

## A mission-oriented approach to the NCAA student-athlete dilemma

by Jeffrey B. Eisenberg, M.A.

Coordinator, New Media, Communications and  
Events, ISSCD

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March 26, 2014 was an historic day in college athletics. Regardless of future appeals and court decisions, the Chicago division of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled in favor of recognizing Northwestern University football players' right to try to unionize.

The NLRB ruled that, because NCAA Division I student-athletes' pay (in the form of scholarships) is dependent on athletics, not academic performance, those athletes are employees of their respective schools. The ruling highlights [the power many schools exert](#) over their student athletes, who often spend 50 or more hours per week devoted to their teams. Often, that dedication means time away from the classroom and academic pursuits.

Why the push to unionize? One aspect centers on pay as University employees. If NCAA Division I schools rake in millions in sports revenue and television deals, some players argue, shouldn't the athletes who make it all possible share in the profits? (Then again, only a handful of these programs actually turn a profit. In fact, [only 23 of 228 athletic programs at Division I schools were able to completely cover their expenses](#) in 2012.)



Former Northwestern Quarterback Cain Kolter, however, notes that [academic support needs to be prioritized](#) more heavily.

"We love our game, but you can't say that playing football and putting 40 to 50 hours per week is going to help your academic experience; it's probably going to hurt it," said Kolter. "A lot of times we do a great job of balancing sports and academics, but we need some support and some basic protections."

Certainly a high level of dedication is necessary to excel in any activity, and success in athletics does require long hours in training and competition. However, we know that most student-athletes do not go pro in sports. To be competitive beyond college and off the court, we cannot ignore the responsibility of academic institutions to prepare student-athletes' minds for the future in the same rigorous way they train for their sports. This is especially true if, as Northwestern University

argues, its student-athletes are classified foremost as students.

But we do also need to put some of the onus on student-athletes. For many Division I athletes, college education and athletic costs are covered in their entirety. Over four years, the cost per student-athlete can exceed \$200,000. Yes, they are earning their scholarships through a deep commitment to their sports, but athletes must be cognizant of their gift to perform and develop both academically and athletically.

For those Division I student-athletes whose costs are *not* entirely covered, a reality is that many athletic departments rely on tier one programs of football and men's basketball to support other sports and contribute to academic progress at the institution. For example, the University of Florida was able to [pump \\$7.2 million of football revenue into academic programming](#) from the 2012-2013 season, while Alabama's football program contributed \$6.5 million to scholarships. This means revenue-generating sports are not

isolating their funds but, when possible, distributing them for the good of other teams and students.

Still, the big issue is that more can be done to create a positive environment in the midst of this recent tension. This is a conversation that applies to all collegiate programs, regardless of Division. Where can student-athletes, coaches, athletic programs and the NCAA meet in the middle?

On all sides, we must keep in mind the idea of gratitude. Athletes at all levels of competition can continue to perfect their craft and get an education through collegiate athletics. For many, both the academic and athletic sides of the student equation open doors during and after college. For the NCAA and athletic departments now feeling the pressure of athletes looking to share in sports-related profits, this is also a strong call to find ways to demonstrate gratitude to athletes who indeed contribute to school recognition and prestige.

Here's what it may look like.



**Schools:** Begin with your mission. Athletics must support your overall school mission and, in some capacity, student, faculty and staff excellence is embedded in most any mission. This is exactly why, here at the Neumann University [Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development](#) we strongly believe that sports can and should be used as a lens to build character, enrich student-athletes' relationships with themselves and their peers, and build an awareness of the need to go beyond self in service to others. It is core to our athletic program that student-athletes engage in community service, team reflections and leadership programs, and develop new ways to grow athletically, academically, socially and spiritually.

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As athletic programs we must offer avenues for student-athletes, many of whom feel over-extended in their athletic demands, to achieve all they are capable of. It means we should not [hand out grades](#), as that strategy is a terrible disservice to students, but consider the support systems available in terms of academic and personal resources. Regularly check in with athletes throughout the season.

In short, if there is a need for academic, emotional, or spiritual support, be ready and willing to lend that support.

Moreover, support cannot just be reactive. While a tutoring mentality often includes an unspoken clause of "if the students are struggling, *then* help them," athletic programs should proactively offer academic and leadership development initiatives for their student-athletes. Start from day one.

This idea of holistic excellence echoes late NCAA president Myles Brand's words in his [2005 State of the Association Speech](#). "When the public begins to believe that the value of the institution is to be measured by the success of its athletic teams, the core mission of the university is threatened," said Brand. "The value of an athletic program must ultimately rest on its support of and integration into the educational mission and traditions of the university." For this reason, we must look at a student-athlete not only as a playmaker but as a whole person.

**Athletes:** No matter your level of competition, you are in a leadership position, and one that calls for excellence. Your athletic ability and inclusion on your team represent an opportunity to play and to receive an education. We can learn from walk-on athletes in Division I programs, very few of whom receive financial incentives to be a part of the team or even see any significant playing time. Yet, they are present for the same hours as their scholarship teammates and are sometimes among the

most vocal supporters on their teams. Blessed with gifts, collegiate athletics is an opportunity to further develop and share with others – especially your teammates and your school – and positively impact how you move forward after achieving a degree. This is, in fact, a lesson in teamwork.

This is not to dismiss either the Northwestern football players involved in the union hearings nor the NCAA or athletic conference communities who reject the notion of students as employees. There is work to be done by all, as well as a necessary understanding as to why we use the term "student-athletes" instead of just "students" or "athletes." We ask our players to be both.

That request is a demand of time, energy, and dedication, but also a demand for excellence both on and off the court or field. We all need to fulfill our responsibility to the mission of our colleges and universities and do our part to ensure excellence.

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