

Hey Nike, Support Student Athletes

A former college football player says the company can make a difference. By David Grenardo

COMMENTARY

THE INJURY SUSTAINED by Duke University basketball star Zion Williamson—after his Nike shoe ripped apart on the court—renewed the debate over whether elite student athletes should risk their bodies playing in college when they stand to make substantial pay as soon as they go pro.

Ire has been directed at the professional leagues, the NCAA, and universities that support this unfair system. Yet, left mostly unscathed in these discussions are apparel brands like Nike, which reap the rewards of sponsoring college athletics while remaining silent on one of its most important issues.

It's time for that to change. Nike and other companies should work together to end university athlete exploitation by suspending their support of college teams until players are paid.

College players provide free labor for the \$11-billion-a-year industry of college football and men's college basketball, but NCAA rules prohibit them from receiving compensation on top of their scholarships or signing endorsement deals. If these amateur players hope to ever be paid, they

must participate in this system, since professional leagues like the NBA allow players to join only once they turn 19, and the NFL maintains a three-year waiting period after high school before a player can enter the league.

At the same time, the major apparel brands, the NCAA, and its member schools profit greatly. In 2016, Under Armour negotiated a \$280 million deal with UCLA for 15 years. Nike signed a similarly lucrative \$252 million agreement with Ohio State University in 2016.

For Nike, its Colin Kaepernick ad campaign has positioned the company in line with progressive values. Failing

to support student athletes in obtaining fair compensation would contradict that message.

Supporting young athletes can be good business, particularly if rules are changed to let college stars endorse products.

Apparel companies have moral, financial, and reputational incentives to agitate for a change to NCAA compensation rules. With that in mind, it's time for brands like Nike to just do it—support college athletes being paid.

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Zion Williamson's knee injury won't stop him from being drafted first overall in June.

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