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College Sports: Money vs. Opportunity

On the television today the media overwhelms the United States with advertising of athletic competition. Every March, one cannot help but hear the results of the annual postseason college basketball tournament entitled “March Madness.” However, it was football that led to the increased popularity of college athletics. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia University were the first to agree on some general rules for this well-liked sport; but soon, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) “emerged as a dominant force in college life” by discussing television contracts and bringing in sources of revenue for the participating institutions (“College Athletics”). Nowadays, the NCAA helps establish bylaws for each sport and eligibility requirements for college athletes; and furthermore, the colleges that are involved with the NCAA are divided up into Division I, II, or III, with Division I schools being the largest and Division III being the smallest. Colleges are categorized under one of these divisions based on the number of sports it sponsors for men and for women, and each division has to follow a different set of contest and participant minimums for each sport as well as scheduling and financial aid standards (“What’s the Difference,” par. 1).

In the past decade, people of the United States have begun to question whether college athletics programs have become excessively commercialized. Since college sports have grown into big businesses and major sources of revenue, some believe that the priorities of many athletic programs are conflicting with the college’s academic standards and educational values.

Although most of the disapproval of college athletics centers around Division I schools, many Division II and III schools are also criticized. Supporters of college athletics think that being part of a sports team benefits the student-athlete as well as the institution (“College Athletics”). Sports play a huge role in the college-life experience, and a well-built athletics program can improve a college’s academic standing in the future. I am, in fact, a Division III women’s basketball player; and by experience, I believe that being involved in college athletics teaches determination and leadership which are positive aspects of a student’s college education. Regardless of how college sports are portrayed as a college’s major source of operating revenue, there is evidence that athletic participation at all three divisional levels is a valuable component of a student’s college experience.

Primarily, the media’s messages spark people’s feelings about this controversy. When the public hears about the violent behavior during a game or that some athletes are struggling academically, it is assumed that the NCAA is not doing its job regarding these particular issues. However, the NCAA was founded by a number of colleges and universities and was created to develop regulations and organize college athletics programs; and since the 1900s, this association has carried out these policies while also improving the lives and experiences of student athletes. Past NCAA regulations consist of accepting the “Principles for the Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics” in the mid-1940s to bring “sanity back to college sports” and authorizing that a residence hall can consist of no more than 49 percent athletes in 1991 (Watt and Moore III 9). Additionally, it has made several reforms regarding a student’s eligibility to participate in athletics. During the fall of 2002, the NCAA developed the fourth major effort in two decades to force Division I athletes to do their best in the classroom and to help coaches recruit those who excel academically. This new set of rules consisted of allowing freshman

athletes to play if they have SAT scores as low as 400 or an ACT sum score of 37, while also having a high grade-point average in 14 core high school courses. This is up one from the previous 13 courses, and in 2008, this requirement will rise to 16. Now, Division I athletes must achieve more degree requirements by the beginning of their third year with a higher grade-point average and must meet these standards every semester, not every year (Blum and Lederman). According to NCAA President Myles Brand, “This academic reform, if it goes right, will see not just better graduation rates but better-educated student-athletes, and coaches and athletic departments being more cognizant that student-athletes need to get a better education” (Blum and Lederman, par. 5). The NCAA is making sure that students are more occupied with their work and that coaches are being more supportive of this. In the NCAA State of the Association Speech, Myles Brand also comments that these programs are helping to create “a more flexible, ‘student-athlete friendly’ Association” while ensuring that “the highest ethical standards of integrity and inclusiveness will be, of course, included in our strategic plan” (“Excerpts from,” par. 11). He makes it clear that even in order to participate in athletics at the college level the athlete’s education will come first.

Not only has the NCAA regulated eligibility standards, but also it has commissioned an analysis of the empirical effects of college athletic programs in support of the fact that operating expenses for athletics are a fairly small share of overall academic spending. The purpose of this interim study was to look at the financial effects of college athletics using information from an assortment of Division I schools. This evidence includes statistical analysis from school-specific information from the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) along with the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System handled by the Department of Education and a thorough survey of “chief financial officers from 17 Division I schools” (Litan, J. Orszag, and P. Orszag

9). Ten specific hypotheses were examined, and only five of them were confirmed while the other five needed further analysis. The first hypothesis that operating athletic expenditures are a fairly small share of academic spending was proved true. The Department of Education data conveyed that for Division I schools in 1997, “athletic spending represented roughly three percent of total higher education spending,” and the NCAA/EADA data suggested that for Division I schools in 2001, “operating athletic spending represented roughly 3.5 percent of total higher education spending” (Litan, J. Orszag, and P. Orszag 2). Two other important hypotheses were tested; and it was concluded that changes in operating net revenue were not a result from increases in operating expenses on men’s basketball or football, and it cannot be proved that changing operating expenses with big-time sports will affect academic quality in the institution (Litan, J. Orszag, and P. Orszag). According to William G. Bowen who is the president of the Mellon Foundation and a former president of Princeton University, “There are new and important data to collect and analyze, especially about capital costs, but the analysis done so far is useful in clarifying our understanding of operating expenditures and revenues in college sports” (“NCAA Releases,” par. 6). This report shows the public that overall spending on athletics is not exceedingly different than money spent on other aspects of higher education.

In addition to the opponents’ views on athletic spending, they also believe that the athlete becomes more aggressive from sports and develops an attitude to win at all costs. On the other hand, research suggests that college athletic participation is associated with an athlete’s “good health and well-being” (Watt and Moore 12). College sports help develop certain qualities like leadership, motivation, determination, self-discipline, and teamwork. Athletes develop a higher level of self-esteem and a better sense of discipline. These valuable qualities result from the extra challenges that college athletes face from day to day. To add to the routine of going to class, to

the cafeteria, and to social events, an athlete also has his/her sport-related activities like practicing, traveling for away games, and studying the team's plays and goals. The student-athlete has to fulfill his/her commitments to the coach, team, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Although Division I athletics require a more demanding role from its athletes than a Division III college, these players are always given the assistance if needed in "balancing the internal and external pressures of being a student and an athlete" (Watt and Moore 12). Not only does the athlete develop important qualities, but the institution strengthens because of its strong sports teams as well. An excellent sports program has become associated with a college's strength overall, and this type of sports program can enhance a college's profile across the entire nation because it encourages high morale among the entire campus community ("College Athletics"). Colleges should strive to be great in every part of the college experience.

Moreover, athletes tend to possess a combination of academic success, time management skills, and a strong work ethic that leads to great success after college whether it be a postgraduate degree or a particular job in the workforce. Student athletes develop skills that will be useful in the future when it comes to employment. According to Daniel J. Henderson, an assistant professor of economics at the State University of New York at Binghamton, there is a wage premium for a majority of athletes in the occupations of business, military, and manual labor. The Cooperative Institutional Research Survey (CIRP) gathered data from college freshmen who were asked a number of questions regarding family income and background, college majors, athletic participation, and goals considered important during their freshman year at college; and then a follow-up was completed asking about their lives after college (Henderson, Olbrecht, and Polachek 563). Teamwork skills and a competitive drive to excel would be useful in the business world while physical strength, ability to apply strategic thinking, ability to adjust

a particular strategy during a game, and other athletic qualities help manual laborers and military professionals. High school teaching was another occupation that consisted mainly of former athletes, but they earned a lower wage compared to non-athletes (Henderson, Olbrecht, and Polachek 569). However, most athletes probably had the desire to pursue coaching or return back to a high school atmosphere and did not regard their annual income as being the most important requisite (Henderson, Olbrecht, and Polachek 571). If a majority of former athletes earn more in the workforce than non-athletes, why does the public believe that athletes are treated differently by professors and other students and have more advantages than non-athletes in college? Student athletes are often stereotyped as “academically unqualified, unintelligent, and socially impotent” (Watt and Moore III 13). This image is present in newspapers, magazines, and news programs, and tends to cause non-athletes and other individuals to blame professors for the academic success of athletes. The public needs to realize that athletes work just as hard in the classroom as other students; and although professors allow an athlete to miss class because of an athletic event, that athlete still takes on the responsibility of turning in assignments on the due date and collaborating with the professor to get the notes that were taken during class time. In order for athletes to believe that they are not inferior to other students, this stereotype needs to be eliminated so every student can have the ability to display his/her talents in the classroom.

To add to these benefits that are learned outside of the game, participating in an athletic activity initiates relationships with people and organizations. According to Sherry K. Watt and James L. Moore III, spectators and players share an interest in the particular sport resulting in friendships and business affiliations. As I said previously, I am a women’s basketball player at the collegiate level, and I have met so many interesting people through the sport of basketball who have strengthened my determination and leadership skills. I have been introduced to

spectators and to my teammates' parents. Each and every one of them take the time and effort to support me in my athletic activities by encouraging me to become a better player and boosting my confidence level while I am on the court. Additionally, I have my teammates, coaches, and my basketball roommate to serve as role models. Every single one of my teammates has either inspired me to become a better leader or has been a part of an unforgettable memory. Although some believe that team separation can be negative, "working together in a variety of circumstances as a team can promote tolerance and respect for differences and provide support for the struggles student athletes face in balancing roles and complex schedules" (Watt and Moore III 14). My basketball coaches' encouraging words will also be used in the future. They have let me know how privileged I am to be a college athlete and how many goals I have to set for myself and the team as a whole. Lastly, there is my roommate who is also a teammate of mine. After just spending a year with her in our dorm room and on the basketball court, I know we will share a long-lasting friendship. Both of us faced some hardships during our first year at college, but we had each other to help us through each stressful situation. She always reiterated the need to stand up for myself. Without her guidance and support, I would not have become the person I am today because she taught me to have more determination and to exhibit more leadership on and off the court.

After looking at all of the positive aspects of college athletic participation, the media still informs the public about recent scandals that have taken place even after rules and regulations have been established. Some of these scandals are, in fact, academic fraud; but right now the NCAA is doing everything it can to increase the penalties for these violations. Fraud does happen in some colleges and sometimes could have been prevented, but there are also many colleges that have never violated the NCAA's eligibility requirements or bylaws. Everyone

needs to understand that these athletes who break the rules are not the majority, but the media focuses more on these athletes instead of the athletes who are really excelling in the classroom. In addition, other reforms proposed by critics could be utilized. For example, the NCAA could begin to reduce the number of recruits or evaluate a coach's performance as a teacher, rather than just a coach ("College Athletics"). These regulations could prove to be beneficial, but they could also cause more problems for the institution or the athletic team in the long run.

In order for college athletic programs to continue to benefit the athlete, athletes need to develop qualities like leadership and teamwork, expand their work ethic for the workforce in the future, and make positive relationships with teammates and coaches; but they also need to appreciate the fact that operating expenses for athletics are a fairly small share of overall academic spending. What the public needs to understand is that the NCAA has been doing its job in regulating sports activities while also making sure that athletes do not receive any special treatment by coaches or even professors. Thus, a college's sports program is associated with a college's strength, and athletic participation at all three divisional levels becomes a valuable component of a student's college experience. Now when the saying "March Madness" appears on a television screen or in a newspaper, one cannot help but think about the hard work and determination it takes to get to that stage of athletic competition and the academic responsibilities that those student-athletes must accomplish.

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