Why athletes in colleges and universities should be paid

Posted on September 20, 2018

The argument that college athletes receive a completely “free education” through athletic scholarships is often overstated. Athletic aid can be extremely valuable and may cover tuition, fees, housing, meals, books, and other elements of the institution’s calculated cost of attendance. However, scholarship amounts differ by division, sport, school, roster status, and individual award. Many athletes receive partial rather than full scholarships, and some teams offer no athletic scholarships at all. Even a full grant may not remove every travel, family, tax, healthcare, clothing, or personal expense. The original essay is therefore correct that scholarship value should not end the debate about compensation.

The college-sports system has changed substantially since this essay was first published. Athletes can now earn compensation from third parties for use of their name, image, and likeness, commonly called NIL. Following the court-approved House settlement and related Division I changes, participating schools may also provide substantial direct financial benefits to athletes under a revenue-sharing structure. These developments mean the issue is no longer whether athletes should receive any money. The present question is how compensation should be designed fairly, how scholarships and education should be protected, and how financial benefits should reach athletes beyond a small group of stars (NCAA, 2026).

Athletic Scholarships Are Valuable but Not Wages

A scholarship is educational financial aid, not a direct wage for labor. It can provide access to tuition, academic support, coaching, facilities, travel, meals, medical services, and a national competitive platform. These benefits should not be dismissed. For many athletes, the opportunity to attend college with reduced debt is life-changing. The NCAA also requires important core protections in Division I, including rules concerning scholarship cancellation, written notice, and appeals (NCAA, 2026).

At the same time, the educational value of a scholarship does not prove that no additional compensation is appropriate. Universities routinely combine education with paid work. Graduate assistants, student employees, musicians, researchers, and resident advisers may receive tuition support and wages. The relevant issue is whether athletes produce commercial value and perform demanding services beyond the educational benefit they receive.

A scholarship also does not have the same value to every athlete. Tuition at an expensive private institution may create a large stated award, but a student who would have qualified for need-based aid may not receive the full incremental value suggested by the sticker price. Conversely, an athlete from a higher-income family may receive valuable aid unavailable through ordinary financial need. Compensation analysis should consider actual benefits rather than use one maximum scholarship figure for everyone.

The Historical Cost-of-Attendance Gap

The original essay cites estimates that traditional athletic scholarships fell several thousand dollars short of the full cost of attending college. Historically, many grants covered tuition, required fees, room, board, and books but excluded additional personal and travel expenses included in federal cost-of-attendance calculations. This gap could be serious for athletes whose training schedules limited outside employment.

NCAA rules later permitted scholarships covering the full cost of attendance, and schools gained flexibility to provide meals, academic benefits, emergency assistance, and other support. Consequently, the older estimate of a universal $2,000 to $3,000 annual gap should not be presented as current for every athlete. Some athletes now receive full cost-of-attendance aid, while others receive partial scholarships or no athletic aid. The underlying concern remains: participation can generate expenses and reduce available time, so institutions should ensure that athletes can meet reasonable living and educational costs without financial insecurity.

The Time Commitment of College Athletics

College athletes balance classes, study, practice, strength training, film review, treatment, meetings, travel, competition, media obligations, and recovery. Official countable-athletic-activity rules do not capture every activity that athletes experience as necessary for maintaining roster status and performance. Travel can remove students from class, and evening practices can limit access to internships or campus employment.

This time commitment resembles a demanding job even when athletes also receive educational and personal benefits. Payment advocates argue that institutions should compensate the labor and sacrifice involved, especially in sports producing substantial revenue. Opponents respond that athletics is part of the educational program and that many extracurricular activities also require intense time. The difference is strongest where athletes' performances are packaged into tickets, broadcasts, sponsorships, merchandise, and donor relationships.

Revenue Generated by College Sports

The original essay emphasizes that athletic programs can generate significant income through media rights, ticket sales, donations, sponsorships, advertising, licensing, concessions, and postseason events. This argument is particularly strong in top-level football and men's basketball, where major conferences and institutions participate in a national entertainment market. Games fill large stadiums, attract millions of viewers, and promote institutional brands throughout the year.

Not every athletic department or sport makes a profit. Revenue from a few sports may support non-revenue teams, facilities, scholarships, administration, and travel. Accounting can also be difficult because universities allocate expenses and internal transfers differently. The fact that one athlete's team does not generate net profit does not necessarily mean that athlete contributes no value. Sports can support enrollment, alumni engagement, community identity, and institutional marketing.

A fair compensation model should acknowledge these differences without assuming that only athletes in profitable sports deserve protection. Direct revenue sharing may reasonably reflect commercial contribution, while minimum healthcare, scholarship, academic, and safety guarantees should apply broadly.

Coaches and Administrator Compensation

The original essay compares unpaid athletes with highly paid coaches and NCAA executives. Its cited amount of approximately $100,000 for a major-sport coach is far below the compensation now received by many top football and basketball coaches. In the largest programs, head coaches can earn millions of dollars through salary, media, endorsement, and incentive agreements. Assistants, conference commissioners, athletic directors, and senior administrators may also earn substantial compensation.

High coaching salaries are often defended through market demand and the revenue or success associated with a coach. That defense strengthens the athlete's case: if the market value of leadership justifies multimillion-dollar contracts, the market value of the people performing on the field should not be treated as zero. A system cannot rely on commercial logic for coaches and purely educational logic for athletes whenever convenient.

Compensation differences do not prove that every athlete should receive the same salary as a coach. Coaches are long-term employees with management, recruitment, strategy, legal, and fundraising responsibilities. The comparison reveals that money is already central to college sports. The debate concerns its distribution, not whether commercial incentives exist.

Name, Image, and Likeness Compensation

NIL rights allow athletes to receive compensation for endorsements, social-media posts, appearances, camps, autograph sessions, and other legitimate uses of personal publicity. This reform corrected a major inequity. Universities, broadcasters, and video-game producers had historically benefited from athlete identity while athletes faced restrictions on earning from their own reputation (NCAA, 2026).

NIL is not identical to salary. A business pays for a promotional service or license, and earning opportunity depends on visibility, sport, location, social following, and market demand. A star quarterback or gymnast with a large audience may earn far more than a reserve athlete. NIL therefore provides individual economic freedom but does not ensure broad compensation for the labor of team participation.

Current Division I rules include reporting and review requirements for certain third-party deals. The stated objective is to distinguish genuine commercial activity from disguised recruiting payments. Oversight can protect competitive integrity, but it should be transparent and should not undervalue athletes' market power. Athletes also need contract, tax, intellectual-property, and financial education because NIL income can create legal obligations and long-term risk.

Direct Institutional Payments and the House Settlement

The most important recent change is that schools opting into the House settlement framework can provide direct financial benefits to Division I athletes. NCAA materials describe modernized rules allowing participating institutions to distribute a multimillion-dollar annual benefits pool, with the initial cap linked to athletic revenue and subject to adjustment. Schools also received greater flexibility concerning scholarships and roster limits (NCAA, 2026).

This development validates the original essay's central claim that athletes deserve a share of the wealth generated by college sports. Compensation is no longer confined to scholarships or outside endorsements. Institutions can pay athletes directly, including through agreements involving their NIL and other permitted settlement-related benefits.

The system remains contested. Questions include how schools allocate payments among sports, how Title IX applies, whether athletes are employees, how collectives and third-party deals are reviewed, and whether roster limits reduce opportunities. Direct payment is a significant reform, not the final resolution of athlete rights.

Should Athletes Be Employees?

One approach is to recognize at least some college athletes as employees with wage, collective-bargaining, workers' compensation, and labor-law rights. Supporters argue that institutions control schedules, performance standards, discipline, and commercial activity in ways resembling employment. Opponents argue that employment could alter educational status, taxes, benefits, team opportunities, and the legal structure of college athletics.

The title question—whether athletes should be paid—does not require one answer to employment classification. Athletes can receive NIL and direct benefits without being treated as employees under current NCAA structures. However, employee status matters because contractual payments do not provide the same rights as labor law. Courts, agencies, legislatures, and athletes continue to debate the issue.

Scholarship Security

The original essay states that scholarships could be ended at any time. Modern NCAA protections make that statement too broad. Division I core guarantees restrict schools from reducing or canceling athletics aid for specified athletics-related reasons, including injury, illness, athletic performance, contribution to team success, or roster-management decisions. Institutions must provide notice and an appeal opportunity for reductions, cancellations, or nonrenewals (NCAA, 2026).

Athletes still need clear multiyear security. Coaching changes, transfers, academic eligibility, misconduct, voluntary withdrawal, and institutional policy can affect aid. Written scholarship terms should be understandable before enrollment. Compensation agreements should not undermine completion of a degree if an athlete is injured or removed from a roster.

Injury and Long-Term Healthcare

Athletes risk concussion, orthopedic injury, chronic pain, and mental-health effects. Immediate medical treatment is an essential benefit, but some conditions emerge or continue after eligibility ends. Compensation policy should include independent medical decision-making, insurance, rehabilitation, and long-term care for athletics-related injuries.

A cash payment does not replace healthcare. An athlete may accept short-term compensation without understanding a future injury risk. Institutions that benefit from performance have a responsibility to provide safety standards and transparent medical support.

Academic Opportunity and Academic Risk

The original essay claims it is unlikely that athletes will succeed academically, which unfairly generalizes. Many athletes graduate, earn advanced degrees, and use academic support effectively. Athletics can create discipline, community, admission opportunity, and career networks. The degree remains a central benefit.

Nevertheless, academic compromise can occur when travel and training conflict with courses, when athletes are directed toward convenient majors, or when eligibility is valued over learning. Compensation should not reduce education to a public-relations justification. Schools should schedule responsibly, provide tutoring without academic fraud, and protect access to demanding programs and internships.

Degree-completion guarantees can help athletes whose eligibility ends before graduation. Financial payments should supplement rather than replace the promise of education.

Language of Exploitation

The original essay compares college sports with a “plantation-like” system and describes athletes as slaves or puppets. This language expresses concern about control and racial inequality, especially because revenue sports rely heavily on Black athletes while leadership and financial power have historically been concentrated elsewhere. The structural criticism deserves attention (Nocera & Strauss, 2016; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013).

However, direct comparison with chattel slavery can obscure the distinct violence and hereditary ownership of slavery and can deny athletes’ agency. A more precise analysis describes exploitation, unequal bargaining power, racialized revenue distribution, and restrictions on economic rights. Strong criticism becomes more credible when the language identifies the actual mechanisms (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013).

Arguments Against Direct Payment

Opponents warn that payments could concentrate resources in wealthy programs, reduce non-revenue sports, create team conflict, or transform recruiting into unrestricted bidding. They also note that most athletic departments have expenses matching or exceeding revenue and that scholarships already provide substantial value.

These concerns require policy design, not a return to complete prohibition. Revenue sharing can include financial limits, transparency, education, health protections, and support for broad sports participation. Institutions choose to spend heavily on coaching, facilities, and administration; athlete compensation should be considered within those priorities rather than treated as the only threat to budgets.

Equal Pay or Revenue-Based Pay?

Paying every athlete the same amount would recognize equal membership but ignore differences in revenue and market value. Purely revenue-based payment could direct most money to football and men’s basketball and provide little to other athletes. A hybrid model is more defensible. Schools can provide universal baseline protections and benefits, distribute some revenue according to team or sport contribution, and allow individual NIL earnings based on market demand.

Allocation must comply with sex-discrimination law, including Title IX. The application of Title IX to particular revenue-sharing arrangements is legally complex and evolving. Institutions should not assume that market revenue automatically excuses unequal educational treatment. Transparent criteria and legal review are essential.

Financial Education and Representation

Young athletes may sign contracts involving exclusivity, long terms, intellectual-property rights, morality clauses, commissions, and tax obligations. Access to independent representation is therefore important. Schools can provide education, but advisers should not be controlled solely by the institution whose interests may differ from the athlete's.

Financial literacy should cover budgeting, estimated taxes, business entities, insurance, scams, and saving. Public stories of large NIL deals can create unrealistic expectations. Most athletes will not earn celebrity-level amounts, and income may be temporary.

A Fair Compensation Framework

A fair system should preserve full scholarship and academic support, permit individual NIL activity, provide direct revenue-related benefits where commercial value is generated, guarantee medical protection, and offer transparent contracts. Athletes should have representation, grievance procedures, and protection from retaliation for raising safety or compensation concerns.

Payment should not be contingent on surrendering educational rights or health information beyond what is necessary. Agreements should explain duration, termination, taxes, intellectual property, and dispute resolution. Athletes should receive copies before signing and meaningful time to seek advice.

Conclusion

College athletes should be compensated because scholarships, though valuable, are not a complete answer to the labor and commercial value involved in major college sports. Athletes devote extensive time, face injury risk, promote institutional brands, and help generate revenue through broadcasting, tickets, sponsorship, donations, and licensing. The large salaries paid to coaches and administrators demonstrate that college sports already operate within a commercial market.

The original essay's argument remains valid but requires updating. Full cost-of-attendance support and scholarship protections have improved. Athletes can earn NIL income, and participating Division I schools can now provide direct financial benefits under the House settlement framework. It is no longer accurate to say all athletes are categorically unpaid or that scholarships can always be withdrawn merely for poor performance.

Compensation should be designed alongside education, healthcare, gender equity, financial training, and long-term scholarship security. Not every sport generates equal revenue, and not every athlete will earn the same amount. A hybrid system can provide universal protections, institutional revenue sharing, and individual NIL freedom. The central principle is simple: when institutions and professionals receive substantial economic value from athletes' performance and identity, athletes should have a fair and protected share in that value.

References

NCAA. (2026). *Name, image and likeness resources*.

NCAA. (2026). *Student-athlete core guarantees*.

NCAA. (2026). *House settlement implementation resources for Division I institutions and athletes*.

Nocera, J., & Strauss, B. (2016). *Indentured: The inside story of the rebellion against the NCAA*. Portfolio.

Southall, R. M., & Staurowsky, E. J. (2013). Cheering on the collegiate model: Creating, disseminating, and imbedding the NCAA's redefinition of amateurism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 37*(4), 403–429.