

Tackling The NCAA Student/ Athlete/ Employee Identity Crisis

February 23, 2018 – 5:30-7:00 PM – Webster’s Bookstore Café

Overview

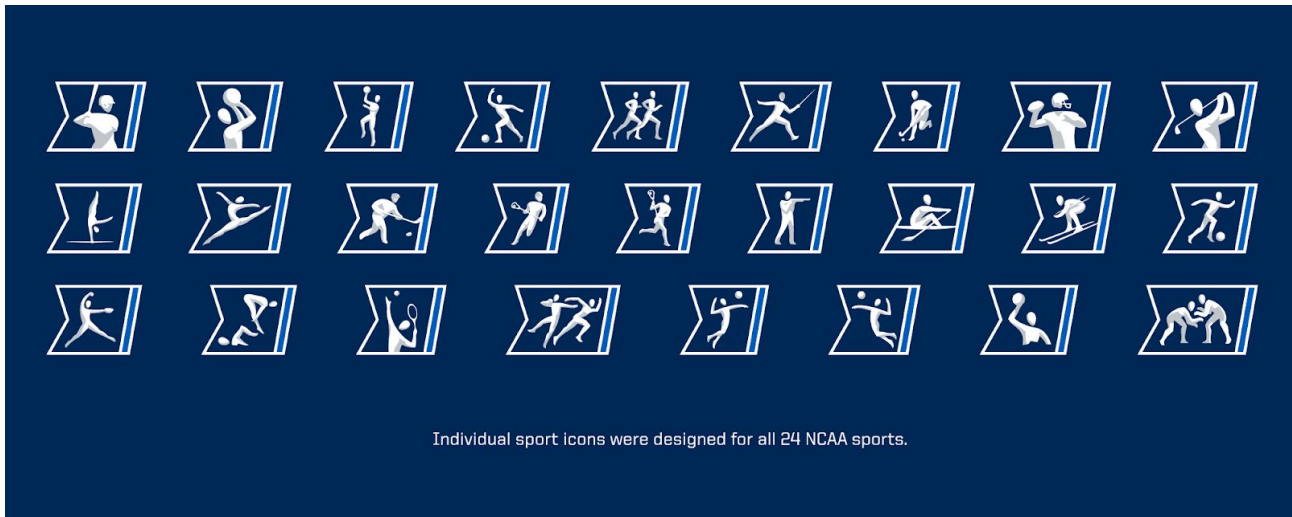
College athletics have established themselves alongside professional sports as a staple of the American society. The NCAA lists one of its core values as a commitment to “the pursuit of excellence in both academics and athletics.” Despite the NCAA’s intentions to encourage ambitions in and out of the classroom, many issues have arisen, such as academic responsibility, compensation, and career paths after college. The true definition of student-athlete at their university has since become uncertain and muddled.



Recent history has seen players’ attempt to unionize, bans on the profitable use of player likenesses, and even the introduction of an ambiguous monthly stipend to cover intangible costs. With all the various rules and regulations that college athletes are subject to, some argue that their role falls much closer to a professional employee than a student. These athletes bring in exorbitant amounts of

money for the university, yet cannot be paid. With an ever-growing media presence, schools are capable of making more money than ever off jersey sales and advertising, yet the well-being of these athletes seems to be deferred. With no means of securing income through either their play or part-time jobs, some athletes struggle to meet basic needs. Does this indicate a parasitic relationship between schools and their prized athletes? Should the athletes receive some type of compensation for the money they bring into their school?

Questions like these are causing more and more people ponder what the duties of student-athletes actually are. Are they being held as academically responsible as other students at their school? The athletes are often guided into certain majors or classes that may not allow them to explore all of their academic interests, which may inhibit proper career development after college. Is it justifiable to bend academic regulations to assist athletes in maintaining their scholarships? And what is being done to help secure a future career for these athletes in the event that a professional athletic career does not come to fruition? There are plenty of gray areas regarding the student-athletes role as a member of a university, and this can lead to confusion about how they should be treated. So the ultimate question in this debate becomes: should athletes primarily be treated as athletes, students, or employees?



Approach One: Student

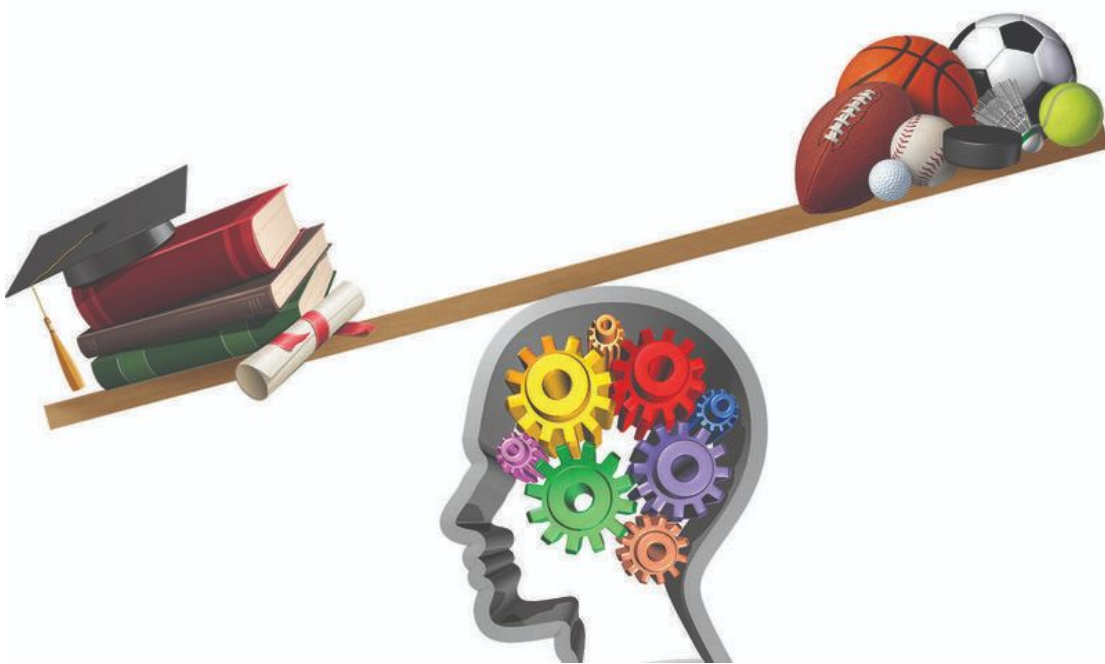
The NCAA's primary initiative for recruiting college athletes is to provide them a free and quality education. However as the demands of their athletic lives start to exceed their expectations as students, educators start to water down the relevance of their education. Not only is this a clear lack of academic integrity but also without a proper education, some of these athletes are essentially playing for free. This completely downgrades an athlete's primary role as a student attending an academic institution. For example, UNC helped about 3,100 college athletes achieve high grades in classes they did little to no work in (Ganim and Sayers, *UNC Report Finds 18 years of Academic Fraud*). Some students were even caught completely



skipping out on classes and assignments and despite admitting to academic violations, the NCAA claimed that the “paper courses” in the department of African and Afro-American studies were supposed to provide the athletes only as a benefit to the efforts they have dedicated for the university (Ganim and Sayers, *UNC Report Finds 18 years of Academic Fraud*). Essentially, the university did not violate the organization's rules according to the NCAA's Committee on Infractions. This begs the question whether there is any valid integrity of an athlete's primary role as a student. If not, are they not just academically disadvantaged athletes?

This issue also resonates within the student-athlete-teacher relationship. In the 1990s the head coach of the football team at the University of Minnesota, Clem Haskins, made a graduate advisor write over 400 academic papers for student-athletes so that they could meet the requirements of their majors (*Wertheim and Yaeger, Minnesota basketball players turned in 400 papers allegedly written for them by a university staffer*). Is this “special treatment” fair to ordinary students who must follow a strict academic plan for their majors? Should athletes have the ability to choose a major out of pure interest rather than one that accommodates a sports schedule? And if they choose a major shouldn't they abide by the same academic plan as any other student?

In 2017, while more than 480,000 compete as NCAA athletes, only 1.5% of footballers, 1.1% of basketball players and 1.4% of soccer players made the transition to professional play (*Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics*). Despite the select few who do end up going professional, the outcome seems like an unfair result for the majority left behind. These statistics beg the question of whether athletes can balance classes and continue to play. What is the relevance of an athlete's role as a student in a life divorced from sports?



Approach Two: Employee

An employee, according to Dictionary.com is “a person employed for wages or salary, especially at non-executive level.” According to the American Bar, a student-athlete performs valuable services for the university and is compensated through scholarships and stipends. Does this mean collegiate athletes meet the definition of an employee of the university?

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) asserted as much when it ruled that players at Northwestern University are employees of the University and thus should have the right to unionize (Piasecki). The NLRB did not, however, rule that student-athletes should receive benefits or compensation similar to that of other university employees, like the “comprehensive medical, dental and vision coverage” it offers to full-time professors. Instead, student-athletes

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can receive a free college education, housing and food, a yearly stipend and other university-funded “perks,” such as a personalized smoothie bar which we have seen at schools like Penn State. Are these acceptable forms of reimbursement for university employees? Additionally, should injured student-athletes lose their scholarships, or receive workers compensation like other university employees?

While athletes may be compensated for their time playing with a “free” education, it is not necessarily a good education. Many athletes spend 40 hours a week or more doing sport-related activities – that’s the equivalent of a full-time job. Do student-athletes have enough time to devote to a thorough education? Considering this, perhaps a free education is not fair compensation after all.

As many arguments can be made to change the status quo and consider paying student-athletes, this solution brings about its own challenges. The NCAA official stance is that college athletes are amateurs and paying these athletes would change the very nature of college athletics, not to mention the recruiting process for professional athletic associations like the NFL. Besides, can universities even afford to pay athletes? Even though in 40 out of the 50 US states the highest paid public official is the head coach of a state university’s football or men’s basketball team (Edelman), most college athletic associations either break even or lose money (Walch). Perhaps this is because only a select few sports, football and men’s basketball, make a lot of money for the university. Thus, this begs the question: should only athletes from money-making sports get paid? Should a lesser-known tennis player be paid the same as a football star?

Alternate forms of compensation could include receiving royalties from appearances, jersey and poster sales, and being allowed to seek outside employment. At the moment collegiate athletes are not allowed to make any money off of their athletics, and they are not even allowed to post videos of themselves working out. Are these regulations too restrictive?

Approach Three: Athlete

Many high-profile college athletes are viewed synonymously by students, alumni, and fans as A-list celebrities. Wearing embroidered bags that mark their sport, it is almost impossible for other students not to marvel at their sheer athletic ability (Hill). Even their social media accounts are treated as such. Penn State's very own Heisman candidate, Saquon Barkley, is verified on Instagram with almost 250,000 followers (Barkley). While this celebrity status may make the life of what should be part-time athletes more difficult to juggle, it is incredibly marketable for schools, especially when it comes to recruiting high school athletes. The fame and post-collegiate endeavors these students pursue contributes to the never-ending cycle of

using current athletes to bring in younger athletes is one that universities focus on (Sibbons).

Yet unlike other athletes in the media, he is unable to make a profit off his success, as his compensation comes in the form of his education which is heavily hindered. With restrictions on certain aspects of their education such as major selection, should athletes like him have the same rights and marketing power as any other free agent in a sports league?

For student-athletes, their major is their sport. With not-so-optional practices and travel time being taken into account, it is quite possible that they spend more time on their sport than their schoolwork (Sibbons). Their application process is quite different from the average student's, but similar to a science genius getting a scholarship for their academic performance, athletes too are looked at for their performance, but in their case, it is their sheer athletic ability. While many college students are only at their university for education, a student-athlete is there solely for their sport and the exposure and experience it gives them.

If a student is not looked down upon for studying all hours of the day, what makes that different from an athlete who practices all day? Both are bettering themselves in what they are at college for.

Moving forward, if we take this mindset regarding student-athletes, how do we accommodate for them focusing solely on their sports? Would you consider athletes to be real students? There are policies set in place to regulate the amount of time student-athletes spend studying and practicing, but should these time frames change and shift to mostly practice time?



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