

The “Lope-Hole”

GCU’s reliance on transfers to build a mid-major program

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Roster spots held by transfers, 2025–26

#33

Transfer class ranking in the country

.729

Win pct. after transfer model adopted

Sneakers squeak inside the Global Credit Union Arena where a forward calls a defensive switch and his seasoned teammate responds like he has been doing this every day of his life. There’s no hesitation or miscommunication. Everyone already knows the drill.

This preseason practice has the ease of a veteran scrimmage in the eyes of a spectator. When the lights turn on, it’s no longer about learning the fundamentals, it’s about refinement.

That quiet distinction highlights a much bigger picture at play. Grand Canyon University has implemented one of the most unconventional roster-building strategies in the NCAA for a mid-major program: relying mainly on downward transfers.

Traditional four-year loyalty to a college is quickly becoming a desert mirage in the midst of the heart of Phoenix, and freshman recruiting is slowly dying.

“Programs are looking for more of a sure thing,” said ALA–Queen Creek coach Luke Stuckey. “When you look at a college player that had success as a sophomore you’re able to have more of a solid idea of what that player’s production could look like at your program. It’s a risk versus reward scenario.”

An older transfer class of athletes is superseding the local high school star waiting for his turn as a freshman on the roster.

But the results of this type of roster building are hard to ignore. It took only four years for GCU to establish themselves as a Division 1 school. Essentially, they formulated a path to speed-run their way to becoming a mid-major program through the expenditure of utilizing the transfer portal to sign multi-year transfer athletes.

These are players who have already seen the worst, learned the groundwork, and have their own developed skill sets they bring with them to each team and each game.

High roster turnover rate is ignored when talent from the transfer portal is easy to sign. The roster-building strategy is now less about long-term investment and more about veteran assemblage. In the 2025–26 season alone, 10 out of 15 roster spots for GCU basketball were held by either single or multi-year transfer athletes coming from prestigious schools like Gonzaga and TCU.

“It has really affected the amount of opportunities that are out there for high school seniors looking to move onto the next level.”

— Luke Stuckey, ALA-Queen Creek Coach

After moving to the Mountain West Conference in July 2025, GCU secured an incredibly successful 2025–26 season, ranking first in their conference.

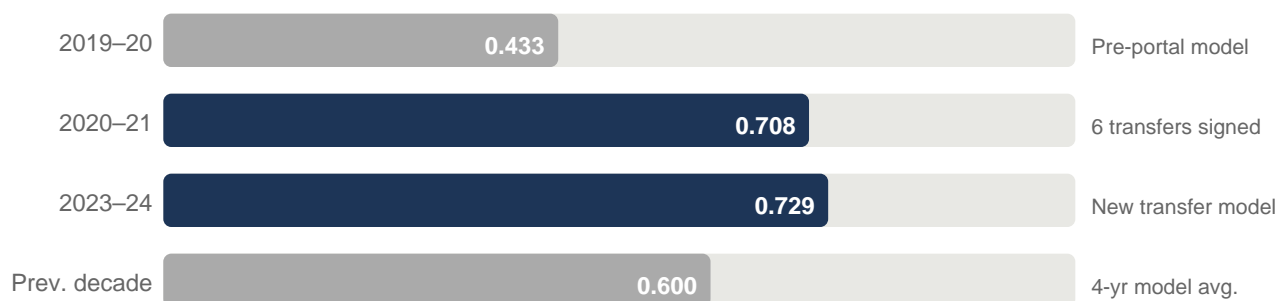
The success of GCU’s transfer class is no secret and is currently ranked No. 33 in the country, making it the only mid-major program to reach the top 50 schools, according to the College Sports Network.

“It’s pushed everything back now. Most schools’ first stop in recruiting is that transfer portal. They want people that have more of a proven track record,” Stuckey said.

With this type of roster-building strategy becoming more common in mid-major programs, high school seniors are having to begin their careers at JUCOs. Four-year-long committed investments will be fewer and farther in between, which could affect full-ride scholarships as athletes transfer from one school to the next.

THE PORTAL PIPELINE: BY THE NUMBERS

Since coach Bryce Drew began his tenure in 2020, the correlation between win percentage and signing transfers has been nearly linear. Under the previous four-year freshman model, GCU’s win percentage sat at .600. After integrating the new model, that stat surged to .729 in the 2023–24 season.



KEY METRICS UNDER THE TRANSFER MODEL

5.4

Avg. transfers signed per year, last 5 cycles

68%

Success rate turning experience into wins

76%

Senior-led mid-majors advance past round 1

22.4

Avg. age of GCU’s starting lineup

70–85%

Rotation minutes played by transfers

9

NBA players developed by coach Drew in 14 yrs

The data shows the pros are beginning to outweigh the cons of this model in a dramatic manner. Since implementing transfer-heavy roster building, GCU has earned a berth in the NCAA tournament in almost every season, excluding the 2021–22 season.

“GCU is in an interesting situation,” GCU assistant coach Casey Shaw said. “When you’re a mid-major program, it’s harder to keep young talent, so in other words, you bring a young guy in and if he plays well, then he’s going to want to go big so he leaves. But if you’re looking at a talented player who doesn’t play much, then he wants to go smaller where he can play more.”

Not only does that solidify the coaching staff’s tenure, it also rebrands GCU as a school. In order to be a successful transfer model in a mid-major program that normally suffers from high turnover, the program has to be known for being a destination school.

While most mid-majors tend to lose their best players in the portal due to the raiding effect, GCU attracts the attention of second-chance high end players looking for a place to spend their final years of eligibility while still increasing their winning potential and playing time.

“We’re not recruiting any high school basketball players. I will probably never go to a young man’s home again. We just go straight to the negotiating table.”

— Rick Pitino, Head Coach, St. John’s

FROM PORTAL TO PRODUCTION: THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ATHLETE

While it is clear that schools benefit from transfers, what does the portal look like through the eyes of an athlete?

Signed in April 2026, Blake Barkley finds himself coming into GCU as a redshirt junior from East Tennessee State and Northwestern. “I went there and if I could have, I would have stayed for four years,” Barkley said. “There was just no real opportunity for me to play.”

“I’m in the perfect time for college sports,” Barkley said. “I’m getting NIL, I’m able to transfer without sitting out, we might get a fifth year, so I’m in the perfect scenario right now.”

The trend is pushing towards value in playing time over value in school association. Players want to fill out their collegiate career to the brim, so time on the court has become the new currency.

Rather than committing to a program for four years, athletes are realizing their minutes are meaningful, and defining their role on a team takes priority. The end goal is no longer patience, it is production.

Brian Moore Jr. is spending his last year of eligibility with GCU after having a collegiate career as a multi-year transfer from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M, Murray State and Norfolk State.

“I would have been at Murray State for my whole career,” Moore Jr. said. “And then, you know, they changed certain rules when I got into college, and it just gave you more opportunities without staying out.”

“When I put my name in the portal and the coach reached out to me, it was just like a no-brainer because I knew their history. They really build with transfers and they have just had so much success,” Moore Jr. said.

Blake Barkley

Redshirt Jr. · ETSU / Northwestern → GCU, Apr. 2026

“I decided I wanted to go somewhere and have a role and an impact on a team rather than just being one of the guys that fills a place.”

Brian Moore Jr.

Final eligibility yr. · NEO A&M; / Murray St. / Norfolk St. → GCU

“They really build with transfers and they have just had so much success because I think they do a good job of recruiting good guards and overall good players.”

THE LASTING IMPACT: GCU IS HERE TO STAY

GCU is not an outlier, it is a preview to what may be coming next for mid-majors. Recruitment will focus on multi-year or downward transfers for schools looking to establish their name.

In a system built on high turnover, mid-major success is no longer about who develops talent, but rather who grabs it the fastest from the portal. The transfer portal has the ability to shift the weight from power by school association to power by playing minutes. GCU’s transfer strategy proves that long-term success no longer requires patience, only the willingness to move.