

NCAA Clip File

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HEADLINE: Show colleges the money; University sports in need of some commercialism

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BODY:

Commercialism is ruining college sports!

So say the cynics and radical reformers, and they point to the recently concluded basketball tournaments as the prime example. Network and cable shows filled with advertisements, ubiquitous product placement and flashy signage in the venues are corrupting intercollegiate athletics until it is nothing other than professional sports entertainment conducted by colleges and universities.

The critics are wrong. In fact, I want to argue that college sports needs more commercial dollars, not fewer. Let me explain.

The criticism toward collegiate commercialism rests on both a deep and pervasive mistake and a failure to recognize the obvious. In fact, there is widespread confusion about the role of commercialism in college sports. Maintaining a clear difference between the professional sports entertainment industry and intercollegiate athletes does not depend on the source of revenues--commercial activities in this instance--but rather the use of the revenue.

The mission of professional sports leagues, such as the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, is to make a profit for the owners. They are businesses, in the finest sense of American free enterprise. The net profits from commercialism are used to reward players based on their performance. Star professional athletes command significant salaries, among the highest in any field.

In contrast, the mission of an intercollegiate athletics program is to provide sports participation opportunities and to support the educational and academic goals of the college or university. Commercial revenue from national sources--for example, proceeds from network contracts--are collected by colleges and universities. Along with commercial revenue from local sources--such as ticket sales--these monies are used to maximize the number of student participants supported by scholarships. Players, even those who are stars, are not compensated for performance. Rather, the commercial revenues provide opportunities for young men and women to receive scholarship support and to participate in sports. Without these commercial dollars, more than 100,000 young men and women each year might miss the chance to go to college and participate in sports.

The overall financial model for universities is that they take in revenue from several sources, primarily tuition, state and federal allocations and grants, private donations--including those from the corporate community--and sales of services, such as room and board, and then use it in ways that best meet their goals of educating students and pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge. Intercollegiate athletics in universities works the same way.

Revenues come to athletics departments from several sources, and expenditures are made to support student-athletes across a broad spectrum of sports. If the only measure of success in intercollegiate athletics were competitive victories in high-profile sports, colleges and universities would only support football and men's basketball. In fact, on each Division I campus, they support 500 to 1,000 male and female student-athletes in an average of two dozen sports.

Participation in athletics has educational developmental value. Student-athletes learn to strive for excellence, to work hard and to work in teams, to be resilient and to persist. A college education should do more than increase disciplinary learning through lectures and textbooks; it should also develop in students the values and character necessary for a successful life and for good citizenship. Participation in college athletics is one very good means to meet these developmental ends.

Universities are first and foremost academic institutions. Given the educational value of participation in college sports, they strive to maximize the opportunities for this experience among the student body. That is why universities reallocate athletics department revenues to support student-athletes in sports that do not produce any appreciable revenue, including many men's and almost all women's sports. Most colleges and universities fall short of providing the number and quality of athletics experiences that their students really want. Frankly, intercollegiate athletics could use more commercial dollars to help meet the interest. Additional commercial revenue could also help close the gap between the current value of a scholarship and the full cost of attendance.

If the dollars are being put to good use and there is a need for increased commercial revenue, why does commercialism attached to college sports seem so wrong?

The confusion about commercialism in college sports likely results from the differences in sensitivities to direct advertising among professional and college sports audiences. Generally speaking, professional sports fans have a greater tolerance for intrusive advertising than college fans. The level of advertising at professional basketball games, for example, would cause complaints at many college venues. The public's collective attitude toward commercial advertising is more about sensitivities than principles.

Tolerance for advertising is an acquired taste. Indeed, different professional sports have different levels of tolerance. The multiple brand marks on a NASCAR driver's uniform would be unacceptable on a Major League Baseball uniform. Extensive signage and loud in-venue ads may be acceptable for professional sporting events that are not accepted by fans--even the same fans--in collegiate venues.

But these differences in audience sensitivities do not speak to the fact that both professional and college sports depend on commercial revenues to present and broadcast their games and, especially, to support their operations and missions. The inviolate difference between professional sports and intercollegiate athletics is that the former is a profitmaking business that financially rewards players, while college sports is part of an academic institution whose goal is to educate young men and women.

In the end, it all comes down to what you do with the money, not that it comes from commercial sources.

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