

The Drake Group Position on Paying Athletes

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The Drake Group is unequivocally opposed to paying college athletes to engage in what for educational reasons ought to be an amateur extracurricular activity. Therefore, we reject NCAA policies that have transformed big-time college athletes into paid entertainers in a multi-billion dollar industry.

In 1956, NCAA rules allowed universities to offer talented players scholarships to pay for room, board, tuition and fees, thus compromising its half-century prohibition against financial inducements. In 1967, rules were adopted that allow immediate termination of scholarship aid to athletes who voluntarily withdraw from sports, thus making a scholarship a binding contract rather than an educational gift. By 1973, four-year scholarships were replaced with grants whose renewal is determined on a year-to-year basis. Coaches can now "fire" players who sustain injuries or who turn out to be recruiting mistakes. Because coaches control financial aid, they have far greater influence over an athlete's educational priorities than do college faculty. When viewed within this historical context, proposals to openly pay stipends to college athletes, such as the one currently being considered by the Nebraska Legislature, are merely an extension of "pay-for-play" policies instituted by the NCAA decades ago. The only difference is that, unlike the current system that uses the myth of amateurism to cap player compensation at room, board, tuition, and fees, the Nebraska proposal would cut through the hypocrisy.

Universities and celebrity coaches have sold their souls to broadcast media and sneaker companies for millions of dollars. Athletes, on the other hand, are treated like criminals for accepting even minor amounts of money that exceed NCAA limits. Absent the NCAA's amateur myth, athletes, most of whom will not end up in professional sports careers, would be able to build some financial security while in college. It is the position of the Drake Group that the NCAA must first acknowledge how its scholarship policies have blurred the distinction between college athletes and professionals if its proposals for reform are to be taken seriously. If the NCAA continues its current hypocritical policy of professionalizing college sports, then the NCAA assumes responsibility for allowing athletes and their families to share in the same kinds of financial rewards currently available to coaches and other stakeholders who profit from college sport pursued as a commercial enterprise.

The Drake Group believes, however, that there is a far more practical alternative for restoring academic and fiscal integrity in collegiate sports than open professionalism. That alternative is to eliminate one-year renewable athletic scholarships altogether. By replacing athletic scholarships with need-based financial aid, most athletic programs could reduce current budget deficits, better meet the requirements of Title IX, and, most important, maintain college athletes as an integral part of the student body. This model already exists and works well in schools in the NCAA's Division III, as well as in the Ivy and Patriot leagues. Schools with massive financial and emotional investments in professional college sports are likely to reject this model, but they shouldn't be surprised when athletes start demanding the right to engage in entrepreneurial activities -- just like the coach.