STUDENT-ATHLETE GUIDE

The College Soccer Pathways & Recruiting Playbook

Navigating NCAA D1, D2, D3, NAIA, and JUCO options to find your ideal academic and athletic program fit.

5 Pathways
Complete Breakdown

NCAA & NAIA
Eligibility Rules

Yearly Roadmap
Actionable Timeline

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MARKET LANDSCAPE

Five Distinct Playing Opportunities

Over 1,400 total college soccer programs nationwide

NCAA D1

28-player hard roster cap.

NCAA D2

Balanced athletic & academic aid.

NCAA D3

Academic & need-based grants only.

NAIA

Flexible recruiting & aid limits.

JUCO

Fast-track 2-year transfer pathway.

ELITE LEVEL ATHLETICS

NCAA Division I: High Impact & New Roster Caps

28-Player Hard Roster Limit

Eliminated traditional walk-on spots starting 2025-26 season.

Expanded Aid Caps

Opt-in programs can fund up to 28 scholarship spots.

Recruiting Timeline Rules

Direct contact begins June 15 following sophomore year.



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NCAA PATHWAYS

Division II vs. Division III Comparison

PARTIAL ATHLETIC AID

NCAA Division II

High-level national competition paired with balanced student-athlete lifestyle.

Scholarships: Max 9.0 (Men) / 9.9 (Women) team total

Strategy: Stack partial athletic aid with merit packages

Recruiting: Direct digital outreach permitted anytime

ACADEMIC & NEED AID

NCAA Division III

Academics-first structure offering rich campus involvement and intense rivalries.

Scholarships: Zero athletic aid available

Aid Sources: 80%+ receive institutional academic grants

Off-Season: Shorter required calendar allows internships

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ALTERNATIVE COLLEGE PATHWAYS

NAIA & Junior College Opportunities

NAIA Colleges

Independent Athletic Association

Aid Limit: Up to 12 scholarships per team

Academic Exemptions: High GPAs do not count against team caps

Contact Rules: Unrestricted recruiting calendar year-round

JUCO (NJCAA)

Two-Year Colleges

Division Tiers: D1 (Full Ride), D2 (Tuition/Books), D3 (Non-Athletic)

Developmental Bridge: Rebuild high school GPA & gain film

4-Year Transfer: Direct pathway into NCAA DI/DII/NAIA

PART 02

Academic Standards & Eligibility Regulations

Understanding core course requirements, minimum GPA benchmarks, and amateurism certification.

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ELIGIBILITY THRESHOLDS

Academic Standards at a Glance

NCAA Division I

- 16 Core Courses Minimum
- 2.30 Core GPA Benchmark
- 10/7 Rule Enforcement

NCAA Division II

- 16 Core Courses Minimum
- 2.20 Core GPA Benchmark
- Graduated High School Diploma

NAIA Association

- 2.0 Overall GPA Standard
- Top 50% High School Class Rank
- Standardized Test Thresholds

NCAA DI PROGRESSION RULE

Understanding The 10/7 Core Rule

10 / 7

Core Courses Locked Before Senior Year

10 Core Courses

Must be completed prior to start of 7th semester (Senior Year).

7 Core Subjects

Must consist of English, Math, or Natural/Physical Science.

Locked Status

Grades achieved in these 10 courses are locked for GPA calculation.

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RECRUITING ROADMAP

Phase 1: Freshman & Sophomore Years

STEP 01

Maximize GPA

High grades expand athletic aid opportunities across all 5 divisions.

STEP 02

Highlight Video

Produce 3-5 minute reel showing speed of play and decision-making.

STEP 03

Eligibility Center

Register early accounts with NCAA and NAIA Eligibility Centers.

STEP 04

Target School List

Build initial broad list of 30 prospective college soccer programs.

RECRUITING ROADMAP

Phase 2: Junior & Senior Action Plan

Direct Outreach (Junior Year)

Send customized emails with highlight links, transcript, and showcase dates.

ID Camps & Showcases

Attend targeted university ID camps where head coaches can evaluate live play.

Visits & Financial Aid Comparison (Senior Year)

Schedule visits and evaluate combined athletic, academic, and grant packages.



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COMPREHENSIVE MATRIX

Year-by-Year Action Plan (Grades 8–12)

GRADES 8–9

Academics
Meet counselor; plan courses; establish study support.

Soccer & Evidence
Agree development priorities; organize available footage.

Recruiting
Explore types of college & soccer routes.

Family / Money
Discuss goals & optional-event budget.

GRADE 10

Academics
Audit course approval & progress.

Soccer & Evidence
Obtain coach feedback; create initial profile / video.

Recruiting
Research a working list; learn contact rules.

Family / Money
Estimate travel & college affordability.

GRADE 11

Academics
Review graduation & application prep.

Soccer & Evidence
Update film & development evidence.

Recruiting
Seek evaluations; plan purposeful visits.

Family / Money
Complete cost research; learn required aid forms.

GRADE 12

Academics
Submit applications; track final records.

Soccer & Evidence
Maintain preparation; communicate changes.

Recruiting
Clarify offers & finish certifications.

Family / Money
Compare written aid; arrange deposits & onboarding.

COMMUNICATION BLUEPRINT

How to Email & Respond to College Coaches

Email Structure Checklist

Subject Line: Grad Year, Position, Name, GPA (*2026 CM - Alex Morgan - 3.8 GPA - Highlight Reel*)

Personalization: Address coach by name & mention a recent team result or play style.

Key Info: High school/club team, jersey #, upcoming tournament schedule, video link.

Response Etiquette

24–48 Hour Rule: Respond quickly to all coach outreach, even if not your top choice.

Tone: Professional, respectful, and enthusiastic; proofread for grammar.

Call to Action: End with an open question or confirm your next event date.

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FINANCIAL AID MASTERY

FAFSA & Government Grants Overview



FAFSA Application

Free Application for Federal Student Aid opens annually in October/December of senior year.



Pell & State Grants

Federal Pell Grants and state awards provide non-repayable aid based on financial need.



Stacking Financial Aid

Combine federal grants, merit aid, and athletic aid to reduce out-of-pocket costs.

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PLAYER EXPOSURE STRATEGIES

How to Get Seen by College Coaches

National Platforms

Compete in MLS NEXT, ECNL, Girls Academy, or NAL showcases with heavy coach attendance.

Targeted ID Camps

Attend specific university camps where staff evaluate you directly in small-group settings.

Proactive Outreach

Email game schedules and full match tape 2–3 weeks prior to major showcase tournaments.

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CAMPUS EVALUATIONS

Official vs. Unofficial Campus Visits

SELF-FUNDED

Unofficial Visits

Financed entirely by recruit and family. Unlimited number permitted across high school career.

Expenses: Travel, meals, and housing paid by family

Limits: Take as many as desired at any age

Tickets: Program may provide up to 3 complimentary game tickets

UNIVERSITY-FUNDED

Official Visits

Financed by college program. Governed by division timing and limit rules.

Expenses: Transportation, meals, lodging covered by school

Timing: Starts August 1 before Junior Year (NCAA D1)

Duration: Max 48 hours per university visit

ELIGIBILITY RULES

The Eligibility Age Clock Explained

NCAA Division I: 5-Year Clock

1-Year Grace Period: 12 months after high school graduation before clock starts.

Strict Timeline: 5 calendar years to complete 4 seasons of competition.

No Pauses: Clock continues ticking even if athlete drops out or stops playing.

NCAA D2/D3, NAIA & JUCO: Flexible Rules

NCAA D2/D3 10-Semester Rule: Clock counts only semesters enrolled full-time.

NAIA Flexibility: No 5-year clock; governed by 24-credit terms and participation limits.

JUCO Pathway: Flexible entry age; ideal for older or returning players.

FINAL SUMMARY

Pillars for Recruiting Success

Academics First

Protect core GPA early to unlock combined academic & athletic aid.

Broad Horizon

Evaluate all five pathways (D1, D2, D3, NAIA, JUCO) for your best fit.

Proactive Outreach

Contact coaches directly with highlight video and upcoming schedule. Check out a live College soccer game.

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NEXT STEPS

Essential Registration Links & Resources

NCAA Eligibility Center
Create official certification account at eligibilitycenter.org

NAIA Eligibility Center
Register profile at playnaia.org

FAFSA Application
Submit federal aid applications at studentaid.gov

Questions & Next Steps

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