December 2021 benchmark report](#), the median neutral sentiment for higher ed news is 91%.

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Questions to Consider

- What conversations do you need to monitor to understand NIL's impact on your campus?
- Has the NIL conversation added to your campus's brand or made it vulnerable? How so?
- Has NIL changed your campus's goals? If so, how? If not, are changes needed?

Conversation Trends Over Time

The predominant topics in NIL conversation did not remain constant over our six month analysis. Rather, the conversation can largely be segmented into three distinct periods.

- July 2021
- August-November 2021
- December 2021



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July 2021

July produced 33% of the total NIL conversation volume, and more than half of the month's conversation focused on NIL generally.

- [What it is](#)
- [Financial opportunities for student-athletes](#)
- [Speculation about what it might mean for the NCAA](#)
- [Potential implications of the new policy](#)

17% of the conversation was devoted to 12 prominent individuals.

- Seven players
- Three coaches
- One athletic director
- NCAA President Mark Emmert
- Blake Lawrence, the CEO of Opendorse, [a company now serving over 70,000 athletes in the NIL sphere](#)

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2.5% of July's conversation was about former University of Southern California running back Reggie Bush, [who was stripped of the 2005 Heisman Trophy after accepting \\$300,000 under the table](#). This was second only to Alabama quarterback Bryce Young (2.8%), [who signed nearly \\$1 million in NIL deals in July 2021 prior to playing in a game](#).

Other players included [D'Eriq King](#) (Florida State quarterback), [Hercy Miller](#) (Tennessee State basketball), and [Spencer Rattler](#) (University of Oklahoma quarterback), all of whom quickly signed lucrative deals.

Coaches, like University of Connecticut Women's Basketball Coach Geno Auriemma, [strove to ensure their players ran endorsement opportunities past him](#) and compliance prior to signing to avoid eligibility issues. University of Wisconsin Athletic Director Chris McIntosh echoed these concerns and the responsibility athletes have for following the rules while asserting that the [athletic department would assist in education](#). Emmert was called upon to [discuss NCAA-wide implications of NIL](#), while Blake Lawrence and Opendorse were frequently mentioned as [part of the new NCAA-adjacent industry of companies](#) vying to assist student-athletes with NIL.

July's NIL conversation reflected the newness of the topic—not only was there a lot of conversation, but the majority was highly generalized. People tried to both unpack NIL and determine how it would impact the broader NCAA sporting landscape. As we progressed further into the year, these conversation trends began to shift.

August-November 2021

Conversation maintained similar trends from August through November, with each month averaging 12% of the total conversation volume. Individual athletes continued to be frequent topics of discussion; the two most popular athletes received an average of 7% of the total conversation volume.

- Alabama's Bryce Young continued to dominate conversation in August and September with discussion of his mounting NIL deals, [including a media deal to host a podcast](#) and the [impact of those deals on his team's culture](#).
- Ohio State quarterback Quinn Ewers, [who left high school early to capitalize on NIL](#), subsequently [signed a \\$1.4 million deal with an autograph vendor](#) in late July. He remained a top topic of conversation in August, both because of news of his NIL deals and also [speculation that he may be the first player with high value NIL deals to transfer](#).

In October and November, conversation about individual athletes continued to trend away from news of new NIL deals and more toward the impact—and potential unintended consequences—associated with those deals.

- Oklahoma's Spencer Rattler [lost his starting job](#), sparking [questions about the return on investment for his NIL sponsors](#).
- University of Illinois men's basketball player Kofi Cockburn [was suspended for three games for engaging in NIL activities prior to July 1](#).
- Texas Christian University began a search for a new head coach, and athletic director Jeremiah Donati [specifically referenced NIL strategy](#) as something they would expect from the new hire.

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These shifting trends in the prevalent conversation themes surrounding individual athletes were also seen when analyzing specific topics in NIL conversation.

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Between August and November, for each month’s mentions:

- *College athlete* was referenced in an average of 22%
- *College football* appeared in an average of 20%

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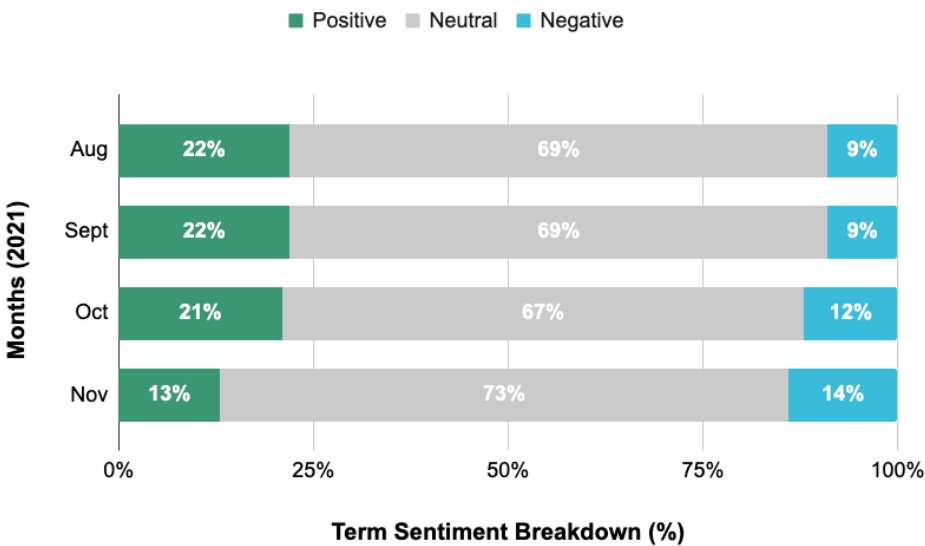
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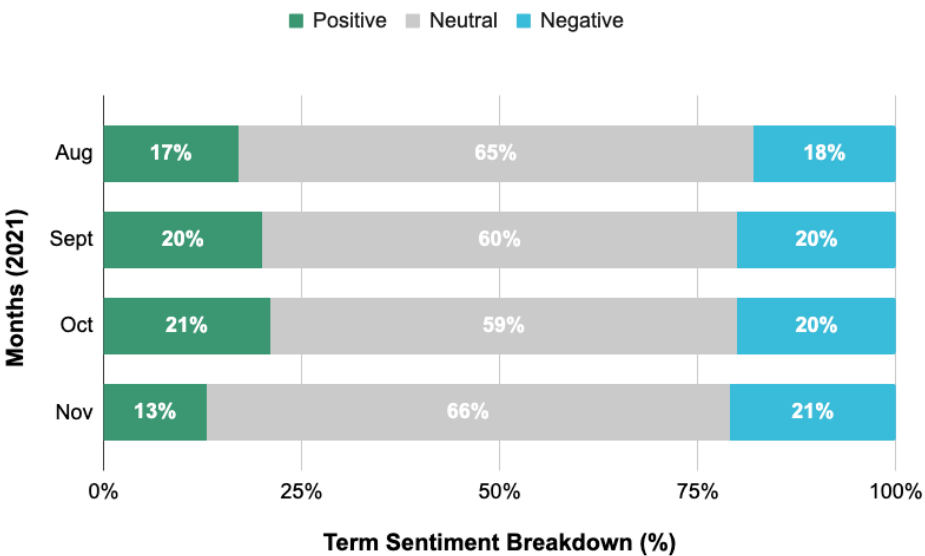
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"College Athlete" Term Conversation



"College Football" Term Conversation



When we examine sentiment for these specific terms:

- The proportion of positive mentions drops from a high of 21% for *college football* and 22% for *college athlete* to only 13% for both terms by November.
- Negative sentiment, conversely, increased month-over-month, with a net increase of 3% for *college football* and 5% for *college athlete*.

This shift in sentiment for two prominent terms reflects the period of transition between July 2021 conversation—largely the “what is this and how will we navigate it” era, dominated more by news articles and one-off social media posts—and the December 2021 conversation, which had a distinctly different conversation theme.

December 2021

December conversation was considerably different from the five months preceding it. Volume, which had decreased incrementally before seemingly stabilizing, nearly doubled compared to November. The effect of this increase is even more pronounced when we consider that conversation volume tends to be lower in December; in our [social listening benchmarks report from May 2021](#), which examined conversation from July–December 2020, December had the second-lowest median conversation volume (only July saw less).

In this analysis, forum mentions more than tripled between November and December, producing 23% of conversation after averaging 10% in the previous five months. Discussion also increased, with 37% more comments and replies shared in December.

Finally, sentiment, which had been proportionally similar in each of the prior five months, averaging 20% positive and 20% negative, saw a 4 percentage point decrease in positive sentiment (to 17%) and a whopping 10 percentage point increase (to 30%) in negative sentiment.

Metric	Change (Nov to Dec)
Volume	97% increase
Forum Conversation	329% increase
Comments/Replies	367% increase
Negative Sentiment	50% increase
Positive Sentiment	18% decrease

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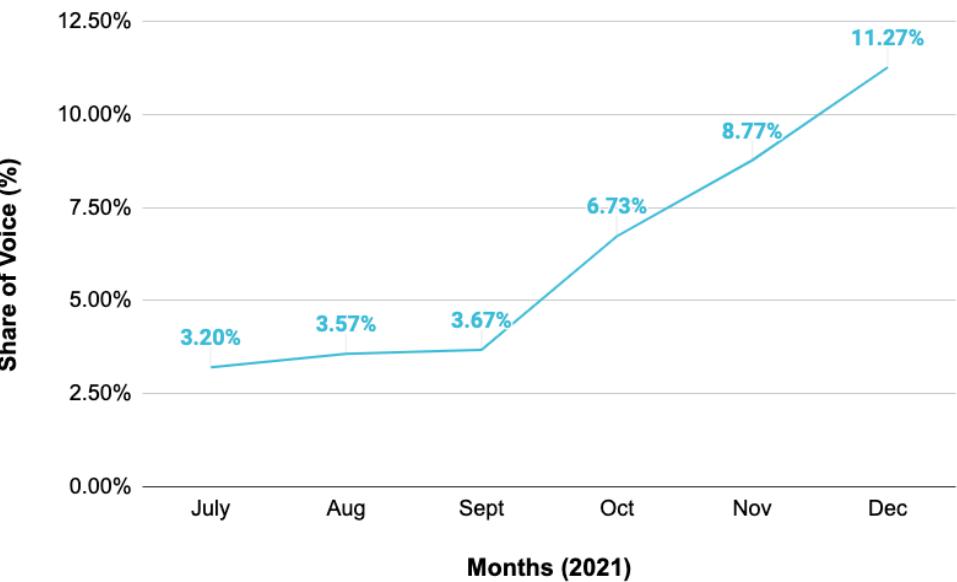
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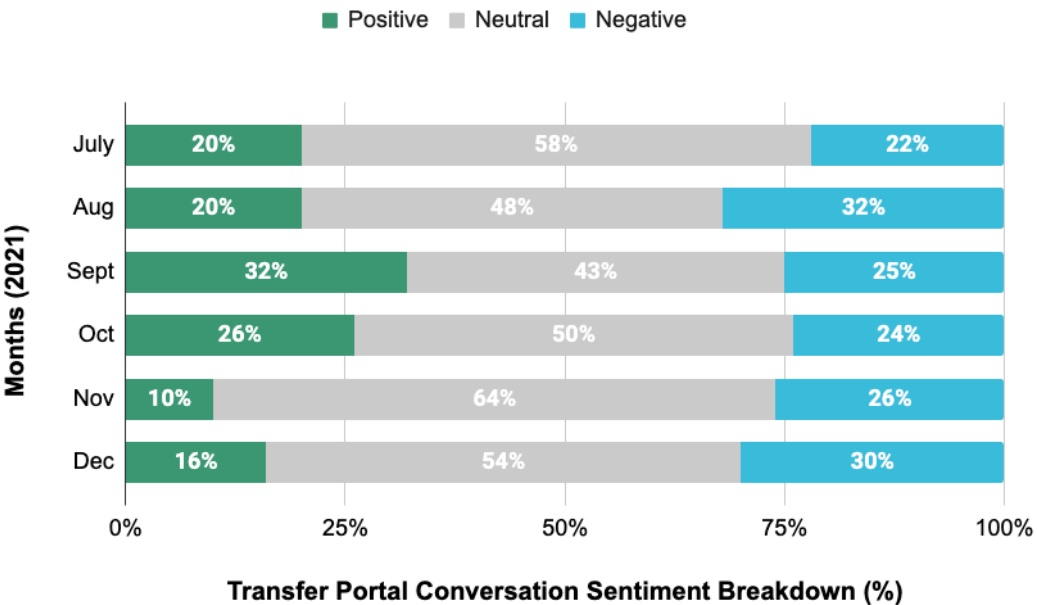
So what happened? Discussion regarding broader implications of NIL, and in particular, impacts on college football, became the most prominent conversations. Top phrases in negative conversation included [pay-for-play](#), [Wild West](#), [free agency](#), and [ruining college football](#), and fans [increasingly took to forums to discuss what they disliked about the new landscape](#). Finally, conversation regarding the transfer portal, already a contentious topic in NCAA sports, became a much more prominent topic in conjunction with NIL.

The transfer portal is the process by which student-athletes are allowed to transfer from one campus to another. The rules regarding transfers and eligibility [were changed in April 2021](#) and now allow [every student-athlete to transfer to another campus once](#) without any disruption to their NCAA eligibility. These changes, coupled with the new NIL regulations, allow student-athletes to move to a campus where they feel they'll have a greater chance to be successful—not only on the field of play, but also financially with NIL opportunities.

Transfer Portal Conversation Share of Voice



Transfer Portal Conversation Sentiment



The transfer portal has been a polarizing topic of conversation since NIL's inception, but its overall share of voice increased steadily month-over-month. This increase coupled with a steadily decreasing percentage of positive sentiment—and a consistent proportion of negative sentiment—was one of the driving factors in the shifts in December's conversation.

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Questions to Consider

- How has athletics affected your campus's brand conversation since July 2021?
- Are polarizing topics like NIL and the transfer portal affecting your fans' affinity for your campus? If so, how has that changed their relationship with your campus?
- How has NIL influenced your alumni, donor, and fan communication strategies? What updates are needed?
- What is the value of retaining student-athletes on your campus, both academically and athletically? How is your campus approaching retention efforts since NIL's inception?
- What motivates student-athletes now, and how does that affect their recruitment? Is this effect carrying over to academic recruitment as well? If so, how does your campus need to adapt?

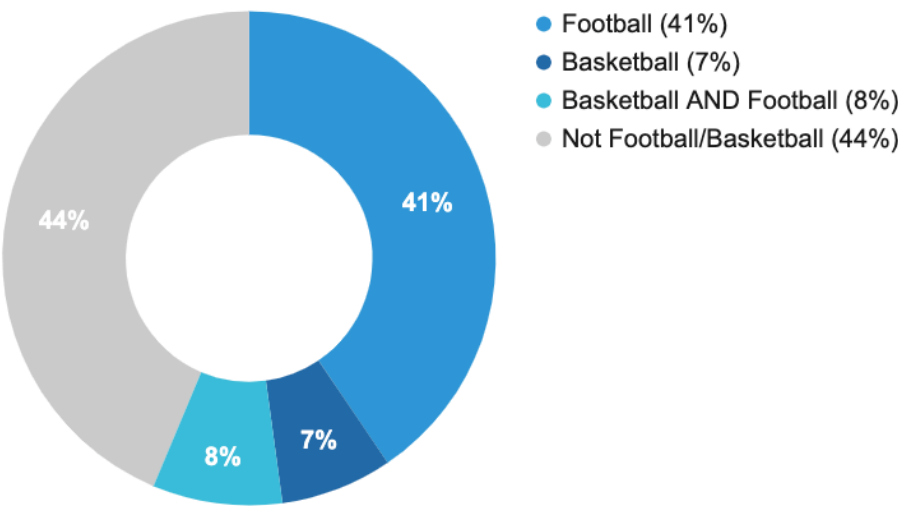
Digging Deeper: Specific NIL Topics

NIL Beyond Football and Basketball

College football is one of the most popular sports in the U.S. [56% of U.S. adults](#) identify themselves as college football fans (second only to NFL football). More than [47 million people](#) attended college football games in 2019, and television viewership for the 2021 NCAA National Championship totaled more than [22 million people](#).

Basketball ranks as the next most popular college sport, with [overall attendance in 2019](#) topping 31 million. In 2021, the men's March Madness title game drew an average of [16.9 million viewers](#) with the women's final bringing in another 4 million.

Football and Basketball Share of Voice



Specific NIL Topics: NIL Beyond Football and Basketball



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Just over half (56%) of all NIL-related conversation centered around these two popular sports, with the majority of conversation (41%) discussing football. 44% of NIL mentions did not specifically reference football or basketball.

Football and basketball may command a larger share of NIL conversation, but the impact of NIL extends to other sports and their prominent athletes.

In our dataset, there were more than 2,000 mentions of gymnast and Olympic all-around gold medalist Sunisa Lee, who began her college gymnastics career at Auburn University after the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Of the last five Olympic all-around gymnastics champions, [Lee is the only one who will compete collegiately](#), catalyzed by NIL regulations allowing her to participate and profit from her newfound celebrity.

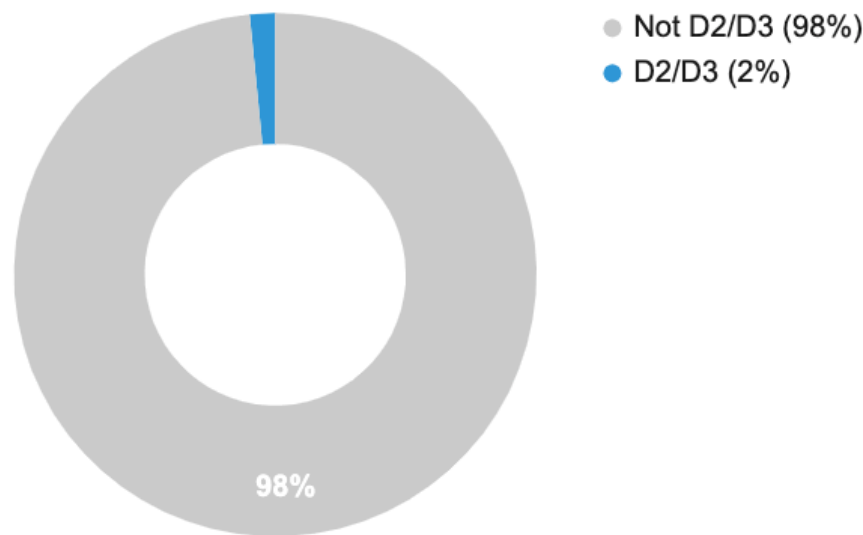
Louisiana State University gymnast Olivia Dunne, who has a TikTok following of more than [4.9 million users](#), has made more than [\\$1 million in endorsements](#) since NIL policies were enacted. Athletes like Emelie Curtis, a lacrosse player at Duquesne University, have begun [running private clinics for younger athletes](#).

These players are leveraging their personal name, image, and likeness to capitalize on these deals but are inevitably linked with the universities they attend. It's important to be aware of both the potential and pitfalls that exist for these student-athletes—and by extension, their campuses—and ensure there are support systems and educational opportunities in place for them as they navigate these new waters.

Division 1 Sports Conversation

The NCAA is divided into three competitive divisions. While campuses are fairly equally divided amongst the three divisions ([32% D1](#), [28% D2](#), and [40% D3](#)), Division 1 (D1) houses the largest (and typically most prominent) programs and receives far more attention than campuses, programs, and athletes in Division 2 (D2) and Division 3 (D3).

D2/D3 Share of Voice



Some D1 campuses and individual athletes received more mentions than D2 and D3 combined (3,448 mentions).

- Ohio State University (17,717 mentions)
- Clemson University (10,731 mentions)
- Auburn University (7,250)
- Alabama quarterback Bryce Young (5,917 mentions)
- Ohio State/Texas quarterback Quinn Ewers (3,235 mentions)

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Overall, references to D2 and D3 made up only 2% of our total dataset over the analysis period.

While references to NIL at the D2 and D3 levels occurred far less frequently than mentions that referenced programs and athletes at the D1 level, it is important to recognize that mentions did occur. NIL is not as prominent a topic for schools outside of D1, but it is absolutely a topic all schools need to consider. As of September 2021, [athletes from more than 100 D2 schools](#) had reported NIL activity. The Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association, a D2 conference, [ranked ninth in total NIL compensation](#) through August 31. While they have been surpassed by some D1 conferences since [and now sit sixteenth](#), they still remain ahead of many more.

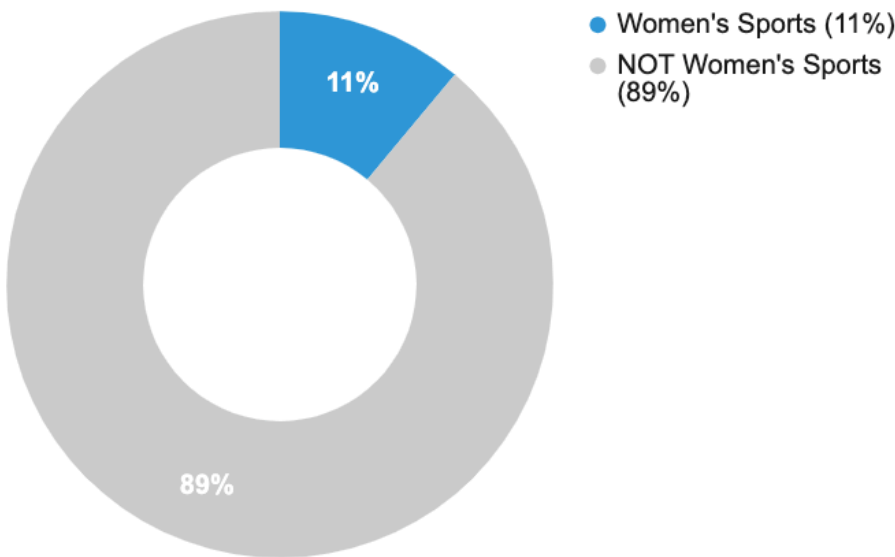
Athletes at D3 schools have also reported NIL deals. Caleb Eagens, a wide receiver at East Texas Baptist University, [signed with the Dairy Queen closest to campus](#). The D3 football program from Whittier College signed what is believed to be [the first team-wide NIL deal in September](#). In Colorado, [every female NCAA athlete from any division was offered an NIL deal](#) with sports gambling company MaximBet.

While higher profile D1 athletes—particularly those who play football or basketball—are most likely to secure larger, more lucrative deals, it's important to recognize that all NCAA athletes can sign NIL deals. Through NIL, all athletes have the chance to capitalize on their name, image, and likeness, and campuses across all three NCAA divisions need to consider what this means. All campuses now have a responsibility to support and educate their athletes, both to help facilitate their success and avoid potential compliance issues.

NIL and Women's Sports

Coverage of women's sports lags behind that enjoyed by their male counterparts. In 2019, [researchers found that 95% of television and 90% of online coverage](#) focused on men's sports—a statistic that has not seen meaningful change in the last 30 years. When it comes to online conversation about NIL, our findings aligned with that of previous research: 11% of mentions in our dataset discussed women's sports.

Women's Sports Share of Voice



The most marketable of women's athletes are expected to sign NIL deals that are of similar value to the top male athletes. For example, after signing with Gatorade and StockX, University of Connecticut women's basketball player Paige Bueckers [is nearing \\$1 million yearly in NIL deals](#), while her counterpart Azzi Fudd has [deals with Chipotle, BioSteel, and SC30 and has appeared in commercials for TikTok](#). These athletes, however, are likely to be the exception and not the rule, with other high performing players like Player of the Year hopefuls Rhyne Howard, NaLyssa Smith, and Naz Hillmon [struggling to secure similar opportunities](#).

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There are also questions surrounding the types of companies that will solicit NIL deals—both in general and with female athletes. The University of Central Florida's women's basketball team was the first to secure an NIL deal. They partnered [with the junk removal company College H.U.N.K.S.](#), a company that primarily leverages a male presence.

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Other team deals have been signed by the University of Alabama's women's gymnastics team ([CrowdPush](#)), Florida State University's softball team ([FTX](#)), and all of Brigham Young University's women athletes ([Smarty Streets](#)).

As the NIL landscape continues to unfold, the opportunities that are provided to women's athletes, and whether they differ from those afforded to male athletes, will continue to be a topic of interest.

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- How is NIL changing the student-athlete experience? What can they get out of their college experience besides the NIL profit (e.g., professional experiences, personal finance training, legal education, networking, etc.)?
- Are support systems in place for student-athletes in light of NIL? What resources need to be provided?
- What NIL opportunities are available for student-athletes in sports beyond just football and basketball, including women's sports?
- What educational opportunities are in place to teach student-athletes about NIL and how to manage the responsibilities that accompany those opportunities?
- Is your campus navigating resource discrepancies related to NIL? What do you need to overcome them?

Conclusion

Athletics, and NIL specifically, continues to be an ever-evolving part of higher ed. The current rules will not likely be in place as we know them even a year from now. (Case in point: blog posts accompanying this report will cover a few changes just since the data collection period ended.)

What has persisted amidst all the changes is athletics' critical role in your conversation and brand perception. At times, its volume may appear to overshadow other aspects of the college experience—that is certainly the case for many campuses. We observed these spikes often in the dataset, particularly when NIL was first announced in July 2021 and again in December 2021 with the advent of the transfer portal.

That increase in athletic focus is not necessarily a negative thing for your campus's brand, though. It just must be acknowledged and embraced as an integral part—not a separate one. There are many ways to strategically leverage strong athletics conversation for a broader brand benefit. For example, consider ways to reposition athletics content to drive pillar messaging, using athletics as a lens to communicate your brand messaging and value through student-athlete experiences.

Beyond just that recognition and mindset shift, there are two critical audiences that cannot be overlooked in this period of change: the student-athletes directly affected by the new policies, and the fan bases reacting to them. For student-athletes, it's navigating a new recruitment approach; harnessing their excitement; and balancing it with education, training, and support. Meanwhile, donors are experiencing conflicting demands on their financial support of the teams they love, and some generations of fans are struggling to grasp the reality of the upheaval and its effect on team composition and culture.

As campus pros, those are some of your primary audiences, too! They're your current students, and they're your alumni, donors, and fans. Consider what steps are needed to further support them and rebuild their affinity for your campus amid this uncertainty.

NIL isn't going away anytime soon. Let's keep listening.



Methodology

Social listening as a research method is similar to archival ethnography (and in some circles, social listening is known as netnography), positioning the researcher within an archival environment to gain the cultural perspective of those responsible for the creation, collection, care, and use of records. The records, in this case, are online social data. Campus Sonar uses Brandwatch Consumer Research (BCR), enterprise-level social listening software, to gather this data for analysis. BCR has access to over 100 million publicly-available online sources and more than 1.3 trillion individual posts across a variety of social media sites (including Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube) and non-social sites (such as blogs, news, forums, and reviews).

The process of data collection began with the development of a custom-designed [search query](#) using [Boolean operators](#) to collect data from BCR. The resulting dataset returned by the query is unique to that particular set of search terms. The sampling technique used in social listening is closest to deliberate sampling, where the researcher consciously selects certain elements to include in the study's sample—in this case, first-person mentions from alumni of four-year campuses located in the US that were not athletics-related—and rejects any element that does not meet that criteria.

After the data was queried and collected in BCR, it was validated by an analyst to confirm the mentions collected were relevant to, and a part of, online conversation about alumni. The analyst employed a variety of tactics to review content where query terms may have resulted in irrelevant mentions and to identify common spam content. Proprietary Boolean was used to help identify common irrelevancies within the entire dataset and top phrases, sites, and authors were reviewed to help ensure relevancy.



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Social listening identifies publicly-available online mentions. Accordingly, social listening software does not have access to any content behind a login or a paywall. There is currently extremely limited social listening coverage for sites like LinkedIn or Facebook and no coverage for Snapchat or TikTok. The majority of Instagram coverage is via hashtags. We also do not have access to content from social media users whose accounts are set to private.

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Social listening software also limits what data is accessible and for how long. Specifically, due to changes in privacy, we have very limited access to historical data from Instagram after December 2018. Twitter is our largest data source.

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Could the results of this study be reproduced when the research is repeated? If under the same conditions, the short answer is yes. If another researcher were to have access to the research framework, the same social listening software and the same rules for segmentation, the results would certainly be similar.

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