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Is eliminating athletic scholarships March madness?

[Suzanne Shaffer](#) March 29, 2011 6:00 am [Education](#), [Financial Aid](#)
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March ushers in the beginning of spring (at least in most parts of the country) and it's March Madness time—college basketball at its finest. You know the drill—college athletes give their best while the NCAA, college alumni, sponsors and the networks promote and abuse the college athlete. At least that's how Ralph Nader and his League of Fans (a sports version of his activism) see it.

Ralph Nader's proposal

If Ralph Nader had his way, he would eliminate athletic scholarships. Why? He believes that colleges exploit the athletes and have lost the focus of what college was meant to be: an institution of higher education.

Nader's League of Fans [made their case](#) last week:

“Clearly athletes on scholarship are pro athletes. Professional sports means ‘pay for play,’ ” says Ken Reed, senior issues analyst for League of Fans. “Athletic scholarships are financial inducements to play sports at college. Basically, they are one-year contracts between an athlete and a coach. Coaches can literally fire athletes for poor performance or injury. As such, a scholarship athlete's first priority in college is to play sports. Education is a secondary consideration. Paying for young people to come to college campuses to focus on sports - not education - is perverse.”

Here' s the bonus: The benefits of eliminating the athletic scholarship at the college level continue at the lower levels of sports in our country. The high pressure, win-at-all-costs mentality that permeates our youth and high school sports programs is often "justified" as the price necessary to earn a college scholarship.

An entire industry has developed in the youth sports arena —club teams, personal trainers, etc. — to prey on families' dreams of an athletic scholarship. The lure of the elusive athletic scholarship is the primary — sometimes the only — marketing tool these youth sports entrepreneurs use.

With the allure of college athletic scholarships, the focus in our youth and high school sports programs has increasingly been on the development of elite athletes vs. participation for all. Intramurals and physical education programs have been scaled way back during today' s childhood obesity epidemic, while varsity high school programs, which serve only a small percentage of the student population, remain sufficiently funded.

It would be difficult for anyone to disagree with these affirmations. But just simply stating the facts and proposing elimination requires a deeper knowledge of how college sports scholarships play into the college process.

The NCAA' s response

Nader' s proposal caused such controversy that the NCAA issued a [statement](#):

"Mr. Nader' s proposal is off-base on so many fronts it is hard to know where to start. The 145,000 student-athletes who receive athletics related financial aid each year are in fact students first — as evidenced by the fact that in almost every demographic they graduate at higher percentages than their counterparts in the general student body. Moreover, less than two percent of them will ever play professional sports. The assertion that student-athletes who receive athletics aid are professionals defies logic — they are students, just like any other student on campus who receives a merit-based scholarship."

Referring to athletic scholarships as a form of merit-based scholarships drives home their point. However, its irrefutable that these scholarships are abused and often out of balance with other merit-based [scholarships](#).

The bottom line

Everyone will agree that the system is flawed. But it's no secret that only a very small percentage of students receive athletic scholarships, especially full rides. It's also important to note that athletic scholarships are not just those for football and basketball. There are scholarships for fishing, golf, lacrosse and some even lesser known sports. Eliminating all athletic scholarships casts an awfully large net that will affect more than just those college athletes who are in the public eye.

Nader makes a [valid point](#) but looking at the overall picture bears some additional thought. If athletic scholarships were eliminated altogether, the top athletes from high schools will simply bypass college and play professionally until they are eligible for the draft. Is bypassing college truly the outcome and message we as a nation want to generate?

As my grandmother once said, "You don't throw out the baby with the bath water." Calling for reform is definitely warranted, but perhaps total elimination is a bit extreme. Nader, however, believes his proposal is valid and plans to approach Congress in the future. It's unlikely the extreme will happen; but it might open a debate and cause some much-needed reform. Only time will tell.

Do you think athletic scholarships should be eliminated? Leave us a comment and let's start the conversation here.

Tags: [athletic scholarships](#) [college](#) [college scholarships](#) [march madness](#) [ralph nader](#) [spring](#)



About the Author: Parent coach **Suzanne Shaffer** counsels parents in the college admissions process and the importance of early college preparation. Her [Parents Countdown to College Coach](#) blog offers timely college tips for parents. She is a regular contributor for [Galttime.com](#) and [Examiner.com](#).

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7 Comments

1.  *steve conn* says:

[March 29, 2011 at 6:54 am](#)

Ralph Nader is right. Enough is enough. Pay these men and women who earn millions for media and everyone else and end the fiction that these people are there to earn a degree.

2.  [Suzanne Shaffer](#) says:

[March 29, 2011 at 8:41 am](#)

Steve,
Don' t you think that eliminating these scholarships will also eliminate the chance for so many to get a college education? And isn' t it a valid point to say that not all athletic scholarships are used to create professional athletes?

3.  [Megan Dorsey](#) says:

[March 29, 2011 at 6:16 pm](#)

While I like the idea that college should be focused on academics, I know a lot of learning takes place outside the classroom, including service learning, networking, and internships. So it is unfair to criticize athletes for dividing their attention between academics and their sport.

I' ve also worked with too many low income students who only went to college because they had athletic scholarships. Sports paid for something their families couldn' t. I also know the hope of a college athletic scholarship keeps many high school athletes in school and out of trouble.

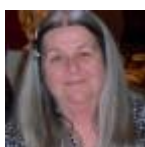
Sports are always an easy target for the academic crowd, but I think overall athletic scholarships and college sports offer more benefits than drawbacks.



4. *vijay* says:

[March 30, 2011 at 11:44 am](#)

I believe Nader' s point is correct, Suzanne. Coming from an athletic school, that happens to be a large public university on the side (instead of vice versa), academics, classroom conditions, and funding are generally stripped while UAA (University Athletic Associations) rakes in millions of dollars. The UAA turns a profit—it along with this “public university” should be considered a private corporation whose goal is not education, but profit maximization and marketing. The fact that academic students are facing tuition hikes and budget cuts, undergoes the point that Nader is heroically and justifiably trying to make—there is no such thing as a student-athlete. For these individuals, academics comes dead last (if any at all) and thus this violates the very basic charter statement of any public land-grant institution.



5. *Suzanne Shaffer* says:

[March 30, 2011 at 12:37 pm](#)

Megan, I agree that these scholarships often offer low-income students an opportunity to attend college. But isn' t it true that academic scholarships can provide the same incentive? And here' s another question, is it a given that athletic scholarship recipients do not normally meet the academic requirements for admission?



6. *Suzanne Shaffer* says:

[March 30, 2011 at 12:39 pm](#)

Vijay, I can see your point. But wouldn't you agree that not ALL academic scholarships are the same? Why punish all athletes when many of them do view academics as a priority?



7. *Marcus V* says:

[March 30, 2011 at 1:01 pm](#)

I'm afraid there is a ton of uninformed, innaccurate stereotyping going on here toward college athletes. Although I did not participate in college athletics, many of my close friends did and their schedules were akin to working full-time while attending school. In the meantime, they brought in more revenue for the school than any other entity on campus, money that did go to new educational facilities. The "dumb athlete" stereotype that is being perpetuated here is just not accurate; it represents maybe 5 percent of student-athletes. These students should be distinguished by their amazing work ethic not by some outdated, and probably biased, view of athletes.