Amateurism: The Issue of Paying College Level Athletes

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the current issue of paying college level athletes, who will be referred to as "student-athlete(s)" through the rest of this paper. With the current challenge from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) against the state of California involving the removal of the amateurism rule, it is more relevant now than ever to look at what is involved in paying student-athletes and how it could impact the current landscape of college athletics. This paper will examine both the positive and negative impact of removing amateurism within college athletics and come to a final recommendation for all stakeholders. Higher education institutions need to work as a combined force to work with the NCAA on changing the amateurism rule and allowing student-athletes to profit off the talents they provide to their programs and the greater community

Keywords

amateurism, student-athlete, NCAA

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Suggested citation:
Henry, J. (2020). Amateurism: The issue of paying college level athletes. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 134-138.

Introduction

Athletic departments at colleges and universities have been a major source of revenue in areas such as ticket sales, marketing, and alumni donations. Currently the state of California is challenging the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) over the concept of amateurism with its collegiate athletes (Jenkins, 2019). Amateurism can pertain to student-athletes receiving money from advertisers for their names and images (Jenkins, 2019). A bill has been signed by the California Governor to allow student-athletes to receive money for their name (Jenkins, 2019). This issue has been in conversation often among higher education professionals and is complicated. This paper will discuss both arguments being made before arriving at a final recommendation. Higher education institutions need to begin looking inwards to solve the issue that student-athletes face when it comes to not receiving compensation for the talent and promotion they provide their institution. Amateurism needs to be addressed at a state and federal level to help influence the institutions to increase financial opportunities for the student-athletes that are taken advantage of by their administrators.

Focus on the Student Athlete

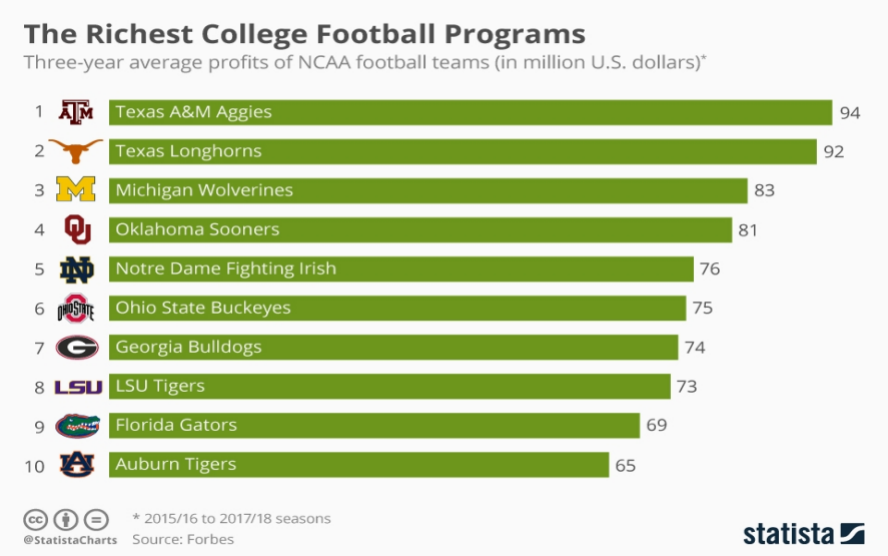
Higher education institutions' main focus is on a well-rounded education and the end goal is on students graduating with a degree. The current system in which student-athletes receive scholarships has existed throughout a majority of higher education institutions. Many critics of paying student-athletes believe the scholarship is an adequate form of compensation (Thacker, 2017). Student-athletes could lose the possibility of attending a higher education institution without this scholarship. Some practitioners argue that the four-year scholarships student-athletes receive are sufficient compensation for their athletic talents and work (Kargl, 2017). These scholarships are just the beginning of the support student-athletes receive. Student-athletes receive other benefits such as: ". . . professional mentoring and coaching; travel opportunities; an invaluable education; and the ability to develop teamwork, discipline, and leadership skills" (Kargl, 2017, p. 392).

Amateurism is important for the education and development of the student (Thacker, 2017). Paying student-athletes could divert the student's focus to only successes in their athletic areas. The NCAA argues that student-athletes are "students first and athletes second" (Wallsten et al., 2017). Student affairs practitioners tend to use this logic in other areas as well including residence advisors and student organization leaders. Some researchers say colleges cannot afford to pay student-athletes (Thacker, 2017). Most NCAA Division I schools operate in debt and do not make revenue during their athletic seasons (Thacker, 2017). Researchers and practitioners cannot find a fair solution (Thacker, 2017). The gender pay gap is an especially concerning issue as even in professional athletics there is no solution to address the issue. Amateurism has become a common discussion point and society tends to bounce back and forth between making a final decision on the matter.

Paying Our Athletes

Research has been growing in the consideration of paying student-athletes. One of the first arguments that is used often is that paying a scholarship for education actually doesn't cover the education. The Collegiate Athletics Coalition estimated that the NCAA scholarships cover about $2000 less than the actual cost of attendance and the amount of time student-athletes have to commit to the team (games, practices, etc.), they have no other way of finding income for other essential needs (Johnson, 2012). Student-athletes are used for their talents and are abused mentally and physically from their coaches and their staff, who are making all the money on their successes (see Figure 1). The fact remains that the NCAA's definition and understanding of amateurism has changed over the years whenever it suits the NCAA's needs (Closa, 2020).

Figure 1.
Richest College Football Programs (Statista, 2019)



The NCAA only prohibits student-athletes from profiting off of college athletics (Closa, 2020). The revenue that they generate is utilized by the NCAA and the institutions.

> In 2017, the NCAA made $1 billion in revenue, while student-athletes made no on-the-books revenue. According to the NCAA's expense sheet, half of this revenue was distributed back to Division I schools, but none of the revenue went directly to the players whose labor and intellectual property generated the money (Closa, 2020, p. 19).

College sports programs are a massive generator of revenue (See Figure 2). Some of the richest college football programs are making 65 million dollars and more (See Figure 3). There are inconsistencies between the money given to student-athletes and the larger entities involved.

Figure 2.
Total Revenue Generated by College Sports Program (Murphy, 2019)

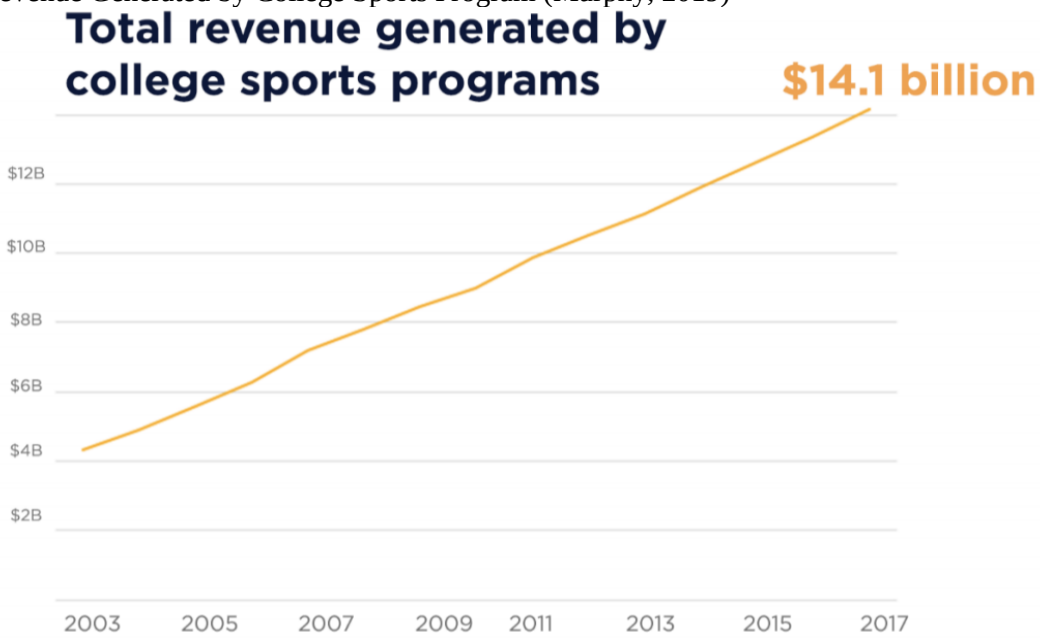
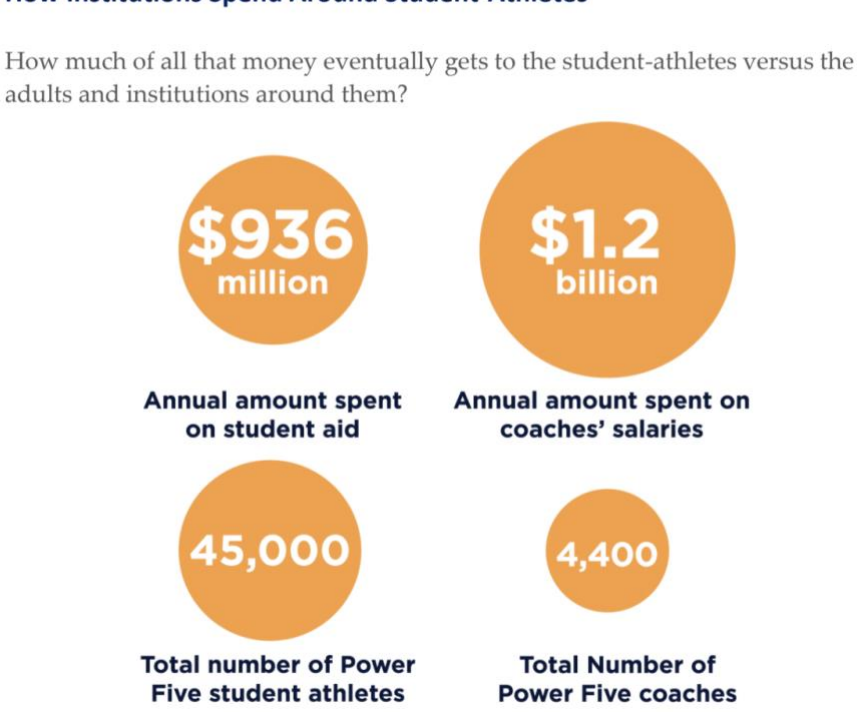


Figure 3.
How Institutions Spend Around Student-Athletes (Murphy, 2019)



There is also the possibility of losing the scholarship and their education to an injury. Student-athletes do not understand that the scholarship is not always renewable and can be terminated at any point (Johnson, 2012).“The NCAA will only change its Amateurism Rule if mechanisms exist to hold it accountable for the rule's harmful side effects” (Closa, 2020, p. 19). Institutions’ and state government entities need to work with the NCAA to address the amateurism rule and begin to make the changes needed to solve the problem. Student-athletes need to receive the support so that if their athletic career is halted at any time, they still have a future through the institutions they attend in other avenues. Student affairs practitioners need to start having these conversations amongst ourselves and bring the student voice into that conversation. Student-athletes could negotiate individually with colleges to create a deal that best suits their needs and the needs of the athletic program (Young, 2013).

Conclusion

Consider the amount of money that is made through athletic conferences like the Big Ten and Southeastern. Above, you can see the revenue that is generated by some of the richest college football programs in the United States. Student-athletes deserve to receive finances for the extended service they give to the institution through their skills that could be viewed as the main reason for their enrollment. Higher education institutions need to work as a combined force to work with the NCAA on changing the amateurism rule and allowing student-athletes to profit off the talents they provide to their programs and the greater community.

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