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Is it Time to Level the Playing Field for College Athletes?

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Is it Time to Level the Playing Field for College Athletes?

By Ali Gordon
UCF Forum columnist
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I love college sports. I've got the Knights, Yellow Jackets, Tar Heels, Hoyas, Maroon Tigers – you name it. If I can catch a game, I will.

My brother-in-law, who's from New England, recently schooled me about lacrosse, so now on top of college football, basketball, baseball and volleyball, I'm hooked on that, too. And if it's any indication of my level of fanaticism, I got married on a Sunday in the fall so I could still watch college football on the Saturday before.

But it seems like the playing field is a little unfair when it comes to student-athletes who can't profit from what they do in college, unlike other students who can use their engineering skills to get jobs, their marketing abilities to work at companies promoting products, their management skills to set up their own companies.

This issue has been around for years. The latest case involves a football player, a marketing major, who was told by the association that oversees college athletics that he risks his amateur status by receiving advertisement payments for a YouTube channel that uses his name and image.

There's something amazing about seeing people competing for not only the win, but perhaps also a chance to participate at the next level. Experiences learned through competition – such as leadership, effective communication and the capacity to work in team-oriented environments – are also key. Intense preparation, strategy, focus, and random luck are all things with which we can relate.

It's easy to see that student-athletes pour a lot of effort into their craft. They love their sports and their fans. I often wonder, however, do these students get full value for sharing their talents? Is limiting their financial support to tuition, room, board and a stipend fair?

I've never participated in college sports, and before I provide a stream of consciousness about something of which I am admittedly not an expert, consider the other students.

College students come in all manner of shapes, sizes and colors. When the next incoming class hits campus this fall, they will do so with varied levels of academic

preparation, degree-seeking goals and financial needs. They've successfully been admitted to their respective universities with the goal of improving their own lives.

Some students will finance or pay their way through school, while some of the bright ones will get full academic scholarships. The very brightest have earned supplemental scholarships that will come to them as stipends.

Once in school, the fully funded students typically need only keep a B average and make satisfactory progress toward graduation to retain their support in place. These requirements are generally attainable given their skill set.

These top-end students usually have intellectual appetites that cannot be satiated by classwork alone. They participate in club activities, volunteer for community service, travel abroad, undertake creative efforts, and so on. If they wanted, they could even further develop their skills by starting a successful company, becoming a research assistant in a lab, hosting a blog or YouTube channel, or have some other side gig. All of these could lead to extra money. As long as the GPA is minimally a B average, they can fully capitalize on their current market value.

It is rewarding to see students with newly developed skill sets preparing themselves for the next level. Experiences learned through extracurricular activities help to develop leadership skills, effective communication and the capacity to work in team-oriented environments. Intense preparation, strategy and focus are what make students successful.

It's easy to see that top-end academic students pour a lot of effort into building their bodies of work. They love their craft. I expect these students will reap the benefits of the value for their talents, but I have yet to see one of my engineering students sell his or her autograph for money, which they can do without being penalized.

Imagine that you, your relative or friend were a student highly regarded in art, architecture, marketing or cybersecurity. What level of vitriol would you have toward a system that placed restrictions on you or their ability to apply those skills for profit while still in school? So although they may occupy the identical campus setting, exceptionally gifted student-athletes and academic students are seemingly subject to starkly different systems facilitating distinct fiscal outcomes.

Arguments against why student-athletes are not allowed to reap the full monetary benefits during or after the application of their skill set seem circular and duplicitous compared to the free markets that exists for the skills of academic students. Universities need to be given more freedom to devise systems that are more equitable for all of their students.

There are a lot of sides on this issue that have been debated for years, and any satisfactory solution will probably be complex. But just consider: As your favorite college team takes the field or court, are the players getting reasonable market value for their time and energy?

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