

Commentary: Pay-for-play in college athletics

By Roger Pielke, Jr.
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The on-again off-again debate over whether or not college athletes should be paid is once again heating up. In the Camera (July 15) Neill Woelk argued that paying athletes doesn't make sense, not least because universities are broke.

As a professor at the University of Colorado, this is a reality I know all too well. Since 2005, CU has paid out \$5 million to poorly performing head football coaches. Meantime, I and my faculty colleagues who bring in hundreds of millions of dollars in research funding per year have foregone raises the past three years. It could be worse though, the Chronicle of Higher Education reports that Rutgers University has subsidized its athletic program to the tune of \$115 million since 2006, while at the same time foregoing raises across campus last year to save \$30 million.

With this background you might expect me to be against paying college athletes, or perhaps even against college athletics in general. To the contrary, college athletics are a great American tradition and an important part of our university culture where we strive for excellence in everything we do. But the first thing to realize in this debate should be obvious -- we already pay college athletes. The right question to ask is whether they should have an opportunity to be paid more. I think that the answer is yes.

Today's scholar-athletes are paid in the form of a college scholarship -- tuition, room and board, books, perhaps some incidentals. Athletes also get some notable perks. Here at Colorado, like at many schools, they have access to top notch educational tutoring and mentoring (this is a bit immodest -- while in graduate school at CU I served as mentor/tutor for Joe Harrington's basketball squad). For the top athletes universities provide marketing and exposure that would cost literally millions if paid for on the open market. Alec Burks, taken 12th in last month's NBA draft by Utah, will deservedly earn millions of dollars over his career, due in no small part to the exposure he received as a Colorado star athlete.

Setting the intangibles aside, if you run the numbers, for an out-of-state student a full-ride scholarship at Colorado is worth about \$40,000 per year, or about \$200,000 for the athlete's five years of eligibility. Much of the debate over so-called pay-to-play proposals are over whether student-athletes should receive a stipend of a few hundred dollars per month or per game in exchange for their services on the court, ice or field. But this focus is to miss the point.

As shown by recent scandals and allegations at top schools, such as Ohio State, college athletes have a largely unrealized economic potential that they are presently forbidden from capitalizing on. Steve Spurrier, the head football coach at South Carolina, says that he "presented a proposal that we give our players \$300 a game for game expenses that they could give to their parents for travel, lodging, meals. Maybe they could take their girlfriend out Sunday night or Saturday night and so forth." No matter how sincerely offered, for college athletes this must be pretty difficult to hear from a guy making \$2.8 million this year.

If there is anyone who should be empathetic with the quandary of student athletes it should be university faculty. For many years university faculty expressed concerns that their research with commercial value was simply being given away due to their status as university researchers. The issue became a matter of national importance as Congress became concerned about technology transfer and the incentive structure in the modern university, no longer considered an ivory tower but an engine of U.S. economic growth. In 1980 Congress passed a law that allowed universities to hold the intellectual property rights to inventions by their faculty and to set up profit-sharing schemes with their faculty.

Here at CU, income resulting from patents derived from research performed on campus is shared between the inventor and the campus, with 25 percent going to the researcher personally and 75 percent to the university (with one third of that devoted directly to the researcher's work). Not every faculty member files patents and fewer still see any financial gain, but the rewards can be significant. One research group's patents at Columbia University resulted in \$790 million in revenue.

When Bob Williams, VP of communications for the NCAA, was recent asked by ESPN if college athletes should receive a cut in the sales of jerseys bearing their name he responded, "I think you have to remember whose jersey it really is. The school name, the colors, that's really the school's and the institution's property. It's hard to say that the student-athlete 'owns' that jersey or it's his jersey. But that intellectual property is owned by the institution." This is exactly the sort of convoluted argument that led faculty to demand a share in the profits that resulted from their unique contributions to a university. We

could test Williams' hypothesis by putting on sale at the Auburn University bookstore jerseys with the name "Bob Williams" on the back and see how sales compare to those with "Cam Newton" on the back.

Make no mistake, opening up opportunities for faculty to capitalize financially on the market value of their university work has also come with challenges such as managing conflicts of interest and debates over the role of corporations in the university setting. Similarly, we can expect that the opening up of opportunities for college athletes to capitalize on their economic potential would also lead to new and difficult challenges of governance on campus and between universities and the broader society. There would of course still need to be limits and effective mechanisms of compliance and accountability, as there are today.

Dealing with these challenges would be hard, but certainly no more difficult than the challenges currently faced by the NCAA in enforcing its archaic rules about college athletics. More importantly, opening up opportunities for all scholar-athletes to more readily capitalize on their successes is not only going to be good for the athletes and for their universities, but it is also the right thing to do.

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