

NCAA Division I Age-Based Collegiate Eligibility Model

(Updated May 28, 2026. Updates or changes in application from previous versions are highlighted in gray.)

Background.

The following document provides general background information on the current Division I eligibility rules as well as the age-based collegiate eligibility model. The age-based model provides predictable boundaries for eligibility that closely track the typical trajectory of collegiate athletics participation in terms of attendance and degree completion. Supporting the five calendar years of Division I collegiate eligibility, NCAA Division I Academic Performance Program data indicates that of the Division I student-athletes who earned their bachelor's degree in 2024, 98 percent did so within five years or fewer, while 72 percent graduated in four years or fewer. Further, although there are some individual sport outliers, the five-year average of APP data demonstrates that the average age of first-year Division I student-athletes is 18.7. (Source: APP data collection, 2023-24)

Aligned with the existing NCAA core guarantees, including scholarship protections, health care and medical services, degree completion support, academic support, career counseling and life skills education, the age-based collegiate eligibility model ensures consistent standards across Division I. Potential implementation scenarios for the age-based collegiate eligibility model are included for reference.

Current Eligibility Model.

Under current rules, after timely high school graduation, a prospective student-athlete is afforded a “grace period” during which they may continue to participate in organized competition prior to their initial full-time collegiate enrollment without any impact on their collegiate athletics eligibility. The grace period varies by sport. For sports other than tennis, skiing, and men's ice hockey, the grace period is 12 months. The tennis grace period is six months. For men's ice hockey and skiing, the grace period extends through the prospective student-athlete's 21st birthday. If a prospective student-athlete continues to participate in organized competition beyond the grace period, they may be subject to the loss of a season of competition for every year they continued to compete while not enrolled in a collegiate institution. The application of these rules is referred to as “delayed enrollment.”

Once enrolled full time, Division I student-athletes are permitted to compete in four seasons of competition within a continuous period of five calendar years. The five-year period begins when the student-athlete first enrolls in a minimum full-time program of studies at any collegiate institution.

There are also various waiver provisions that either extend the student-athlete's five-year period of eligibility or restore used seasons when a student-athlete participates in a limited number of competitions due to medical or other extenuating circumstances. There are also several legislated exceptions that either pause the five-year period or allow a student-athlete to compete without using a season of competition.

Age-Based Collegiate Eligibility Model.

Under the Division I Age-Based Collegiate Eligibility Model, Division I student-athletes would have five-year period of collegiate eligibility beginning at the start of the regular academic year immediately following, whichever occurs first:

- The student-athlete's 19th birthday;
- The student-athlete's actual high school graduation date; or
- The student-athlete's expected high school graduation date based on the first year of high school enrollment.

Notably, if a student-athlete enrolls full time in any collegiate institution (e.g., international or domestic) before any of these events are triggered, their five-year period of collegiate eligibility starts upon enrollment.

The age-based collegiate eligibility model would eliminate seasons of competition. Existing “redshirt” exceptions in football and wrestling would no longer be relevant because student-athletes would be permitted to compete in the maximum number of contests within the five years of eligibility. The model also eliminates waivers previously used to extend the period of eligibility (extensions and athletics activity waivers) or to restore used seasons (medical hardship and season-of-competition waivers).

The only legislated exceptions that would remain would be those that are narrow and clearly defined (e.g., pregnancy, religious missions, and active-duty military service). Further, all current rules and waivers regarding delayed enrollment would be removed, simplifying the eligibility process for student-athletes and member institutions.

Implementation Scenarios.

The following are potential implementation scenarios for the age-based collegiate eligibility model:

	Which eligibility model applies?
Current student-athletes who initially enrolled full time at any collegiate institution (e.g., two-year, international, Division II/III) prior to the 2026-27 academic year.	
Student-athletes with eligibility remaining (time left in their period of eligibility and seasons of competition remaining).	<p>Either the current rules OR new age-based model, whichever is most beneficial to the student-athlete.</p> <p><i>*Any waivers (e.g., extensions, hardship waivers, delayed enrollment) for current student-athletes based on the current legislation must be submitted no later than July 31, 2026, and will not be available for competition or extenuating circumstances occurring beyond the 2025-26 academic year.</i></p>
Student-athletes who exhausted eligibility in 2025-26 (no time left in their period of eligibility and no seasons of competition remaining).	Current rules; no longer eligible.
Student-athletes who used final season of competition during 2025-26 but have time remaining in their period of eligibility.	Current rules; no longer eligible.
Prospective Student-Athletes Enrolling Full Time at any Collegiate Institution Fall 2026 and Later.	
Prospective student-athletes who initially enroll full time at any collegiate institution in 2026-27.	<p>During the athletics certification process, the NCAA Eligibility Center would apply either current rules or the age-based model, whichever is most beneficial to the prospective student-athlete.</p> <p><i>*Athletics eligibility waivers (e.g., extensions, hardship waivers) will not be available for prospective student-athletes assessed under the current eligibility rules.</i></p>
Prospective student-athletes who initially enroll full time at any collegiate institution in 2027-28 or later.	Age-based model only.