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Pay for Play is Fine — But Not in College Sports

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Let's be clear.

There is nothing wrong with paying athletes to play sports. Professional sports is big business in America. The athletes, as a labor force, are rightly paid what the market will bear. That's the professional model.

But it isn't the right approach for the collegiate model of sports.

For the professional model, the bottom line is...well...the bottom line. For the collegiate model, the bottom line is education. In the professional model, the athletes are commodities who can be traded to meet market needs. In the collegiate model, the athletes are students.

For the last couple of weeks, I've written about the two reasons most people give for why student-athletes should be paid.

The first one is the capitalism argument. Big-time college sports, especially football and men's basketball, is big business. Student-athletes are a significant part of that capitalism machine and are generating the revenue. As labor, as with their professional counterpart, they have a right to share in the money they help bring in.

It's an appealing argument, but it doesn't hold up. Neither higher education, of which college sports is only a small part, nor intercollegiate athletics is truly capitalistic. They do not generate revenue to make a profit; they generate revenue to fulfill a purpose, to meet the mission of higher education. If they were models of capitalism, many academic programs and nearly all sports other than football and men's basketball would be dropped because they are too costly and do not generate enough revenue to pay their own way.

In fact, based on that model a large number — 30 to 40 percent in Division I — of the football and men's basketball programs would shut down because they fail even to cover their own costs.

The second argument is that it just isn't fair. Everyone else gets paid — some of the coaches get paid millions. Why shouldn't student-athletes?

Another appealing argument, but as flawed as the first. While it is true that student-athletes are the only amateurs in amateur college sports, the collegiate model has never been otherwise. Like every other human resource on campus, coaches, athletics directors, trainers, and all the other personnel in an athletics department are paid based on the demands of the market. We can argue,

fairly in my opinion, that the market for coaches at the highest levels is artificially inflated by professional sports and may be damaging to the propriety of higher education as a whole.

But the idea that a market should be created for the employment of students to play sports because it is only fair would benefit only a few individuals in only a couple of sports on only a handful of campuses where revenues exceed expenses. Such a market would disadvantage all other student-athletes who would unquestionably be deprived of opportunities to participate so that revenues could be reallocated to compensate the lucky few.

Nothing fair about that.

These arguments, as appealing as they are around the water cooler or in the sports bar, miss the point. College sports has survived as a component of campus for a century and a half now for two reasons: 1) Those who play are students, and 2) Intercollegiate athletics shares in the driving purpose of higher education — to educate students.

I know. That collective groan I hear rising is the chorus of cynics singing in unison, “Come on, Brand, give us a break.”

To be sure, there are athletes playing college sports who have little or no intention of being a student. After 40 years in the classroom, as a philosophy professor, I can tell you that lack of sincerity isn't confined to athletes. You will find it all over campus. And, clearly, there are coaches who care much more about X's and O's than about A's and B's.

There are abuses and abusers.

But the majority of student-athletes — including those in the sports of football and men's basketball — would be or would want to be in college whether they are athletes or not. Some have the opportunity to be students only because of athletics, including young men and women from low-income families. The driving purpose of higher education all over campus, including athletics, is to educate. And on average, more student-athletes earn their degree than all the other students. Ten years after enrollment, 88 percent of all student-athletes earn their degrees!

It requires professionals and lots of money to carry out the higher education mission. We understand that.

But somehow, the obvious and even noble acquiring of money to finance the mission of higher education is characterized as little more than a ravenous greed for filthy lucre when it comes to financing the mission of intercollegiate athletics.

Intercollegiate athletics is not the entertainment division of the higher education business; it enhances the educational experience of student-athletes. Student-athletes are not a human resource in the great business machine of intercollegiate athletics; they are the object of intercollegiate athletics.

Professional athletes are paid because playing sports is their job. Playing sports is not the job of student-athletes.

They are amateurs at it.