CASE STUDY


# LEVERAGING

## ATHLETICS FOR GROWTH

William Woods University (WWU), a private institution in Fulton, Missouri, has seen remarkable growth and success in recent years, thanks in part to strategic decisions in athletics programs. By adding twelve varsity sports in the last two years and leveraging data-driven insights from the Return on Athletics (ROA)® datasets, WWU has significantly boosted student enrollment and financial performance.

### THE ATHLETICS ADVANTAGE

The Chronicle of Higher Education* highlights WWU's proactive approach to expanding athletics offerings. Steve Wilson, the university's director of intercollegiate athletics, said that ROA datasets played a critical role in guiding these decisions. The ROA tool provides comprehensive data that helps predict the success and sustainability of new sports programs. This approach was particularly beneficial when adding women's flag football and women's wrestling, both rapidly growing sports in the United States.

Flag football has seen a dramatic increase in participation, with 474,000 girls aged 17 and younger playing in 2022 — a 63% increase in just three years. Similarly, girls' wrestling has expanded, with 44 states now hosting sanctioned championships. This research, alongside ROA data, gave WWU confidence in recruiting a substantial pool of athletes for these new programs.

The ROA template also provided valuable insights for men's football, helping the coaching staff determine the optimal number of recruits to maintain high retention rates. With approximately 120 athletes, WWU found a balance that maximizes participation and minimizes the risk of transfers due to limited playing time.

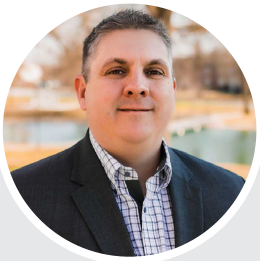
WWU STUDENT-ATHLETE RETENTION RATE


### ENROLLMENT AND FINANCIAL GROWTH

WWU has experienced unprecedented growth in student enrollment, achieving the largest incoming class in history with 456 new students in the 2023-24 academic year. This surge in enrollment is closely linked to the addition of new sports programs, which have not only attracted athletes but also enhanced the university's overall appeal.

Since the 2019-20 academic year, WWU's overall net return (total revenue after total expenses) has increased by 65%, while net tuition revenue has soared by 93%. These financial gains are a direct result of strategic investments in athletics, which have proven to be a high-return investment.

In addition, WWU's student-athlete retention rate has improved significantly, rising from 59% in the 2020-21 academic year to 77% in 2022-23. This improvement highlights the positive impact of a robust athletics program on student engagement and satisfaction.



> ROA datasets play a critical role in guiding athletics decisions by researching comparative institutions and finding insights into sport size and opportunities for growth.
>
> **Steve Wilson**
> Vice President of Student Engagement and Intercollegiate Athletics

## KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The success of WWU's athletics-driven growth can be attributed to several factors:

### DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

ROA datasets provided a solid foundation for making informed decisions about which sports to add, ensuring a high likelihood of success and sustainability.

### EMERGING SPORTS

Adding sports with growing popularity, such as women's flag football and wrestling, tapped into existing trends and demand, making it easier to attract and recruit athletes.

### BALANCING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

By carefully determining the optimal number of recruits, particularly for men's football, WWU avoided issues related to playing time and transfer rates, maintaining a healthy and engaged athlete population.

### ENHANCED INSTITUTIONAL APPEAL

The expansion of athletics programs contributed to the university's overall attractiveness, driving a record increase in student enrollment.

### FINANCIAL PRUDENCE

Strategic investments in athletics have led to significant financial returns, demonstrating the high return on investment that well-planned sports programs can offer.

## CONCLUSION

William Woods University's strategic expansion of athletics programs, guided by NAIA's Return on Athletics datasets, has resulted in remarkable growth in student enrollment, financial performance, and athlete retention. By aligning sports offerings with data-driven insights and national trends, WWU has successfully leveraged athletics to enhance institutional appeal and ensure long-term sustainability.

ROA POWERED BY NAIA | WINNING DECISIONS

# FIND YOUR SUCCESS

## GROW YOUR ATHLETICS PROGRAM

For more information on evaluating and optimizing your own athletics programs, explore NAIA's Winning Decisions executive education program.

[Winning Decisions Module 3: Using ROA to Elevate and Grow Current Sports Programs]