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[Myles Brand](#), Contributor

President of the NCAA

Why the Fairness Argument on Pay for Play Isn't a Fair Argument

“But it just isn't fair that student-athletes don't get paid to play sports. What about everyone else who is making money? What about the coaches making millions? Doesn't the student-athlete deserve something?”

This is the fairness argument for why student-athletes should be paid for playing sports as a part of intercollegiate athletics. Last week, I talked about the capitalism argument for pay for play and why it misses the point, and the fairness argument is another approach that also misses the point.

It's a point of view that looks around the world of college sports at the most-hyped and most-visible level; sees head coaches and athletics directors with large compensation packages; sees large staffs of professionals from assistant coaches to academic advisors, trainers, strength coaches, and others; and says: “Wait a minute. The student-athlete is the only amateur left in college sports!”

That's true.

The critical point is that it has always been true. The early days of intercollegiate athletics saw some athletes in some sports who were not students at all (on occasion, the athlete would move from college to college on a weekly basis to participate). But it has always been true that student-athletes were the only amateurs in what otherwise is an enterprise coached, managed and supported by professional staffs. For student-athletes, playing sports is not a profession; everyone else in college sports is making a living from the enterprise.

What really bothers us and abuses our sense of fairness is the scale of salaries for some personnel, of media contracts for some conferences and of facility expansion on some campuses. It's the million-dollar (or \$2 to \$4 million) coach, the multi-million dollar television contracts and the build-out of luxury suites that sends us over the edge. It all begins to look out of whack.

And it is.

There is only one perspective from which the high salaries and huge budgets make sense: the marketplace. At the highest levels, college football and men's basketball are competing for coaches in a marketplace that includes their professional counterparts. Those compensation packages are also the coat tails for other positions.

Media contracts over the last two decades have exploded both in terms of number and value as the interest by the American public has increased for sports in general and college sports in particular. And stadium expansions have become common - some would argue even necessary - to meet increased demand for seats.

While all of this has meant more monies for about five dozen universities in what is popularly referred to as “big time college sports,” it has not translated into excess revenues after expenses in any more than a small handful of programs.

In other words, the marketplace isn't a place for every, or even most, programs in college sports. They are not going to realize sufficient return for those investments to generate excess revenues. And this is why the fairness argument falls apart. No one ever makes the claim that Divisions II or III or even most of the Division I student-athletes should be paid. They don't make the claim for any program that is losing money. And there isn't even a hint that female student-athletes are entitled to salaries. Why not? Don't all of these student-athletes work just as hard as the few in top end of Division I football and men's basketball?

Of course they do, but everyone understands that there isn't enough money to pay all student-athletes. It only works to argue that student-athletes should be paid because everyone else is making big money if you mean the few elite athletes in one of the two sports at one of the dozen or less institutions that are “big time” enough to consistently generate more revenue than required to pay the bills.

What about all the others? Think they might have a problem with some student-athletes getting paid and they aren't? Worse is the inevitable possibility that paying football and men's basketball athletes when there are insufficient revenues to cover other costs would result in the loss of any opportunity to participate because their sports would be cut. More than likely, their reaction would be simple and to the point: It isn't fair.

So, the capitalism argument for pay for play doesn't work because higher education and intercollegiate athletics aren't truly operating in a capitalistic environment. The fairness argument doesn't work because you can't correct what on the surface appears to be an inequity for a few (less than 2 percent of all student-athletes) by creating a worse inequity for the majority.

Both arguments fail to recognize the underlying principle for why athletes aren't paid in the collegiate model of sports. They are students.

That is the topic for the third and final posting next week on the pay-for-play topic.