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Student Athletes: A Scholarship Is Not Enough

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Professional and college athletics have a lot in common, but they have one big difference—athlete pay.

by Hunter Vance

With all the college athlete craze generated from March Madness and the upcoming college football season, the debate of student athlete compensation has only intensified. With college football season returning for its annual debut, student athletes return to the field. Millions of eyes across the country will be tuning in to watch these amateur athletes, just as they did for the Men’s Division I Basketball Tournament this last March. The NCAA reported $857 million of revenue from the 2018 March Madness tournament, and the association is estimated to have increased that amount to $1 billion in 2019.1 The players who make up this tournament and the upcoming college football season are the reason these are some of the most widely viewed sporting events of the year, but the athletes themselves barely get a paper-thin slice of the revenue they produce.

Everyone wants to get paid, and college students are no exception. The lives of student athletes are filled with hard work, but their compensation is often underwhelming in comparison to the high expectations that are placed upon them to perform. Professional and college athletics have a lot in common, but they have one big difference—athlete pay.

A scholarship is the highest stipend student athletes can realize regardless of their economic value to an organization or school. The current NCAA system stipulates that student athletes only receive up to one academic scholarship as compensation for services rendered. Any form of compensation beyond this is against NCAA rules. Students who violate this rule risk their eligibility to play.

The NCAA prohibits student athletes from benefiting from their image or likeness in any way. Simply put, student athletes cannot profit off their own brand until after their college careers. Student athletes are expected to work and perform like professionals but are compensated like amateurs. This incongruency only benefits the NCAA and fuels its ability to take advantage of those who make the money-making events possible—student athletes. College athletes should be eligible to receive compensation above a mere scholarship because of certain extenuating circumstances. These factors include (1) the potential lower-quality education obtained by student athletes, (2) the numerous university benefits received from student athletes, and (3) the additional strenuous obligations pushed upon student athletes beyond just playing sports.

Low-Quality Education

While many student athletes are awarded scholarships, many of them are unable to fully take advantage of this free education. A study conducted in 2015 by the Pac-12 examined how effectively its student athletes were able to balance both their athletic and academic commitments.
The conference found that student athletes around the conference spent an average of 50 hours a week on mandatory team activities during the season. Many athletes who were surveyed reported that they were stressed, and that time demands from their sport created “anxiety and a loss of sleep that hinders academic and athletic performance.”

This same Pac-12 study also found that more than half of its student athletes say they don’t have enough time to study for tests. Eighty percent of Pac-12 athletes say they missed a class for a game in 2014-15.

With such high demands on their time, student athletes find it significantly more difficult to graduate college. A study conducted by the College Sport Research Institute found that a student athlete is 23% less likely to graduate compared to a non-athlete.

To remain eligible and participate in athletic activities, a student athlete must meet specific academic requirements. But instead of lowering athletic commitments for struggling student athletes, many universities lower academic expectations.

In 2017, the University of North Carolina was guilty of one of the worst academic fraud schemes in college sports history. This scam involved fake classes that helped thousands of athletes gain and maintain eligibility to play on their respective sport teams. The university offered something called “paper courses”—classes that never met during the entire semester and required only one final paper. A report detailing the scandal addressed how easy these fake classes were. The statement said that “the average AFAM paper class GPAs for these players was 3.61—far higher than their average GPA of 1.917 for their other classes.”

Amid the fake class scandal at the University of North Carolina, a distinguished professor of history at the university named Harry Watson wrote a letter to alumni who were upset that the scandal had become such a big deal. He stated, “We entice these players to entertain the public and enrich their coaches by performing a vast amount of arduous, dangerous, and unpaid work with the opportunity for a free education and a distant chance to go pro as their only compensation. Then we set up conditions which make the education either meaningless or nearly unattainable. To me, this situation is fundamentally immoral.”

The University of North Carolina scandal shows that student athletes lack time to enroll in traditional classes that will truly educate them. The NCAA places athletic eligibility before academic excellence, and student athletes do not receive the high-quality education that they are promised in return for their athletic services. If a student athlete’s true interest is getting a college education and graduating, the numbers say “NO” to a student athlete simultaneously playing a sport and receiving a good education.

**Benefits Universities Receive from Student Athletes**

The benefits academic institutions receive from the services of student athletes are endless. In an analysis by Ucrbs, it was found that some universities have even higher revenues from their athletic programs than many professional sports teams.

In the 2014-2015 fiscal year, the University of Texas football program alone generated $91,567,632. Tyler Hakes stated, “Not only did that put them nearly $25 million ahead of the second-best NCAA team (University of Alabama, by earnings), but it also put them ahead of nearly every NFL team when comparing the profits earned by Texas versus the operating income of the professional teams. Only seven professional teams had a higher operating income than UT’s football profits.”

The income of the Texas football team was a far cry from the modest $25,400,000 the Atlanta Falcons, a professional football team full of highly paid athletes and coaches earned in that same year. Imagine being part of the Texas football team, helping generate more annual income than most paid, professional teams, and not receiving a dime of it because you are just an “amateur student athlete.”

Academic institutions also receive benefits from student athletes through rising application rates and higher caliber of applicants. An article written by Sean Silverthorne from the Harvard Business School talks about the effect athletic success has on college applicants to a particular institution. He said, “Boston College’s greatest marketing campaign lasted about six seconds.” Silverthorne recalls that in 1984 in a football game against the University of Miami, the quarterback of Boston College, Doug Flutie, threw a last second, game winning touchdown. This unlikely play put Boston College on the map and in the national spotlight. Before the dramatic play, nobody knew anything about Boston College, but that all changed after the miraculous way that Flutie won the game. In the following two years, applications to Boston College increased by 30 percent.

Harvard Business School Assistant Professor of marketing Doug J. Chung said, “The primary form of mass media advertising by academic institutions in the United States is, arguably, through their athletic programs.”
NEARLY EVERY COLLEGE STUDENT WORKS FOR PAY...

... JUST NOT AS AN ATHLETE.

The Controlled Life of a Student Athlete

Student athletes are subject to numerous restrictions to be eligible to play college athletics. Countless examples of absurd NCAA violations have caused student athletes to be suspended, or even miss entire seasons of their sport.

The rules and restrictions that the NCAA enforces severely limit student athletes, sometimes to the extreme. Take for example Chris Richardson, UNLV men’s basketball forward who was suspended for part of his junior season for buying a used mattress from an assistant coach. Another example, several players on the 2011 Ohio State football team were suspended for accepting a free meal from a fan. The NCAA’s control of student athletes went so far that in 2014, The National Labor Rights Board Office in Chicago ruled that members of the Northwestern University football team who were receiving scholarships were “employees” within the meaning of the National Labor Relations Act. The ruling was made because student athletes “perform services for their college and the NCAA, subject to their control, in return for compensation.”


Brand, Image, and Likeness

In January 1996, Google was invented. The invention came through a research project by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, PhD students at Stanford University. Who received the current $102 billion business? Was it Stanford? No. It was Larry Page and Sergey Brin who became rich off their invention, not the university where it was invented.

Larry Page and Sergey Brin were not required to forfeit their profits to the school even though they were on academic scholarship. The two inventors weren’t stripped of their rights to their ideas even though some might argue that a scholarship was enough compensation. The invention of Google and its student beneficiaries is not controversial, but the idea that student athletes could benefit from their abilities to play sports is currently prohibited by the NCAA, even though other students can profit from their ideas and academic performances.

Some argue that if student athletes were paid for their services, these athletes would no longer be students and would quit focusing on their higher education. Such reasoning fails to recognize that nearly every college student works for pay, just not as an athlete. These common students who are employees in various locations, including the university itself, continue pursuing academic excellence despite the small monetary compensation they receive. Just like regular college students, student athletes would continue to academically excel if they were to receive a higher sum of compensation.

Only student athletes on scholarship can’t be paid while receiving an education—other students on academic scholarship have no such restrictions. Athletes that generate millions of dollars for their schools should not be different. If a common student can work and be paid for services, a student athlete should be eligible to be paid for their athletic services as well.

Conclusion

Exploitation is the action or fact of treating someone unfairly to benefit from their work. This sounds a lot like college sports and the NCAA. Exploitation is about the gap between what someone gets and what that person is worth. Rewarding a scholarship might be enough to cover the services of some college athletes, but limiting compensation to only education harms others who might be worth more or not value education the same way they value monetary compensation.

The value of some student athletes is higher than the value of others. In a free market, the value of an object is determined by the price people will pay for it. Scandals in college sports are constantly emerging, and most of them have to do with illegitimately paying student athletes to play at respective universities. If there were no rules against it, would colleges and boosters pay athletes more than just the value of the scholarship to play? The answer is yes, and countless scandals can prove it.

Neither the NCAA nor universities are interested in changing the label of amateur for student athletes, but they are concerned about the profits they make off them. The current system only protects big institutions and exploits student athletes.

If someone wants to pay student athletes for services, it should not be prohibited. Because of the low-quality education obtained by student athletes, the numerous university benefits received from student athletes, and the strenuous obligations pushed upon student athletes, college athletes should be eligible to receive a higher form of compensation above a common scholarship from universities or boosters and be permitted to sell their images and likenesses for personal profit.

Notes

4. “STUDENT-ATHLETE TIME DEMANDS,”
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