

PRO/CON: Should college athletes play for free?

By William H. Noack and Don Kusler, Tribune Company, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.24.18

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Jessica Shepard (23) of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish attempts a shot while defended by Teaira McCowan (15) and Victoria Vivians (35) of the Mississippi State Lady Bulldogs during the fourth quarter in the championship game of the 2018 NCAA Women's Final Four at Nationwide Arena on April 1, 2018, in Columbus, Ohio. Notre Dame defeated Mississippi State 61-58. Photo by: Andy Lyons/Getty Images

PRO: Paying college athletes would cause more problems

To address problems in college basketball, a commission issued a recent report. The commission was headed by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The report made several overdue recommendations, but, wisely, it stopped short of suggesting that players be paid.

The 14-member commission largely favored the amateur rule of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The members supported the idea that while paying players might sound attractive, it would only lead to more problems down the road.

The report's focus was on basketball, but it could apply to college football as well. The report has been criticized, but it is at least a sincere effort to improve the troubled landscape of college athletics.

Few would deny that money is playing too large a role in college sports today. Yet it's difficult to see how the situation could be made better by adding even more money by paying players.

It's not as though today's scholarship athlete is not getting something for his or her services. A year at college can be worth \$50,000 or more.

TV Revenue Wisely Used In Other Areas

Much of the call for paying athletes has come from the popularity of college football and basketball on television, and the money these sports produce. However, most of that money goes back to the universities where it's used to support both sports and academics.

The football or basketball coach is well paid at many major universities. Yet everything from the campus library to classroom construction benefits from the money made by the sport.

Three Rice commission recommendations stand out:

- The NBA needs to allow players to enter its pro draft out of high school. The current rule requires players to be 19 years old or a year out of high school. It has made some college programs a one-year stopover for players on their way to the NBA.
- The NCAA should create an independent investigative arm for handling major rule-breaking cases. For too long the NCAA has been slow and weak in its judgments.
- Make the punishments severe enough to discourage cheating.

The commission was formed after claims by federal prosecutors last year. They said bribes were going to the families of top high school players to sign with college programs.

The NCAA has a history of moving slowly, but it's a start.

The commission affirmed the values of amateur play and an education for the nearly 99 percent of college basketball players who don't go on to the NBA.

ABOUT THE WRITER: William H. Noack played basketball at Michigan State in the 1960s and is a business consultant in the Washington, D.C., area.

CON: College athletes should be justly compensated for their hard work

College athletics are a profitable business and too many athletes sweating and producing for the industry are underpaid.

The system needs to change, and an appropriate pay arrangement should be enacted.

As athletes, these students work long hours each day. They work something similar to a full-time job on top of trying to navigate college.

It is true that most of the 450,000-plus college athletes are not moneymakers for their universities.

The "pay" that they receive in pursuing their sport and getting help with seeking a degree should be the example of a successful system.

Football And Basketball Are Profitable For Colleges

Those success stories are harder to find when taking a closer look at the two big moneymaking sports, football and basketball.

In these sports, the student part of the athlete's work falls short of that of their peers in other college sports.

It is in these two sports that the profits and power lead to problems for athletes and their families. Hundreds of millions of dollars flow to universities, coaches and sports agents, among others, and that wealth is produced by the athletes.

Money is behind problems in recruiting, or seeking athletes for college teams. The need for money among many athletes and their families and the thirst for money among universities drive these offenses.

Some aspects of the Rice report's recommendations might have positive effects. Yet the overall effort seemed to support the NCAA's position that athletes, although treated like employees of a business, should not receive pay.

NCAA Should Compensate Athletes

The NCAA takes a weak approach in addressing offenses. It is past time for change to come.

Even the "pay" via education provided many top athletes does not always add up to something meaningful. Universities shuffle their moneymaking athletes through light course loads, leading to meaningless college degrees.

The NCAA should continue and boost efforts to make the academic portion of athlete payment whole.

Positive recommendations from the Rice report include establishing a fund to pay for degree completion for athletes who leave college. Another idea is allowing those who are unsuccessful in getting drafted to come back to school.

Athletes whose skill has value through the sale of their image should benefit. They should have the same right to profit from their skill as the universities, the NCAA and the sports industry does.

The sooner the NCAA shares the value of top athletes with the athletes themselves, the better for all involved.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Don Kusler is national director of Americans for Democratic Action, a progressive advocacy organization.