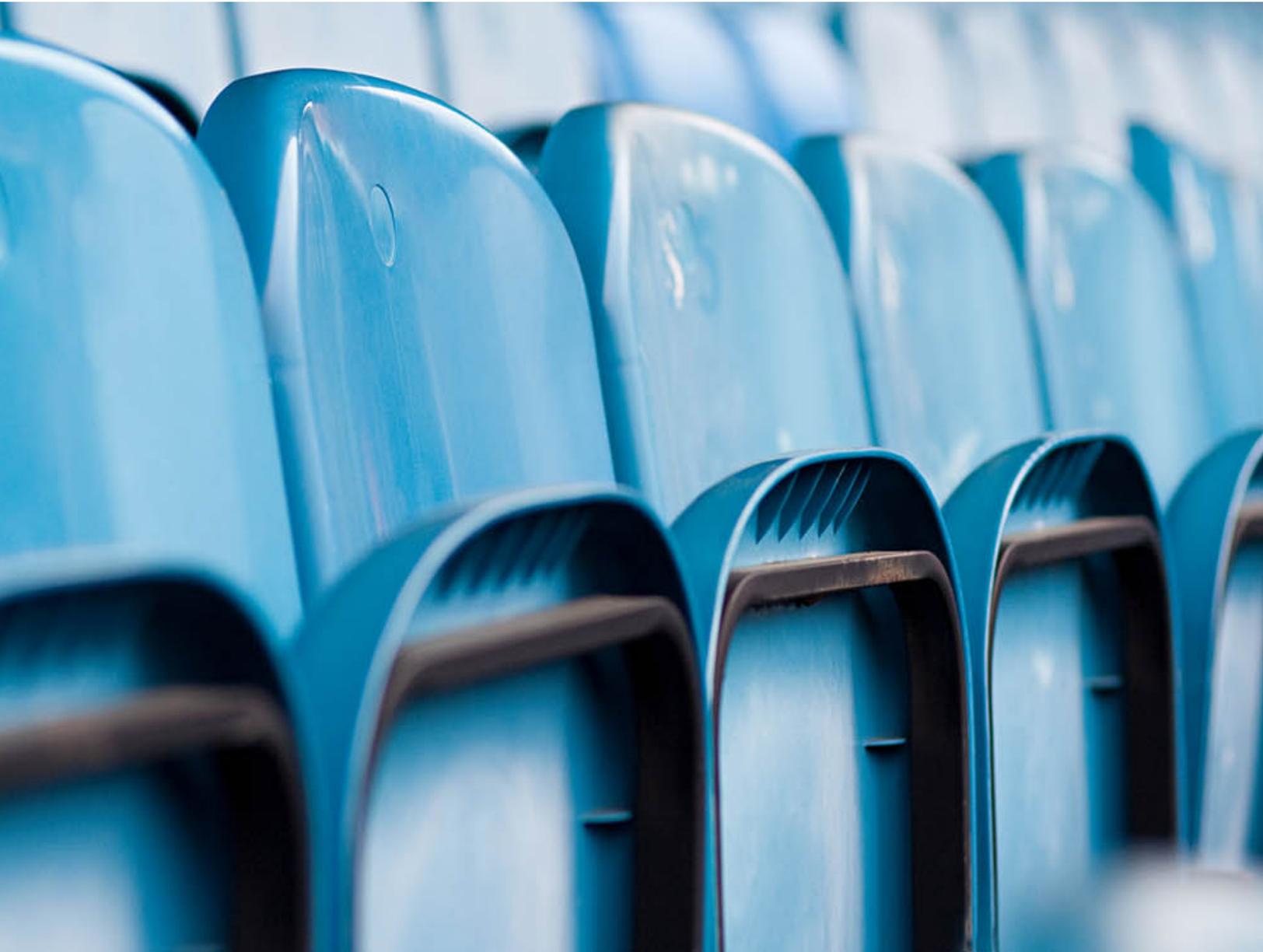


Leadership in a New Era of College Athletics



Collegiate athletics has entered one of the most volatile and complex periods in its history. The rapid expansion of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), increased player mobility through the transfer portal, emerging revenue-sharing models, private equity involvement, and ongoing litigation are fundamentally altering the college athletic landscape.

These forces are not simply reshaping the business; they are dismantling traditional norms and creating an unpredictable future. As college athletics becomes more sophisticated, universities will require a new set of leaders capable of navigating this rapidly changing landscape and evolving operating dynamics.

To better understand these challenges, Russell Reynolds Associates conducted in-depth interviews with university presidents and athletic directors across Division I programs. These conversations revealed the stark realities of the current environment: mounting financial pressures, cultural disruption, and the need for leadership capabilities that go far beyond traditional playbooks. From these discussions, we identified three critical steps universities and athletic departments must take to safeguard their programs, institutions, and athletes in the years ahead.

Lean Out: Driving efficiency and agility

Athletic directors today operate as enterprise leaders running highly complex organizations, with a multitude of stakeholders and changing operating variables. They are accountable to university presidents, boards, athletes, alumni, and increasingly, financial investors, all while navigating competitive market dynamics. As the financial model of college athletics undergoes fundamental change, departments face mounting cost pressures, including escalating athlete compensation, growing compliance demands, and shifting revenue streams. In this environment, athletic directors must create organizations that are both lean and resilient to adequately manage through these increasing pressures. As one leader described it: **Every role must have a measurable impact behind it.**

The demand for operational speed, strategic clarity, and organizational discipline has accelerated the need to “lean out” across athletic departments. Leaders are redesigning their teams to ensure that roles directly contribute to institutional priorities, specifically through performance outcomes, compliance integrity, or revenue generation. In response, many departments are consolidating functions, reducing overall headcount through attrition, and establishing clearer accountability structures. These strategic trims have led to a greater reduction in operational costs for overstuffed departments as well as improved speed of decision-making processes.

Forward-looking athletic directors are expanding this philosophy by restructuring their teams to reflect corporate enterprise structures. For example, many programs have adopted hub-and-spoke operating models that centralize critical functions such as finance, legal, and compliance, while empowering sport-specific leaders to make localized decisions around recruitment, investment, and partnership strategy.

In addition, other leaders are diversifying revenue stream through innovative uses of university assets, such as repurposing facilities for external events and multi-use development projects to unlock new commercial value.

This is the reality: strategic agility and diversification are no longer a competitive advantage; they are a prerequisite for relevancy.

Level Up: Elevating and upskilling your team

The professionalization of college athletics is redefining the talent composition within athletic departments. The traditional leadership mix—centered on coaching oversight, fundraising, and compliance—is no longer sufficient in an environment increasingly shaped by market dynamics, legal complexity, and commercial competition. Today's athletic departments must operate with the sophistication of corporate enterprises, demanding leaders and teams who combine deep sports acumen with expertise in finance, strategy, and governance.

To remain competitive, universities must deliberately upskill their talent base and rethink the capabilities required to lead in this new era.

This environment demands stronger financial insight and commercial capability. Athletic directors now manage nine-figure budgets, diversified revenue portfolios, and enterprise-scale operations. As athletics evolves into a fully commercialized business ecosystem, the role demands fluency in capital allocation, investment modeling, contract negotiation, and commercial strategy. Forward-looking programs are cultivating teams capable of evaluating sponsorship returns, modeling revenue-sharing agreements, and managing multimedia rights with the precision of professional leagues.

Leading programs are already putting this philosophy into action. Clemson, through Clemson Ventures, has created an internal commercial unit that centralizes sponsorships and brand partnerships under a professional sports-style model. Notre Dame has strengthened its business operations and forecasting capabilities to better navigate the economics of media rights. And the University of South Carolina recently restructured its athletics leadership to include commercially minded executives with legal and business expertise, signaling a new benchmark for strategic growth and governance.

Simultaneously, the convergence of NIL, revenue sharing, and litigation is elevating the importance of in-house legal capability. Athletic departments now require counsel who can manage complex contracts, collective agreements, and regulatory ambiguity with both speed and sophistication. Many universities have brought legal roles in-house or elevated their influence within athletics, ensuring that governance and risk management keep pace with commercial ambition. While the need for true business-savvy legal talent is key, the athletic director must understand how to manage risk, interpret legislation, and build governance frameworks that protect both the university and its athletes.

The programs best positioned for long-term success are those that “level up,” intentionally building modern leadership teams that blend commercial, legal, financial, and technological expertise. By investing in advanced capabilities and fostering a culture of continuous development, universities can transform their athletic departments into high-performing enterprises equipped to navigate volatility and define what excellence in collegiate athletics truly means.

Look Beyond: Hiring external talent to elevate your department

As the complexity of college athletics continues to expand, universities are increasingly looking beyond traditional sports pathways to identify the next generation of leaders. Athletic departments are evolving into sophisticated enterprises that demand diverse expertise in areas such as finance, strategy, and operations. To meet these demands, institutions are now recruiting talent from corporate, legal, and professional sports sectors, individuals who bring fresh perspectives and specialized skill sets to help navigate this new environment.

This shift is evident across leading programs. The University of Florida recently created a chief commercial officer position within its athletics division, appointing a senior executive from Kroenke Sports & Entertainment to lead its commercial strategy, an approach that extends well beyond conventional fundraising or facility oversight. Similarly, the University of Maryland appointed an athletic director with a background spanning both professional sports and business management, reflecting the growing recognition that modern athletics leadership requires multidisciplinary experience.

By infusing their teams with external talent, universities are raising the bar for professionalism, accountability, and strategic performance. As the demands of the marketplace grow, institutions must continue to identify functions where outside expertise can drive material value, whether in revenue diversification, risk management, brand partnerships, or capital investment. Embracing this broader talent ecosystem will be essential to building the next generation of high-performing athletic departments.



What's next for college athletics leadership?

The transformation underway in collegiate athletics represents a defining leadership moment. The pace of change is faster than at any other point in history, challenging long-held assumptions about how athletic departments should operate. While tradition remains an important part of the collegiate identity, universities must now balance that heritage with a forward-looking approach that reflects the realities of a commercialized, highly competitive marketplace.

Over the next several years, we expect to see divergent models emerge. Some universities will double down on the professionalization of athletics, prioritizing revenue generation and commercial expansion. Others will focus on preserving balance between athletics, academics, and institutional missions. The most effective leaders will be those who can define their university's position clearly, align stakeholders around that vision, and execute with discipline.

Institutions that succeed will be those that lean out to operate with efficiency, level up to develop sophisticated capabilities, and look beyond to bring in new expertise.

The professionalization of college sports is not a departure from its core purpose; it is an opportunity to strengthen that mission through stronger leadership and cohesive strategy. Universities that can keep up with the rapid professionalization of college athletics will win their rightful place among the best-in-class performers.



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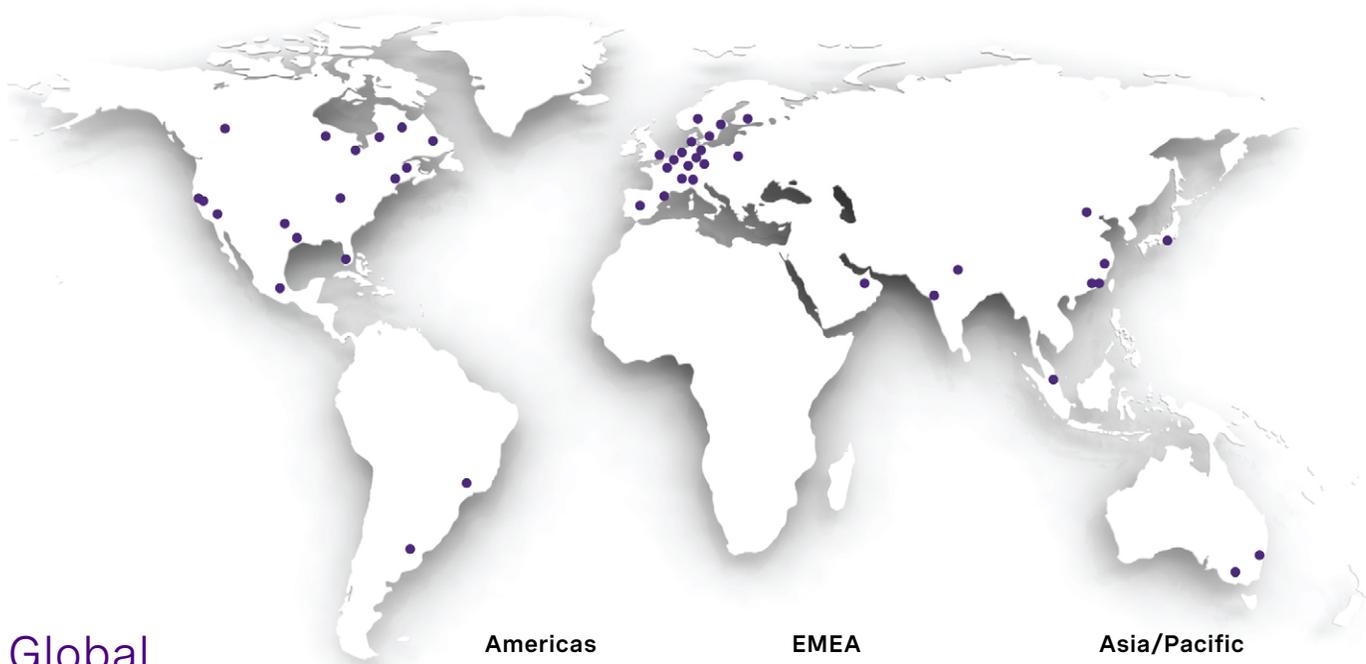
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