

Myth, Reality, and the Lessons of the Game: Reorganizing the Governance of College Sports in the 2020s

During a speech at the association's 2022 convention, NCAA president Mark Emmert identified what he saw as the key debate in college sports:

And then there's the issue of money. People are asking right now if money is being spent for right or wrong purposes. Are we spending our resources in a way that emphasizes our core values in helping as many students as we possibly can? That's what's driving frustration and anger, inside and outside college sports, not the core values.¹

That frustration and anger, he said, has put the whole of college sports at risk: Could spending on college sports be made to reinforce the core values of fair play, sportsmanship, and physical and mental health? This was part of Emmert's endorsement of a new constitution² just adopted by the NCAA in response to ethical, fiscal, and legal challenges that have come to a head in the past decade.

Neither the new, relatively brief constitution nor the ponderous old rulebooks it replaces address what Emmert addressed in January: money and how it flows through college sports. In eliding this issue, the NCAA's rulemakers reflect the oldest and most intractable issue in college sports: how to manage an industry that wants to see itself as an academic pursuit.

When an organization seeks to manage itself based on a story instead of its reality, inefficiencies arise. They may take the form of misspent funds, misallocated personnel, or, particularly in this case, a misalignment of value and reward. In college sports, the story told by educational leaders, athletic personnel, and especially the NCAA is that college sports is an extracurricular activity for students,³ an intensely meaningful experience that also brings a college community together in celebration. This is not an untrue story. College athletics can be a transformative experience for participants and fans alike. Many coaches and administrators choose to work in college sports because they want to be in an environment in which the goal is personal growth, not profit.

But colleges and their conferences and associations have tried to minimize the fact that athletic programs are significant business enterprises⁴ on college campuses. Colleges capture great value from those enterprises, and prioritize activities that maximize that value. Some of that value comes in direct dollars from donations, ticket sales, and broadcast contracts, but a significant amount comes in the form of institutional branding, marketing, and

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stakeholder communications.⁵ In terms of both revenue and branding, the business of college sports has grown rapidly over the past three decades, enriching individual coaches and administrators. It also has benefitted a handful of institutions, while the rest strive to “keep up with the Joneses.”

This creates two problems. First, the story that college sports is organized for amateurs playing for the love of their sport creates a number of perverse incentives⁶—among them, that athletes in “revenue” sports of football and men’s basketball are prevented from accessing the value they create, which is directed instead toward salaries, facilities, and the operations of “nonrevenue” sports. This effectively marginalizes female athletes despite federal laws mandating gender equity, and transfers economic benefits from a group of primarily Black athletes to a group of primarily white athletes, coaches, and administrators.⁷

Second, this story places college sports in a tenuous legal position, albeit one that has survived for nearly 115 years. The NCAA has developed a bureaucracy around amateurism that takes attention away from the business side of sports. But business is governed by laws, and over the past four decades and in particular the last one, courts and legislatures have punctured the NCAA’s mythology. These legal entities have recognized that the business aspects of college sports give athletes some rights as workers or contractors, and thus are entitled to some portion of the value they create. Rather than recognize this change in jurisprudential and political attitudes, the NCAA has doubled down on the myth of amateurism at the heart of its story of college sports. This has not been an effective strategy. The NCAA has lost battle after battle in court and drawn the ire of governors, U.S. senators, and other elected officials as well as alienating a growing segment of the public.

At the same time, the NCAA’s 50-year-old division charged with enforcing its rules has proven itself

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incapable of policing issues of integrity involving not athletes, but the coaches, administrators, and academics who stand to benefit from athlete labor.

The new constitution continues to avoid these issues and instead strives to tell the same myths about college sports, grudgingly carving out room for the commercial opportunities state legislatures have granted athletes but otherwise ignoring the commercial reality of college sports. The moment demands a more holistic response from stakeholders in college sports. As colleges navigate an uncertain era of declining enrollment, state budget cuts, and growing skepticism from the public about the value of higher education as a whole, a new paradigm of college sports is needed.

This paper will explore the elements of the traditional narrative of college sports and will situate them in historical and cultural context. It will explain the disconnects between the traditional story and the reality and perverse incentives that have been created. It will then propose a framework for colleges and the NCAA to consider as the association begins to ponder the details of the new constitution and the devils lurking within them. What is needed is transparency and efficiency in a system explicitly organized to benefit athletes, universities, and the community that loves college sports.

The Myths of College Sports

Many organizations tell stories about their history and purpose—in strategic plans, government filings, and “About Us” web pages. Employees and leaders tell these stories to explain their organizations. Such stories are not merely advertising: They help shape the organization’s structure, hiring decisions, and corporate strategy. Scholars of organizational theory have identified the power of story to divorce corporate actions from ideals, positing that organizations tell stories to legitimize their status with stakeholders. Opening their operations to inspection, they suggest, deprives an organization of legitimacy and power. Only by ceremonializing inspection, and claiming rewards for actions that support its narrative,⁸ can an organization solidify its status.

I first encountered this article as a doctoral student after a decade of covering college sports. I recognized much of what I read in the operations of the NCAA and its member conferences and institutions. Athletic leaders and the NCAA proclaim the value of college sports and reward institutions, for example, for having high graduation rates for athletes. However, the association does not verify the quality of courses or degrees completed by athletes.⁹ Academic integrity is just one of the values for which the NCAA advocates. This section sets out the other most pertinent values promoted in the story told of college sports.

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The Real Story of College Sports

The NCAA’s amateurism story inspired the creation of an environment in which thousands upon thousands of students thrived, this author included. College-aged athletes could compete against peers and gain the valuable lessons in teamwork, goal-setting, and perseverance that participating in sport can teach. Many of those athletes returned to colleges to coach or work in athletic administration, helping others to have the same experience they did. A tiny handful went onto professional careers in a smattering of sports.

But college athletics has never been organized around helping students grow and develop. Doing so is celebrated, but coaches are rarely evaluated or rewarded based on the outcomes of their athletes. Instead, particularly at the Division I level, they are incentivized to win and fired if they fail to win enough.

Why? What makes winning so important, especially for an institution of higher education? Why should we not adopt the attitude of the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, the legendary former president of Notre Dame, who declared that “men fired with the spirit of Notre Dame will win in the end, when it is important to win”?¹⁰

Because universities win when teams win. The evidence is mixed on whether a winning season or a championship brings in extra revenue for a particular institution, but institutions clearly place a significant value on teams competing and winning at the highest possible level. This is not about the pursuit of profit *per se*; colleges that compete in the NCAA, of course, are state agencies or not-for-profit organizations. Instead, as the economist Howard Bowen put it, colleges raise all the money they can and spend everything they make in the pursuit of prestige.¹¹

This pursuit is shrouded by the NCAA’s story. However, that story contains so many myths and contradictions that they have created a dangerous weakness for the enterprise. These myths and contradictions must be addressed as a means of looking towards lasting solutions.

The Myth: NCAA as Steward

From its earliest days, the NCAA has presented itself as the steward of values and mores in college sports. At the meeting that created what was then known as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, delegates decried paying athletes and “proselytizing” (what we would today call recruiting). Although those values and mores have evolved over time, the NCAA always has tried to assert its right to define and defend them. From its earliest days, it declared athletics to be the province of full-time undergraduates matriculating straight out of high school (or perhaps transferring from two- or four-year colleges). Graduate students are not permitted unless they are finishing eligibility they started as undergraduates. Part-time students are not permitted. Students in non-degree-seeking programs are not permitted. In Division I, students more than five years out of high school are not permitted except under unusual circumstances, such as if they suffer a long-term injury or they pursue a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The NCAA also controls the lengths of seasons, the number of contests permitted, and, for four decades ending in 1984, when football teams appeared on television and how much colleges were paid.¹² More recently, the NCAA has emphasized the physical safety and mental health of athletes, and has redefined amateurism to separate the compensation that courts and legislatures have opened to athletes, from compensation that is still forbidden (direct compensation from institutions). The NCAA leverages its own resources to incentivize adherence to its values: In the fiscal year 2020, the association used the majority of the \$599 million it distributed to colleges from the royalties from the broadcast of the Division I men’s basketball tournament to reward colleges for offering more sports and more athletic grants-in-aid, as well as providing academic support and emergency assistance to athletes.¹³

The Reality: Stewardship and Autonomy

The NCAA has long proclaimed its authority over all matters of college sports, and for many years, its members fell in line. The NCAA successfully convinced its members to give it monopoly authority over regular-season college football for 40 years, until they demanded it back in an appearance before the Supreme Court in 1984.¹⁴ But the NCAA always has acknowledged that institutions have a high degree of autonomy in their operations. Although the organization can enforce common rules for games and championship qualifying, each member sets its own rules for admissions, academic requirements, and other rules for students. Moreover, the NCAA cannot dictate what an institution spends on athletics or how much it pays coaches.¹⁵

On the face of it, it makes little sense for a national organization to weigh in on which students a college should or shouldn’t admit, whether a course is sufficiently rigorous to merit the credit-hours it is worth, or how much (or little) a college should pay a coach. But colleges can choose how they operate athletics programs, how much they spend on them, and how they treat athletes without much, if any, interference from the NCAA. Institutional autonomy, thus, allows colleges to define amateurism as they (or their conferences) see fit, and the NCAA has little means of preventing it. While the association’s rules-enforcement investigators and procedures were much-feared from the 1950s (when the University of Kentucky’s men’s basketball team suffered a one-year ban for point-shaving) through the early 2000s, in recent years the NCAA failed to punish the University of North Carolina for allowing athletes to take fraudulent courses, or many colleges and coaches for giving bribes to recruits or their families.

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The Myth: Amateur Sports

For the athletes governed by NCAA rules, the traditional story holds that participation is an avocation, not a vocation. Students play sports because they love them, and the important self-knowledge that can be gained from participation makes sports relevant to educational institutions. Colleges are charged with maintaining a paternalistic posture toward athletes: The first article of the NCAA's newly adopted constitution declares that "it is the responsibility of each member institution to establish an environment in which a student-athlete's activities are conducted with the appropriate primary emphasis on the student-athlete's academic experience."¹⁶ More specifically, they are charged with ensuring that athletes are amateurs, uncompensated for their participation. The definition of amateurism has evolved over time. In the first half of the 20th century, college coaches and administrators battled over issues such as whether athletes could earn money in the summer playing for crowds at resorts, whether boosters could provide sinecure jobs, and whether colleges could forgo tuition in the form of grants-in-aid or "athletic scholarships."¹⁷ Since then, amateurism has evolved to allow athletes to be reimbursed for expenses related to travel or training for national teams and for scholarships to cover not only official costs but the total cost of attendance.¹⁸

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The Reality: Amateurism

Amateurism has been always been the center of the NCAA's story, with R. Tait McKenzie of the University of Pennsylvania declaring to the association's annual convention in 1910 that amateur competition was motivated by "scrupulous respect for personal honor and fairness that would make a team elect to risk a probable defeat rather than win through the services of those who do not come within the spirit of a gentleman's agreement."¹⁹ This tradition of amateurism should be revered, McKenzie said, "for it is on the two great Anglo-Saxon races that the spirit of competitive sport has descended from the Greeks"). However, modern scholars agree that this idea of amateurism is based on a misreading of classic Greek language and culture. The ancient Olympics and other tournaments were primarily religious ceremonies, but victorious athletes were lavishly rewarded, and also competed for prizes and pay in other events.²⁰ Thus, the myth of amateurism arises not in ancient Greek, but in late nineteenth-century Europe and America. There are other intellectual sources of the American flavor of amateur college sport, but the essence of the idea can be found in the NCAA's Bylaw 2.9:

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation shall be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.

It also is a myth that athletics is an avocation. Parents with means enroll athletes in private clubs and coaching sessions stretching many hours a week in the hopes of preparing them to be competitive in the scholarship market, or just in the hopes of them landing on a team someplace. At many elite institutions, as Bowen and Levin found, recruits arrive on campus so burned-out by the years of competing that, having gotten into a top school, they retire after a year or two of competition.²¹ As such, those institutions have to recruit more athletes than other colleges to account for the turnover.

The Myth: A Level Playing Field

Apart from competitive equity, the concept of a level playing field plays an important role in another aspect of the story of college sports: recruiting. Institutions accept some constraints on athletic operations out of fairness and to encourage athletes to choose colleges for their academic or other merits, not sports. Among these constraints: common scholarship limits across sports (e.g., 85 full scholarships per team in football at colleges in the Football Bowl Subdivision of Division I or six scholarships for each Division II women's gymnastics team);²² rules on how colleges may entertain recruits; and at least theoretically ethical guidelines for coaches and athletic administrators.

This enables athletes, coaches, and fans to believe that, to some degree, all teams have a chance at victory and championships. The diversity of institutions reflected by the NCAA basketball tournaments celebrates and draws interest, as do uncommon matchups in football bowl games. And part of a college's identity is its prowess in sports, be it Gonzaga University in men's basketball or Northern Arizona University in cross-country. Beyond Division I, the question of which conferences can send their champions to NCAA championships as "automatic qualifiers" is critical to institutional arrangements and can cause the breakup of some leagues and the formation of others.

Another component of this myth is that athletes choose colleges for the same reasons other students do: cost, location, academic programs, and so on.

The Reality: The Tilted Playing Field

One need only visit different institutions to see the vast differences between elite programs in college athletics and others. Perhaps fifty yards from my faculty office at the University of Georgia is a 93,000-seat stadium, which is about to get even more luxury boxes and other amenities to add to the \$153 million the athletic program brought in last year²³—even before winning the College Football playoff. Flagship institutions like Georgia have amenities that lower-profile institutions just don't, and NCAA rules can't make up for the difference. Boosters and other donors are highly invested in the success of football and basketball teams, and high-profile victories attract attention and excitement from all stakeholders, ranging from fans to potential students to state legislators. Those incentives have only grown as television networks have flooded big-time sports with money to broadcast football and basketball games.

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The Myth: The Importance of Academics

Colleges also assert that classes are more important than sports, and that the value of a college degree far exceeds the compensation that would be due a promising minor-league athlete. Most economists believe that a bachelor's degree contributes to a high wage premium over a high-school diploma, at least \$300,000 in lifetime earnings by some estimates.²⁴ And some institutions, like Williams College in Massachusetts, schedule classes and practices specifically not to conflict.²⁵

One unintended consequence of the NCAA's policies on grants-in-aid is the cachet that has come to be associated with earning an "athletic scholarship." Most of the athletes who compete in college begin playing at a young age, and those with college aspirations train year-round, often with private clubs and coaches. Many hold "signing day" celebrations to mark their commitment to attend a certain college and to receive a scholarship.²⁶ It is indeed relatively rare for athletes to move on to the college level: In 2018-19, colleges reported having 587,581 athletes in aggregate, while that year, high schools had nearly nine million athletes.²⁷

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The Reality: Athletics and Academics

Athletes and their families deal with a basic information asymmetry: They know far less about how to evaluate schools, athletic programs, and coaches than those institutions know about how to evaluate them. Studies by Caroline Hoxby have found that low-information students are much less likely to attend the best institutions for which they are qualified.²⁸ And many athletes, especially in high-profile sports, come from schools and socioeconomic backgrounds that tend to have less information about colleges. Moreover, the recruiting calendar works in a way that athletes may choose an institution when a coach might leave before they matriculate: 29, or roughly 10 percent, of colleges with FBS football teams fired their coaches after the 2021 season.²⁹ The difficulty of finding the right "fit" in a college right after high school is illustrated by the high number of athletes transferring. With the NCAA having liberalized its transfer rules particularly during the pandemic, roughly 1,400 FBS football players, or an average of 11 per team, are estimated to have entered the "transfer portal" in search of more playing time, a higher profile to market, or both.³⁰

When athletes get to campus, many are overwhelmed by the demands of their sports—even if those sports don't result in measurable returns for institutions. A 2015 study by the Pacific-12 Conference found athletes reporting 50-hour work weeks, leaving them too exhausted to study. Many sports, teams travel all over the country for different types of games—nonconference money games in football and basketball, tournaments and meets in sports. Adding to the problem is the increasing likelihood of games being scheduled for the sake of television appearances. Leagues sign deals with broadcasters such as ESPN and Fox Sports where the broadcasters want football and basketball games to generate ratings, and take soccer and softball game to fill airtime when high-rating content isn't available.³¹ Finally, limited access to facilities (i.e., team sharing fields or indoor practice space) makes it difficult to schedule athletic activities such that they do not conflict with classes. As a result, classes and even entire academic programs at some institutions are impossible for athletes to pursue, and athletes often miss classes because of practice and traveling to games.

The Reality: Persistence of Gender Inequity

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Title IX, but progress has mostly stalled over the past 20 years. The Clinton administration made enforcement of the law's athletic provisions a priority, resulting in dramatic growth in women's teams and female athletes in the 1990s and early 2000s.³² However, the Bush administration fought back against Title IX, and under President Obama, attention shifted to explicating and enforcing Title IX in the context of punishing offenders in sexual-assault cases. As a result, the representation of women in college sports has remained static since the mid-2000s.

The Reality: Prestige and Business

Colleges make all the money they can from sports. But they reinvest all that money in the athletic enterprise; very little is redirected to academic ventures. Moreover, most of the revenue coming into college athletics stays with a few dozen traditional powerhouses, such as Ohio State University, the University of Texas, the University of Alabama, and so on. Meanwhile, the majority of universities, which cannot generate hundreds of millions of dollars from stadiums, donors, and broadcast contracts, attempt to stay in the game by transferring money from general-fund budgets and student fee payments to athletics. They are, as a former conference commissioner once put it, the ALAMO: "a loose association of monetary outcasts."³³

This is the reality of college athletics obscured by the NCAA's story. Colleges use sports to pursue prestige, and this pursuit takes many forms. The University of Alabama has used the success of its football team to attract out-of-state students in droves, offsetting cuts in

state budgeting.³⁴ Universities have been jumping from one athletic conference to another in search of more prestigious arrangements. Recent versions include the Universities of Oklahoma and Texas abandoning the Big 12 Conference for the Southeastern Conference, followed by the Big 12 luring Brigham Young University and the Universities of Central Florida, Cincinnati, and Houston from their leagues.³⁵ Institutions such as Georgia State University and Old Dominion University have started football teams specifically to move into the Football Bowl Subdivision of the NCAA's Division I, nominally the highest tier of athletic competition.³⁶

Many observers have tried to quantify this prestige by looking at increases in student applications, the academic qualifications of students, donations, state legislative qualifications, and other objective outcomes that might be associated with athletic prestige. The evidence is limited. McEvoy (2005) found a positive relationship between football wins and applications in the subsequent year, but none such for basketball or volleyball.³⁷ Humphreys (2006) found that colleges with Division I football teams had higher state appropriations than those without, but finishing in the top twenty at the end of the year and participating in bowl games had no effect.³⁸ Donations by athletes and those to public institutions appear to rise with football success, but by small amounts.³⁹ Smith (2009) found that the impact of football success on applications and other outcomes was dwarfed by other factors.⁴⁰

Whether it can be quantified, colleges use athletics to drive prestige. The president of Gardner-Webb University told me that he engineered the university's move to Division I to get it onto the ticker on ESPN and CNN, "like Duke and Harvard. We aspire to be like Davidson, Furman, and Wofford. Academically we're in their league, and athletically we want to be, too."⁴¹

And they spend money to get there. A 2020 analysis by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics found that 106 out of 230 public Division I institutions generated less money than they took in, even when university budget subsidies and student athletic fees are taken into account.⁴² Division I universities generally subsidize their athletic programs. The commission found that on average, Division I institutions in 2020 received \$9.3 million from institutional or government support

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and \$6.5 million in fees charged directly to students on top of activity fees, facility usage fees, and other charges. These vary widely: Many institutions received nothing in institutional support while Central Michigan University, Coastal Carolina University, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the Universities of Connecticut, Houston, and Cincinnati all received more than \$30 million from their institutions. Many institutions also got no student fees, while James Madison charged its students \$45 million and Old Dominion, Florida International Universities as well as the Universities of California at Davis and Central Florida received more than \$30 million.

Telling a New Story of College Sports

In its new constitution, the NCAA is largely delegating rules on competitive structure, eligibility, ethics, and other concerns to its member conferences. As of the first part of 2022, it does not appear that radical changes are coming to the structure of college sports. But what if colleges, conferences, and NCAA divisions took this opportunity to rebuild college sports?

This is not a hypothetical “what-if.” The pressure on sports to develop a model based on athletes as employees will only continue to grow, with the National Labor Relations Board considering such a move⁴³ and Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh essentially inviting further challenges to compensation limits set by the NCAA in part of his concurring opinion in *Alston v NCAA*. So the task in front of colleges, conferences, and the NCAA is to develop a new model or allow one to evolve shambolically.

We have a narrow window for educational institutions to develop a model that is aligned much more specifically with the needs and goals of institutions and athletes. Such a model would clearly articulate how sports fits into a university’s mission, ideally in the classic form of teaching, search and service. Such a model would reduce the transactional costs of amateurism through greater transparency of operations and reducing incentives to cheat.

This model could function at the level of a team, a college, a conference, and an association like the NCAA. It would clearly identify the mission and aspirations of each team to fans, communities, and prospective athletes, making it easier for coaches and athletes to find

the right “fit.” It would reduce the cachet of “getting a scholarship” and reduce incentives to invest time and money into unhealthy youth sports opportunities in favor of educational enhancement. And it would promote a clearer understanding of how sports participation relates to professional preparation, for those desiring it, and personal growth and education for all athletes.

For institutions, a successful model of college sports must recognize that it is impossible to decouple athletics from prestige-seeking and institutional branding. Colleges can be explicit about that mechanism and recognize it as a partnership with athletes, determining what the value proposition is for both of them. The basic institutional interest in sports is twofold. First, winning high-profile games in football and basketball communicates to stakeholders that the institution is winning overall. Even competing against high-profile opponents conveys some level of institutional seriousness. While the validity of this can be debated, it is the prevailing belief at colleges today. Second, having popular or broad-based sports programs is a means of increasing enrollment. There’s nothing wrong with that, but colleges should be transparent about the fact that a Division I-FCS or a Division II “athletic scholarship” is just another form of financial aid.

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In themselves, neither of these missions serve athletes' interests. If athletes are trying to develop into professionals and/or enhance their marketability, contributing to a university's brand may or may not help them, depending on factors such as compatibility with coaches, playing time, availability of auxiliary personnel in strength training and sports medicine, and so on. And if their desire in sports is to build skills as part of a holistic educational experience, being deployed for brand-building only takes away from such opportunities. Moreover, the concept of athletic scholarships distorts individuals' ability to find the best athletic and academic fit.

Instead, a new athletic model would envision sports as a partnership with athletes rather than universities *in loco parentis*. In high-profile environments, athletes would be recognized for their role in value creation and given the opportunity to enhance their opportunities for future competition.⁴⁴ In participation-oriented environments, sports would be organized around personal and holistic growth.

Let me sketch out one possible model. The late NCAA president Myles Brand sought to draw a distinction between the professional model of sports, which he saw as profit-based with athletes comprising a paid labor force, and the collegiate model for sports, which was based

on education, amateurism, and explicit ties between the university and the athlete's education. This was primarily in an effort to discredit the "professional model" as a paradigm for college sports. I would replace that distinction with a prestige model and an education model. A college will seek to drive prestige through operating a given sports team, so athletes on that team deserve some form of compensation. To be blunt, athletes on other teams—such as in my own sport of cross-country—will not do much to drive prestige, so are not entitled to the same kind of compensation. Hence, the education model.

The first thing to understand about this proposal is that it would be completely modular. Any college could decide whether to field teams in any sport in either model. For obvious reasons, the colleges with any desire to build public brands through athletics probably would adopt the prestige model for football and men's basketball. But because athletics would still be subject to Title IX, they would have to identify women's sports to operate at the prestige level to achieve gender equity.

Moreover, lower-profile sports in certain areas might be valuable enough to stakeholders to be worth operating in the prestige model. Hockey in the Northeast and Midwest is an obvious example, as is softball in the South and on the Pacific coast. Even a sport like track and field might attract a constituency with the Olympic movement and shoe companies willing to invest in top-flight programs like the University of Oregon and Texas A&M University.

The prestige model would recognize two of the basic realities in college sports: Colleges use sport to build relationships with constituents, and athletes create value for those colleges. Colleges would elect to put teams in leagues that allow them access to the highest level of publicity and competition available. Those leagues, in turn, would have expected levels of resources available to teams and would organize schedules and championships accordingly.

And what would those resources look like? In addition to the funds that go into the current model, colleges would have to work out arrangements to maximize the value athletes generate for their teams and for themselves. They could be creative in putting together packages of educational and financial benefits to attract athletes.

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Educational benefits could include traditional tuition, fee, and expense waivers for athletes to pursue degrees, or they could consist of certificate programs to teach skills and knowledge, such as personal financial planning, sports medicine and “prehab,” marketing, that would be valuable and relevant to aspiring professional athletes. Colleges also could offer athletes “delayed scholarships,” or opportunities to complete degrees as full-time students following their playing careers. But they also could provide direction and agency for athletes pursuing “name, image and likeness” deals, or simply pay players a salary or stipend directly. In any of these cases, there would be a need for transparency and regular evaluation of the actual value of any such arrangements.

Prestige-level teams also could be much more flexible in evaluating which athletes to recruit and what academic requirements to place on them. There is nothing sacred about forcing college athletes to adopt the traditional model of full-time enrollment directly out of high school, the model available primarily to the socioeconomic elite. Academic eligibility standards could be dispensed with or modified to suit athletes interested in the environment of a particular college. Certainly many more athletes could pursue the rigor of a sport and a valuable education if they were enrolled only part-time, or full-time after they fulfilled athletic obligations.

In football and men’s and women’s basketball, there is little reason to think that competitive arrangements would change much. For the Alabamas, Michigans, and Southern Californias of college sports, football is so integrated into institutional brands that any other choice seems untenable. Basketball is far less resource-intensive, so a much larger number of institutions might choose to field teams in this model. Some elite research universities currently in Power Five conferences, such as Northwestern, Stanford, Vanderbilt, and Wake Forest Universities, might find that such an arrangement no longer fits with their institutional mission for football or basketball, but they might choose to compete at a prestige level in baseball or other sports. Or they might adopt the academic model.

It would seem unlikely, though, that revenue-producing programs could continue to subsidize the broad range of sports currently on offer across colleges and universities

The primary difference would be

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at anything approaching the same level. This is not to say that athletes in what are called non-revenue, Olympic, or minor sports currently get the same amenities as revenue-sport athletes, but rather that colleges should rationalize and be transparent about the differences in how they treat the athletes who work just as hard but generally stay out of the spotlight. Hence, the academic model.

The academic model would look like the present Ivy League or Division III. Teams would recruit athletes and offer them the same kind of financial aid available to other students. Merit aid for athletes could be established according to whatever criteria institutions set, but it would be explicitly described as part of a student’s financial aid package. Colleges would need to take team needs into account in their admissions processes, which would be unremarkable at a great number of institutions but would undoubtedly be hotly negotiated at the most selective.

The primary difference would be the abolition of the “athletic scholarship” and reducing the incentives to use athletics as a means of accessing higher education. That, hopefully, would redirect youth and scholastic sports into broader participation models to encourage health and fitness rather than the false ideal of the scholarship.

As noted above, colleges could choose to place teams at either the prestige level or the academic level as they saw fit. Colleges could find new regional participation opportunities with new kinds of colleges; in cross-country, it is common to have Division I, II, and III athletes in the same race, and there is no reason that teams at, say, the University of Chicago and Chicago State shouldn't compete assuming that they are at a similar competitive level. Conferences might evolve so that colleges belong to multiple conferences to meet the needs of teams at different levels. There are precedents for this kind of federated arrangement: Johns Hopkins University has Division I men's and women's lacrosse teams, and the men's soccer team at the University of Kentucky competes in the Mid-American Conference because the SEC does not sponsor the sport.

The goal of sports in this model is to provide a meaningful experience for athletes, enabling them to learn the lessons that can only be taught in training and competition. The most crucial aspect of this model is how coaches would be assessed and rewarded. If the goal of the academic model is to provide an environment for athletes to flourish, then coaches should be rewarded for attracting and retaining players and providing them with an experience they find valuable. Of course, winning

can make for a better experience, but coaches should be incentivized to achieve the end of that experience, not the means of getting there.

Numerous problems with this model have already occurred to readers, I am sure. The obvious one is that this arrangement reduces the incentives of colleges to offer any sports beyond football and basketball. This is true, but there are some constraints, and these incentives are not completely eliminated.

As mentioned earlier, Title IX requires colleges to provide comparable athletic opportunities to men and women at each level of competition available. A college seeking to operate any teams in the prestige model would have to accommodate both men and women in prestige-model sports.

Second, Division III and Ivy League institutions have done fine without offering actual athletic grants-in-aid. Many have a third or more of their students on varsity teams. Many of them have expanded their sports offerings over the past 20 years to recruit more students, adding teams in sports such as football, field hockey, and lacrosse. This is a model of sports that works in the context of higher education. Moreover, as noted earlier, at colleges not deriving significant revenue from sports, athletic grants are just a form of financial aid, so eliminating them frees up colleges to allocate financial aid by whatever strategy maximizes enrollment for them.

The real quandary faces colleges and elite athletes in sports that have little chance of driving significant brand value or revenue, such as golf, tennis, wrestling, and swimming. Professional and Olympic teams use the American college system as a training ground in these sports, and it is certainly possible that many college leaders seeking prestige through sports would look at the value proposition and decide that it's not worth spending half a million dollars on an elite tennis team that recruits foreign athletes and flies them all over the country for matches.

And who could blame a president or an AD for making that decision? Why should colleges be expected to allocate resources to train semiprofessional athletes that do not generate value for the institution? If professional

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sports organizations or the national governing bodies for Olympic sports want colleges to continue sponsoring competitive opportunities for aspiring pros, perhaps they should partner with them. But it is certainly possible that elite competition in non-revenue sports, such as the SEC championships in track and field (which rivals many national championships and even Olympic preliminaries in the level of performance), could fall by the wayside. The SEC's presidents and athletics directors would need to decide whether recruiting elite teams is worth it.

I propose the prestige/academic model not as a final answer but as a starting point for a discussion that may become pressing for all of the colleges that sponsor sports, given the significant possibility that the courts may render college sports professional sooner rather than later.

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through world wars, through technological change, through the massification of higher education, and even through scandals that laid bare the reality that amateurism sought to hide.

But stakeholders may take any move in athletics as good if it increases the chances of top teams winning, and bad if it appears like any form of retreat from competition. The University of Alabama at Birmingham learned this the hard way when it dropped football in 2014, then was forced to backtrack and reinstate the sport two years later. Even dropping nonrevenue teams can be difficult politically, as when the College of William & Mary tried to drop seven sports in 2020, resulting in a furor among alumni that cost the athletics director her job.⁴⁵ So any transition to a new model is likely to be assessed by its short-term impact on a particular school, rather than on its ramifications for either athletes or higher education as a whole.

The future of college athletics, and in particular the amateur story we tell about it, has never looked less certain. But it is striking that the model of college sports has remained more or less unchanged for nearly a century and a quarter. Amateurism may have always been a façade, but it has remained intact as the organizing principle of the NCAA through world wars, through technological change, through the massification of higher education, and even through scandals that laid bare the reality that amateurism sought to hide. Years ago, at a meeting of faculty wanting to effect change in college sports, legendary *New York Times* columnist Robert O. Lipsyte told the group, “when your revolution comes, let us know and we’ll come cover it.” The NCAA may yet make it through its current upheaval intact, but colleges, athletes, and everyone involved in the enterprise would be better off if the structure and governance of college sports moved in a more transparent, more efficient, and more honest direction.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/governance/ncaa/constitution/NCAAGov_DraftConstitutionDec6.pdf
- 3 That is, first-time, full-time students of traditional age
- 4 College presidents have been known to point out that athletic departmental budgets are a fraction of overall university budgets, particularly at institutions with medical schools. But that minimizes the degree to which sports shapes the public image of the university. The University of Michigan is a “public Ivy” university, but winning the Big Ten in football and making the College Football Playoff generated far more headlines even than the university president resigning in disgrace.
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- 7 <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-ncaas-farcical-anti-athlete-argument>
- 8 But cannot easily be verified
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- 13 https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/ncaa/finance/d1/2020D1FIN_AnnualRevenueDistPlan.pdf
However, those funds amount to less than a quarter of the \$2.5 billion in revenue institutions received in 2020 from broadcast contracts and payouts from postseason football <http://cafidatabase.knightcommission.org/fbs#!quicktabs-tab-where-the-money-1>. The Knight Commission has called on athletic associations to redirect funding to achieve these and other athlete-welfare goals, such as addressing gender and racial equity, but the vast majority of those funds are allocated across participating conferences and become part of lump-sum payments to universities <https://www.knightcommission.org/c-a-r-e-model-report-and-resources/>.
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- 25 <https://athletics.williams.edu/handbook/college-division-of-the-day/>
- 26 Division III passed a rule in xx to permit colleges to generate a document for prospective athletes to sign, even though Division III forbids its members to award athletics-based financial aid.
- 27 Estimated from https://members.nfhs.org/participation_statistics and <https://ope.ed.gov/athletics/Trend/public/#/answer/2/201/main?row=-1&column=-1>
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Hoxby, C., & Turner, S. (2013, March). Expanding college opportunities for high-achieving low-income students (Discussion Paper No. 12-014). Stanford, CA: Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, Stanford University.
- 29 <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/college-football-coach-carousel-2021-fbs-change/1a4hp96yv3as81evldmgobko07>
- 30 <https://www.si.com/college/2022/01/04/quarterback-shuffle-transfer-portal-new-normal#:~:text=Since%20Aug.,tough%20to%20compute%2C%20Spilbeler%20says>
- 31 A side point: The reality of the athlete as student is often conflicted. First, the NCAA's demand that athletes are first-time, full-time students is increasingly out of step with the reality of higher education today: Only about 60 percent of college students are full-time, according to the Education Data Initiative[DWS1]. Thus, a significant portion of American college students have absolutely no chance to be athletes.
[DWS1] Hanson, Melanie. “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics” EducationData.org, January 22, 2021, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>

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