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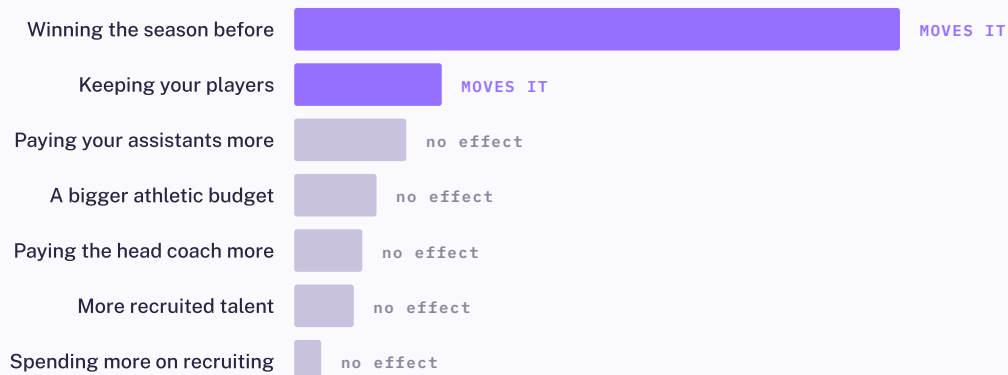
The second recruiting battle

Seasons now turn on keeping the players you already have. What keeps them is not money.

1,231 team-seasons 129 programs 10 seasons 302 coaching changes

WHAT MOVES YOUR WIN TOTAL

bar length = how much each one actually shifts a season, compared like for like



Ten seasons of college football, each program measured against its own past.

Two things predict a college football season: **the season before it, and how much of the team came back.** Recruited talent does not survive alongside them, because a program with talent is usually one that won last year and the record already carries that. Coach pay, athletic budget and recruiting spend register nothing.

One of those two has already happened. The other is decided every year, by players who now have somewhere else to go. That is a second recruiting battle, fought against the roster a coach already has.

HOW THE ROSTER IS MEASURED

Three terms,
before the numbers

RETENTION

the share of last season's production still on the roster this season



A POINT

one percentage point of that roster. Six points is six percent of last season's production, kept or lost.

LEVEL AND CHANGE

both are in the model, so each is read while the other is held still

A team that goes 6-6 then 9-3 has a **level** of .750 and a **change** of +.250. A team that goes 9-3 then 9-3 has the same level and no change.

Retention counts production rather than bodies, so losing a starter costs more than losing a walk-on.

THE QUESTION

What keeps players

1,231 team-seasons, 129 programs,
each measured against its own past.

WHAT PREDICTS THE SHARE OF A ROSTER THAT STAYS · PROGRAM AND YEAR FIXED EFFECTS · R² 0.30			
FACTOR	EFFECT ON RETENTION		P
The record went up rather than down	+0.228	<0.001	
The head coach changed	-0.050	0.001	
Retention the year before	-0.242	<0.001	
How good the record was, at a given change	-0.131	0.005	
Four- and five-star share of the roster	-0.264	0.052	

FACTOR	EFFECT ON RETENTION	P
Recruiting budget (doubling)	-0.026 includes zero	0.07
Athletic aid (doubling)	-0.019 includes zero	0.11
Head coach pay (doubling)	-0.036 includes zero	0.15
Athletic budget (doubling)	+0.015 includes zero	0.75
NIL and booster money raised	+0.011 only in a 186-season subset	0.04

Set out as raw averages rather than coefficients, three things stand out.

.585 vs .523 The coach stayed, or was replaced. A change costs about six points of the roster	.605 vs .530 The record went up, or went down. Teams heading the right way keep more, whatever the record	.563 vs .574 Most four- and five-star players, or fewest. The better the roster, the more of it leaves
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Every line a school can spend sits at zero. Recruiting budget, athletic budget, coach pay, athletic aid. NIL and booster money reaches significance in one specification on a seventh of the sample and nowhere else, which is not enough to call an effect.

What does hold a roster is **whether the staff is the same people, and whether the program is going somewhere**. Note that winning in *level* runs negative while the *change* in record runs strongly positive: a good team that has plateaued gets picked apart, while a team on the way up holds together. And the more blue-chip talent on the roster, the more of it leaves, because those are the players other programs come after.

The players hardest to keep are the ones you most wanted to sign.

It is a relationship, not a payment

A coaching change costs six points of a roster while doubling the recruiting budget costs or buys nothing. The plainest reading is that a player's attachment is to people rather than to a program. He committed to a position coach who sat in his living room; when that person leaves, the thing holding him leaves too.

Which makes recruiting continuous. A staff re-recruits its own roster every year, against opponents who can see exactly which of its players are worth a call — and the evidence says the tool for that is not a bigger budget.

WHAT THE FILINGS CANNOT HOLD

Asking the players

*Survey research from Tudor Collegiate Strategies
with Niche, 7,129 to 31,000 respondents per wave.*

School accounting records what was spent, not whether a player felt wanted or whether the message he got sounded written for him. Those can only be asked about.



Six in ten students say individual contact is what moves them. Fewer than two in ten report getting any. **That gap is the one measure available of the thing the filings have just ruled out being about money.**

It is evidence about prospects during a college search, not athletes at a transfer window. But the mechanism it describes — being treated as a person rather than a name on a list — is the same one a coaching change destroys.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

The next step

The hypothesis left standing is that what holds a roster together is the relationship work the surveys measure on the way in. Nothing here establishes that. It establishes that the paid explanations fail and that staff continuity does not.

- **Ask athletes who stayed and who left, in the same season.** The existing survey instrument, pointed at current players at the transfer window instead of prospects during a college search.
- **Player-level movement, not team totals.** Who left, from which position group, after how much playing time, and to where — which separates a walk-on's departure from a starter's.
- **What an athlete was actually paid.** The accounts used here are school-level and cover facilities and scholarships too. Without per-athlete figures the money explanation is ruled out only in aggregate.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations

- **Correlation, not cause.** Coaching changes are not random — they follow bad seasons, and a program losing players may be why a coach was replaced rather than the result of it. The model holds the change in record constant, which helps, but it is not an experiment.
- **Retention the year before runs negative partly by construction.** Keep everyone one season and there are more seniors to lose the next.
- **The model explains 30% of retention, and most of that is not the measured factors.** Coaching change, momentum, talent and the money lines account for about 11 points of it. The rest comes from the year (the portal era hit every programme at once) and from which programme it is. Roughly 70% is unexplained either way.
- **The NIL proxy is rough.** Those accounts cover a school's whole athletics nonprofit, not payments to players, and per-athlete figures are not public.
- **Football, and mostly the top two divisions,** which is where retention and talent data exist.

- The survey figures are Tudor Collegiate Strategies' published results with Niche, quoted as published, and concern prospects rather than current athletes. The newest wave located was November 2022.
- No revenue-sharing year is in this data. Direct payments to athletes began in 2025-26; that survey publishes around spring 2027 and may change this picture.

APPENDIX

Data and definitions

SOURCES			
SOURCE	WHAT IT PROVIDES	COVERAGE	N
Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act survey US Department of Education	Recruiting spend, athletic aid, coaching counts and salaries, participation, enrollment, revenue and expense	2015-16 to 2024-25, 37 sports, all divisions	20,353 school-years 2,037 schools/yr
247Sports Composite ratings via sportsdataverse	Per-recruit star rating and composite grade; roster talent	Signing classes 2015-2026, football	48,362 recruits
Published game schedules via sportsdataverse	Win-loss records, folded up from completed games	Seasons 2015-2026, football	5,360 team-seasons
Niche / Tudor Collegiate Strategies surveys	Student college-search behavior and how outreach was received	Classes of 2021-2023	31,000+; 20,045; ~12,000; 9,461; 7,129

VARIABLES		
VARIABLE	DEFINITION	ROLE
Recruiting budget	Reported recruiting expense: travel, lodging and meals for prospects and staff on visits, phone, postage and related costs. Men's figure in the football model, total elsewhere.	Predictor, logged
Class rating	Mean composite grade of a program's signees in one class. Restricted to classes with 15 or more rated recruits, since an average over a handful is unstable.	Outcome, football
Athletes	Participants across all sports, men and women, as reported. A count of people, not a measure of quality.	Outcome, small colleges, logged
Win percentage	Wins plus half of ties, over completed games.	Predictor and outcome

VARIABLE	DEFINITION	ROLE
Roster talent	247Sports team talent composite: the summed recruiting grades of players on the roster, a four-year rolling measure rather than one class.	Predictor
Returning production	Share of the previous season's production back on the roster.	Control
Rest of athletic budget	Total athletic expense minus the recruiting line, so the control does not contain the predictor.	Control, logged
Head / assistant coach pay	Average annual institutional salary per head or assistant coach, as the survey asks it. Not a payroll.	Control, logged
Athletic aid	Athletically related student aid awarded.	Control, logged
Program and year fixed effects	Absorbs what is constant about a school and what is common to a year, so estimates come from a school changing against its own past.	Design
Within R ²	Share of the remaining variation the model explains once those fixed effects have removed the differences between schools and between years. Not comparable to an ordinary R ² , which is much higher here because knowing which school a row belongs to predicts most of its recruiting.	Fit

Civly × Tudor Collegiate Strategies, 29 August 2026.

Spending, participation, aid and staffing from the US Department of Education Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act survey. Football ratings from the 247Sports Composite; win-loss records folded up from published schedules. Student survey figures as published by Tudor Collegiate Strategies with Niche.