



UNITED STATES *of* AMERICA
EMBASSY *and* CONSULATES
FRANCE



SPORTS *in* AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES



U.S. Mission France

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INTRODUCTION



This toolkit **supports English teachers** in introducing students to an important aspect of American culture: **the central role of sports in U.S. universities**. College athletics are not simply extracurricular activities. They shape campus identity, mobilize entire communities, and offer significant academic and professional opportunities to students from a wide range of backgrounds — including international students.

As part of our **America250** cultural programming, celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States, we developed this kit to offer **accessible, ready-to-use resources** (videos, interviews, adapted texts, and primary sources) that explore key themes such as recruitment, scholarships, student-athlete life, and the historical reasons universities invest in sports.

The goal is to provide teachers with engaging resources that help learners **explore a distinctive element of American life while practicing English in an authentic cultural context**. This toolkit also supports the broader America250 effort to **build deeper mutual understanding** and celebrate the long-standing ties between France and the United States.

The resources and content included in this toolkit are provided for educational purposes only. The appearance of external resources, content, or viewpoints in this toolkit does not imply or constitute endorsement by the United States Government.

The NCAA and the COLLEGE SPORTS SYSTEM

The **National Collegiate Athletic Association** (NCAA) is the main organization that **governs college sports in the United States**. It sets rules for competitions, eligibility, and scholarships, and organizes national championships across many sports. While football and basketball often receive the most attention, **college athletics include over 20 sports**, from swimming and gymnastics to soccer and tennis.

Schools have sports programs for multiple reasons: they foster **school spirit and community**, offer students **opportunities for personal development**, and sometimes generate significant **revenue**. Sports also provide pathways to **scholarships**, higher education, and even professional opportunities.

The NCAA system **organizes schools into three divisions** (Division I, II, and III), and within each division, groups schools into **conferences**. Conferences are regional or traditional groupings of schools that compete regularly against each other. They help organize schedules, championships, and maintain rivalries, while providing a structure for competition at all levels.

RESOURCES

[NCAA website explanation](#)

Use this as a reference or reading to see the official description of the NCAA, divisions, and rules.

[8 minute video by The Athletic \(New York Times\) on why schools have sports.](#)
This video focuses on football but illustrates broader reasons why colleges have sports programs

[This 4 minute video explains Title IX](#) and why equal opportunities for women's sports are an essential part of the college system



The BUSINESS and SCALE of COLLEGE ATHLETICS

MAGNITUDE OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL



College sports operate on a scale unlike anywhere else in the world. In the United States, university athletics — especially **football and men's basketball** — attract **huge audiences**, generate **national media coverage**, and generate significant **revenue**. Their income comes from ticket sales, sponsorships, merchandise, alumni donations, and large television contracts. These programs often use their revenue to **support the many other athletic programs on campus**, most of which do not generate profit.

Although only a small number of universities earn very large profits, the overall scale is impressive. Some football stadiums hold **more than 100,000 fans**, television contracts are worth billions of dollars, and game days are major cultural events. Some universities earn more from athletics than from public funding or tuition.

RESOURCES

This 4 minute [National Public Radio \(NPR\) segment on a stadium bearing the American artist 'Pitbull's name](#) illustrates the financial scale and sponsorship aspect of major college sports programs.

This 6 minute [YouTube video by The Athletic](#) explains why college football stadiums are the biggest in the world

AMATEURISM

This financial system reflects the traditional idea of amateurism, which has long defined college sports. Historically, **colleges could not pay student-athletes to play**. In exchange for competing at a school, they could receive **scholarships** that covered tuition, housing, or meals. However, this model has changed dramatically in recent years.

NAME, IMAGE, AND LIKENESS (NIL)

A major shift occurred with the introduction of **NIL (name, image, and likeness) rights**. Since 2021, **rules allow student-athletes to earn money through endorsements, sponsorships, social media, personal branding, and other commercial activities**. Today, NIL is one of the most **controversial** issues in college sports, as it shifts the traditional model of amateur athletics and raises questions about fairness, recruitment, and competitive balance. Supporters argue student-athletes deserve to benefit from their popularity; critics worry about fairness, recruiting advantages, and the growing “professionalization” of college athletics.

The rise of NIL, combined with the enormous scale of major sports, is **reshaping the system and fueling an ongoing national conversation** about what college athletics should look like in the future.

RESOURCES

8 minute [YouTube video on NIL](#) that explains how NIL works and how students now earn money from their personal brand

[NPR: What NIL Means for College Athletes](#)

A 9 minute clear, accessible audio segment explaining the policy change and its impact.

This 8 minute [NPR interview with the NCAA president on athlete compensation](#) offers an institutional perspective on the debates and controversies surrounding NIL.

This [ESPN article](#) answers common questions about NIL and gives examples of deals



EDUCATION *and* OPPORTUNITY

College sports provide more than just competition — they are a **pathway to education, personal development, and future opportunities**. For many students, athletic talent opens doors that might otherwise be closed.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND ACCESS

Athletic scholarships can cover tuition, lodging, books, and other expenses, **making college accessible** for students who might not otherwise afford it. Colleges award scholarships based on talent, dedication, and sometimes academic achievement, and they **exist across a variety of sports** — not just football and basketball. **Recruiting** plays a central role: coaches evaluate high school athletes through videos, competitions, and academic records, **offering opportunities to students both in the United States and abroad.**

RESOURCES

These YouTube “**Day in the Life**” **videos** show the daily lives of real student-athletes:

- [Tennis Player](#) - 6 minutes
- [Soccer player](#) - 8 minutes

[University of Pennsylvania student newspaper article](#) that provides examples of students juggling athletics and academics

RESOURCES

“What scholarships cover”

Article explaining the types of expenses athletic scholarships can cover

This article provides a [practical guide to the recruiting process](#)

6 minute [NPR segment](#) explaining why playing football appeals to low-income families

BALANCING ACADEMICS AND ATHLETICS

Being a student-athlete requires effective **time management and support**. Most universities provide academic advisors, tutoring, and flexible scheduling to help athletes succeed. **Graduation rates for NCAA athletes are often higher than the general student body**, reflecting the emphasis on education alongside athletics. Day-to-day experiences vary by sport and division, but student-athletes must balance practice, travel, competition, and classes — developing **skills that serve them in every area of life.**





INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

U.S. colleges also attract talented athletes from around the world. **International students can join teams** through recruitment programs, showcase events, or personal contacts with coaches. Playing in the NCAA offers not only high-level competition but also **immersion in American culture, academic development, and exposure to professional scouts** in some sports.

RESOURCES

This 4 minute [interview with a Stanford Basketball player from Greece](#) shares an international perspective on joining a college team

The NCAA publishes data on the participation of international student-athletes, which can be found [here](#)

PATH TO THE PROS

While only a small percentage of college athletes turn professional, **collegiate competition can serve as a critical stepping stone**. Sports like tennis, basketball, and baseball often use college programs to **prepare athletes for professional leagues**, providing coaching, competition, and visibility that are hard to achieve elsewhere. Even for athletes who do not “go pro,” the **skills, discipline, and networks gained through college athletics** are valuable for future careers.

RESOURCE

This [Stanford student newspaper article](#) shows how college tennis can serve as a stepping stone to playing professionally

CULTURE *and* COMMUNITY

College sports are not just about the game — they are a **central part of student life and American culture**, connecting campuses, cities, and entire regions. The traditions and rituals around college athletics create a sense of **community and shared identity** for students, alumni, and local fans alike.

GAME DAY TRADITIONS

One of the most visible aspects of college sports culture is game day. Before football or basketball games, students, alumni, and fans gather for **tailgating** — social events that often include food, music, and team rituals.

Bands, cheerleaders, and parade traditions add energy and spectacle, turning game days into major cultural events on campus. These traditions are not only entertainment; they foster school spirit and a shared sense of identity among fans.

LOCAL PRIDE AND ALUMNI

College teams play an important role in shaping **regional and local identity**. Alumni, students, and city residents often take great **pride in their teams**, attending games, celebrating victories, and participating in fan culture. High attendance at women's and men's games alike demonstrates how deeply **college sports connect to community life**.

RESOURCES

This [Associated Press \(AP\) article](#) explains the unique traditions, music, and community atmosphere surrounding football games at HBCUs

This 3 minute [video of the Texas Southern University "Human Jukebox" band](#) shows a first-hand example of how bands energize the crowd



RESOURCE

3 minute [NPR segment on 92,003 Fans at a University of Nebraska Women's Volleyball game](#) highlights how college sports foster community pride and regional identity

MAJOR EVENTS: MARCH MADNESS AND BEYOND

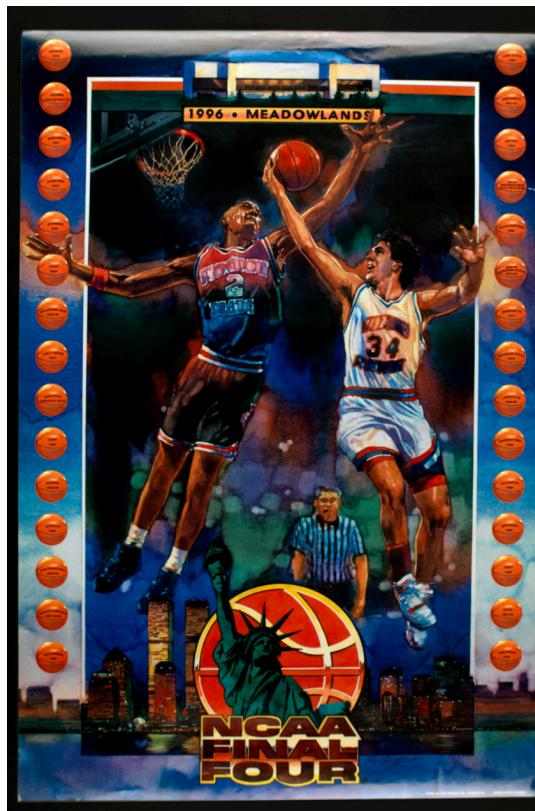
National events such as the NCAA basketball tournament, known as **March Madness**, illustrate the cultural reach of college sports. **Millions of fans across the country follow the tournament**, holding competitions to correctly guess which teams will win each game — a tradition that turns the event into a **shared national experience**, even for people who may not regularly follow college basketball. Major tournaments generate enormous media attention and **create stories that resonate far beyond campus**. Star players, like the University of Iowa's Caitlin Clark, can become national figures, inspiring fandom and influencing sports culture more broadly.

RESOURCES

This 8 minute [NPR segment](#) discusses a book written about Caitlin Clark, a basketball player who brought national attention to women's college basketball, creating a phenomenon called "The Caitlin Clark effect"

This 9 minute [YouTube video](#) explains the scale, excitement, and financial impact of March Madness, showing why it is a cultural phenomenon.

This [poster](#) advertises the 1996 NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament Final Four, at Meadowlands Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey.
(Credit: National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)



REFLECTION *and* GUIDANCE

This toolkit uses American college sports as a window into U.S. culture, values, and social life. By exploring athletics, students can learn how sports shape community, identity, and social practices on university campuses and beyond. The materials also highlight connections to broader cultural movements and historical moments, showing how sports reflect and influence American society.

Educators can use these resources to encourage students to make connections between U.S. culture and their own experiences, and to use these insights as inspiration for projects, presentations, or classroom discussions. Teachers and students alike should consult additional resources, such as videos, museum exhibits, and articles, to deepen their understanding.



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