

# Compensation for College Athletes



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The National Collegiate Athletic Association was officially established on March 31, 1906. For years, the NCAA strictly served as an organization that established rules and regulations monitoring fair play in college sports, but in 1921 it held its first national championship for Track & Field. Almost a century later, the NCAA is one of the most competitive platforms for sport competition, and has become a multimillion dollar industry. While the NCAA exists as one of the most profitable sports industries, the athletes who represent their universities are not paid, and many believe they are entitled to financial compensation. However, college athletes should not be directly compensated for their participation in college sports, as they already receive numerous benefits that separate them from their peers, and placing a greater emphasis on athletic success would deter athletes from their academic pursuit.

### *Narratio*

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is the governing body of intercollegiate sports in the United States, dedicated to ensuring that athletic contests reflect the high purpose and dignity of education. Serving as a non-profit association, the NCAA represents 1,281 college institutions and more than 450,000 student-athletes who participate annually in college sports (*NCAA: About*). The association was organized in the early twentieth century by President Theodore Roosevelt, who, under immense pressure from the public, saw it as his responsibility to draft reforms that improved the safety and integrity of college athletics. In 1905 alone, 18 student-athletes died during collegiate games, and it was for this reason that Theodore Roosevelt sought to establish an association that provided regulations for college sports, while protecting the core values of academic institutions (Klein). As the popularity of college sports increased throughout the twentieth century, the NCAA found creative ways to generate money from the

universities it represented, all the while refusing to acknowledge the sacrifice and commitment of student-athletes who deserved compensation.

Today, the NCAA functions as a multimillion dollar enterprise, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue each year. This money largely comes from student fees, ticket sales, marketing rights, and television deals, the amount of which is solely dependent on the performance of student-athletes. Participating in college sports can be demanding, as the schedules of student-athletes are built around multiple practices throughout the week, making it difficult to balance academics and sports. Yet, it is the athletes who help to generate revenue for their team and are responsible for the athletic success of their schools. For instance, it is estimated that, “Heisman Trophy Winner Johnny Manziel generated \$37 million worth of exposure [in his final year playing] for Texas A&M” (*Huffington Post*). However, the NCAA prohibits college athletes from earning “salary for participating in athletics” and receiving “benefits from an agent”, meaning they are not allowed to sign endorsement deals under NCAA rules (*NCAA: Amateurism*). In other words, Johnny Manziel did not receive any portion of compensation that he brought to the university.

This is only one example at the forefront of the debate over whether college athletes should receive any sort of compensation for their performance on the field. Many athletes believe they are entitled to a portion of the revenue generated by their services. After all, they are responsible for their teams’ success, and if they were to underperform then the school would lose money from its fans and sponsors. Additionally, many of the students could use the money to pay off their student loans that they have accumulated through attending the university. However, the NCAA believes that placing higher priority on athletics would diminish the value of receiving an education from a university, claiming that the primary interest of a university

should be centered around academics. It would also be unreasonable and impractical for colleges to fairly accommodate each of the 450,000 students that the NCAA represents with a fair salary, thus making it difficult to identify a clear solution for either side (Gerencer).

### *Confirmatio*

Although there are college athletes who believe they are entitled to a share of this profit, simply handing money to the athletes is not a viable solution, as this would undermine the academic pursuit of college athletes. On the official website of the NCAA, the association claims that the primary interest of a university should be centered around academics (NCAA: Amateurism). This means compensating athletes would diminish the value of attending a university for academic purposes, as the perception of universities would be that they place a higher emphasis on athletic performance rather than academics, which should not be the case.

John Thelin, a Research Professor at the University of Kentucky who has published a collection of works analyzing the contemporary issues of higher education, suggested that if universities were to start compensating athletes, it would create an environment where the wealthier schools are more likely to succeed, as they would be able to attract the best players. This scenario would eliminate all aspects of fair play in college sports, which would not be an ideal situation for the universities represented by the NCAA. If this were to happen, it is possible that universities would lose much of the money currently generated through college sports, as viewers would lose interest due to the reduced level of competition.

While compensating student-athletes would negatively affect the perception of universities, it is also important to consider the impractical nature of creating a standard wage of compensation across all sports. In a way, college athletes already receive special treatment for

their performance on the field, as it was found that on average, “Division 1 schools... spent \$91,936 per athlete in 2010, [almost] seven times the spending per student of \$13, 628” (Peale). Already, Division 1 schools place a much higher emphasis on athletic performance as opposed to academic excellence, and much of that money is responsible for maintaining the state-of-the-art facilities most athletes are accustomed to using.

One such facility is the football operations center at Oregon State University, which was unveiled in 2013. The building, standing six-stories tall, overlooks their practice field and consists of movie theaters, game rooms, and a gym to help athletes stay in shape during the season (Walker). The use of this facility, which cost approximately \$68 million to construct, allows the athletes to live a leisurely lifestyle while pursuing their degree on the college campus. While these athletes, who have daily access to such facilities, draw envy from their peers on campus, many universities even offer their athletes additional programs dedicated to assisting them in their academic pursuit.

This is one example of how college athletes are already fortunate to receive special treatment from the universities they represent, revealing the impractical and unnecessary nature of compensating each individual athlete. Ekow Yankah, a professor from Cardozo School of Law who has published research describing the relationship between student-athletes and their peers, suggests that one of the fundamental reasons college sports are popular in modern society is that supporters and alumni feel a special connection to the athletes. He goes so far as to say they, “walked the same halls, had the same professors, and sweat the same midterms that we once did” (Yankah). It is this commonality that creates an intimate bond between spectator and athlete, one that is not found elsewhere. Compensating athletes would threaten such association, a reminder of why it would not be practical to provide salaries to all college athletes.

## *Refutatio*

While it remains true that college athletes should not receive direct financial compensation, that does not necessarily mean they are undeserving of other forms of compensation. It is unclear how the NCAA could go about compensating all college athletes uniformly, however, it is clear that the NCAA is in need of some serious restructuring in terms of their rules regarding their definition of prohibited compensation, as Jon Solomon of *CBS Sports* writes. Jon Solomon is a college football expert who has conducted years of research primarily on the function of the NCAA. In an article titled, “10 Ways College Athletes Can Get Paid and Remain Eligible for Their Sport,” Solomon explains how some athletes are able to find loopholes around the NCAA’s rules, giving them an unfair advantage to earn additional compensation. In one instance, he describes how some athletes sign modeling contracts prior to committing to play in college, thus allowing them to earn money from marketing and endorsements through their agency. In another instance, former NCAA wrestler Joel Bauman, who was self-employed through his own video editing business, gained a lot of publicity when he produced a music video and, “declined to remove his name from any songs and eliminate any promotion of his status as an NCAA athlete” (Solomon). These are just two examples of how some athletes are able to find ways around the current NCAA rules, demonstrating the need for a refined system of regulations regarding college athlete compensation.

Tyson Hartnett, a former professional athlete who runs a program that helps athletes through the mental side of their lives and careers, published an article in *The Huffington Post* that addresses the need for the NCAA to provide an effective way to indirectly compensate athletes for their participation in college sports. Hartnett, while recognizing that college athletes deserve some form of compensation, highlights the irony in the fact that college coaches can earn

upwards of 100,000 dollars a year, and even earn bonuses for, “getting to the playoffs, winning championships, or breaking school records,” while the athletes who earn these bonuses for their coaches are not even able to, “earn 50 [dollars] from signing a few autographs” (Hartnett). While this not only demonstrates the NCAA’s reluctance to accept necessary change, it makes way for a possible solution to the problem of college athletes not receiving enough compensation for their athletic commitment to their university. Perhaps one effective way to make both sides happy would be to allow college athletes to earn money for their image and likeness to be used in endorsements and marketing, as well as allow them to make money from signing autographs and having their character used in video games. Although these seem like simple changes, the implication of this practice is a necessary step the NCAA should take in ensuring their athletes do not feel taken advantage of.

While it holds true that college athletes should not be directly compensated for their participation in college sports, as they already receive plenty of non-academic benefits that separate them from their peers, allowing them to earn money from their autographs and image likeness is a fair way to reward them for their athletic success without deterring from academic pursuit. College athletics should be about representing your school and playing the sport you love, all while receiving an education; let’s not allow money to get in the way.

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