

# **Student Perspectives on the College Athlete Experience**

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Honors Thesis

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## Abstract

There has been an ongoing discussion of whether college athletes are exploited, and it is likely to continue considering the vast popularity of college sports. It is important to understand that exploitation of college athletes has been viewed through moral, economic, and legal realms and that the term “exploitation” begins as a moral-philosophical concept based on perspective. Researchers have looked at the exchange between the NCAA and the student-athlete attempting to determine if said exchange is “unfair” through economic and legal utilities. They provide opinion pieces, and gain the perspectives of student-athletes, university officials, and a former executive director of the NCAA. None of them however have asked the directly (and indirectly involved) group of non-athlete students. I administer a questionnaire asking students their initial opinion of how exploited they think college athletes are, and provide them with opinion statements, which are given facts about college athletes. They use my scale from “0 to 100”, “0” meaning not exploited at all, “100” meaning very exploited. My key findings are: (1) The initial opinion of college athlete exploitation suggests that students are not really sure whether college athletes are exploited or not, supporting my hypothesis that students are just concerned about the entertainment value of college sports as opposed to what takes place behind the scenes

(something I call “inner-workings”), (2) Particular statements about college athletes make students believe college athletes are more or less exploited depending on the statement I give them and (3) After students receive information about college athletes and do a reassessment of their opinion on college athlete exploitation, their opinion that college athletes are exploited significantly increased.

## Introduction

Football is the most popular sport in America. Star college and NFL athletes such as Reggie Bush make impressive moves or cuts that help their team win games on Sunday afternoons. When he rushes for 100+ yards it is a spectacle and it makes every headline. Much less attention is paid to the scandals surrounding him while he was at the University of Southern California, which stripped him and his team of a national championship and his Heisman Trophy after it was determined that he and his family were receiving “improper benefits” from the school. Many fans tend to glorify these star intercollegiate and potential NFL athletes, while remaining unaware of the processes behind the finished product displayed through their television screens on Saturday afternoons and evenings. Equally, the focus on high-profile basketball players is on their abilities on the court, rather than issues and controversies surrounding them off of it. They are not aware of societal and occupational pressures placed on athletic departments—and more specifically head coaches and their assistants—to put a triumphant team on the football field or the basketball court.

My thesis focuses on the exchange between college athletes and athletic departments and how this exchange affects many different stakeholders, including fans, families, media groups, and university faculty. Researchers have characterized this exchange as economic and only benefitting the athletic department and their collaborators (such as the NCAA) because they gain all the financial profit from an athlete's likeness and labor. The exchange can be looked at as a formal agreement with several unwritten aspects including the devotion the college athlete must put into their sport; this includes approximately 50 hours a week on athletics, leaving little time for academics or other endeavors. Some key questions about this exchange come to mind: Does the focus and pressures on recruiting the most athletic individuals in the country—so as to win more games—cloud the athletic department's priorities and their responsibilities toward academic and occupational achievement of the student-athlete? Should any involved group (student-athletes, athletic departments, professors, students) care about this exchange? What our universities and athletic departments focus and dedicate a majority of their time on should be substantial in the minds of the aforementioned stakeholders. Additionally, athletic department's focus on the economic and entertainment aspects of college athletics and stakeholders such as fans, students, media groups and the like heavily drawn to said team and the commercialization of college athletics as a whole might provide insight into what we as a society value.

Walter Byers, former executive director of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), coined the term, "student-athlete" in the 1950's, which created ambiguity among the college athlete and their athletic departments. This term was crafted to emphasize that college athletes were (and are) students first before anything else, and processes during recruitment and while at the universities must be mindful of that emphasis. Because "student-athletes" are considered students first, they are never thought to be just athletes, as that could lead to them

being considered employees. Essentially, the term allows Division I colleges and universities (about 350 of the largest and the most competitively athletic programs) and the NCAA to have unpaid dedicated players who are, some would argue, not students. Unfortunately, that dedication to their college sport can take over these young individuals lives and the student aspect of “student-athlete” gets lost. The priorities of athletic departments and their collaborators can outweigh the responsibilities they have to these student-athletes and this creates the potential for injustices against the latter.

Past researchers have identified many of the injustices against college athletes and have called it exploitation. That definition can be simply looked at as an unfair exchange between two parties, where unpaid college athletes devote their time to athletics, putting an entertainment product on the field and television screens. The argument is that no one focuses on the “inner-workings” of college athletics, which refers to all of the background occurrences before the games on Saturdays. The “inner-workings” are the daily lives of college athletes and what they encounter due to their relationship with the NCAA. They are what lead to that final product, which becomes financial profit only for athletic departments and their collaborators. Because of the peculiar nature between these two parties though, this exchange can be grounded through financial, legal, and moral perspectives. Researchers have said that clever use of the term, “student-athlete”, contributes to this exploitation because the NCAA, Division I universities, and athletic departments prioritize less on the athlete who is a student first. The student athlete’s university is responsible for covering student tuition, room, board and fees for athletes on a full scholarship, but not particularly if injuries occur while playing. Because of this leniency, athletic departments and universities have priorities that are geared toward winning games and making a profit while doing so.

Much of past research on the possible exploitation of the college athlete has focused on defining exploitation, arguments for and against the claim of exploitation, and gaining the perspective of the student-athlete. Little research takes into consideration a very important stakeholder in this topic: the non-athlete student. Students have a substantial direct influence on intercollegiate athletics through student fees. Some indirect influences include free advertisement and the potential to become contributing Alumni, continuing the tradition of importance in college sports. Many of the athletic department websites, flyers, commercials, etc. show lively students packing the stadiums. Those types of advertisements draw fans, more students, and potential star athletes to top Division I universities. This is known as indirect advertising and it is free for athletic departments, and more substantially, the NCAA who has large media contracts and are looking to increase the popularity of their teams for increased profits.

Prior research on exploitation of student-athletes focuses on only the perspective of student-athletes. There is little or no research that asks student opinions on college athlete exploitation, even though their indirect (and sometimes direct) participation in college athletics has a significant effect on college sports and the athletes that play them. Understanding student opinions on college athletics and the exploitation of college athletes will help us see if students are focused more on seeing the finished product of a winning team, rather than being curious or caring about the processes behind the results. Additionally, their opinions could show the likelihood of them financially contributing to their alma-mater. Since students represent a majority of the younger generation, their opinions and values matter, especially if those values are seen as flawed. It is likely that students care about college athletics purely for the entertainment value, but their opinions have been scarcely addressed—if at all—in prior research.

My research focuses on the non-athlete student perspective on the possible exploitation of student-athletes. The connection between student perspective and the notion of student-athlete exploitation lies in student's current and future values. Students might be uninformed of the plight of the student-athlete, and because of their current responsibilities (such as exams, homework, part-time work, etc.), care less about student-athlete difficulties and instead are more concerned about going to home games and attending the events with friends or not caring about college sports at all. Students can enjoy school spirit and watching a spectacle that is the football stadium or the basketball arena without consideration of the situation of the athletes they are watching. Society has shaped these student's values into caring about athletic events, school appreciativeness, and a willingness to give back to their schools financially. Those values tend to stay as students become alumni and contribute to the universities and athletic departments. Adding this particular stakeholder to the discussion of student-athlete exploitation can provide an opportunity to observe the core values of one group that has a lot of direct (tuition paying students) and indirect (free advertising) influence on the livelihood of student athletes.

I conducted surveys asking a sample of undergraduates their opinions on whether student-athletes are exploited or not. The survey consisted of demographic questions and "opinion statements"—given pieces of information about college athletes—in order to measure certain factors that could influence student opinions about college athlete exploitation (such as part or full-time employment, school loans, attendance of university athletic events, etc.) and to answer questions related to the exploitation of student-athletes. This research, at the very least, has the potential to make students more consciously aware of the potential exploitations exhibited by the athletic division of their university.

## Literature Review

Large companies such as Nike, Adidas, and CBS have been in financial alliance with the NCAA and college athletic conferences in order to showcase their star college players. Because of this, the NCAA (also known as the Association) has emerged as one of the largest corporations in the world. As an example, the television network, CBS, “has recently agreed to pay the NCAA \$6 billion for the rights to televise March Madness for eleven years, amounting on average to \$545 million each year” (McCormick and McCormick 2009: 639). Furthermore, college sports have become “a \$60 billion growth industry” (McCormick and McCormick 2009: 645). Intercollegiate athletics has been a popular topic of discussion for many groups, including corporations, university officials, researchers, and students. Some of these discussions are centered on maintaining the “status quo”, which is continuing to build the big business of college sports, while others contend that intercollegiate athletics has become a place for scandal and exploitation for all involved, especially between the college athlete and their university. Looking at this exchange through a wide-lens, one may gather that college sports is a billion dollar entity that makes its money through star college players who love throwing the miraculous touchdown pass that wins the game every Saturday. Regardless of if they have full or partial scholarships, they love their sport and dream of making it to the pros and the NCAA takes pride in being a part of that process. This may all be true. Gaining the opinions and perspectives of all directly—and indirectly—involved may help expose the truth, and at the very least, reveal some of the complexities of intercollegiate athletics.

Walter Byers writes that, “colleges have appropriated the right to financially exploit their young players and designate others (such as athletic conferences and the NCAA) to exploit



them” (Zimbalist 1999: 20). Surely, the former executive director of the NCAA from 1951 to 1987 would have insight on the treatment of college players and the inner-workings of college sports. Byers was instrumental in building intercollegiate athletics into the big business that it is today. Many commentators believe that he and his collaborators developed terms like “student-athlete” in order to maintain that academia is the primary focus for these college players and to make sure they are considered amateurs above all else. In essence, Byers and the NCAA were (and may still be) manipulating language and literature about college players in order to be less responsible for their overall well-being. This manipulation is why researchers believe young athletes are exploited for their talent and likeness by the NCAA, athletic departments, their universities, and corporations in conjunction with the Association. There has been plenty of research done on the exploitation and plight of the college athlete, and as we delve into that argument, it is important to understand what exploitation really means.

## **What Is Exploitation?**

We have touched on this term without giving it a solid definition. I found it to mean, “fundamentally a means to an end using another person (or thing) to advance one’s ends” (Van Rheenen 2012: 553). This definition is a moral-philosophical concept and because of this, it is based on perspective. Two people may look at the same definition of exploitation and still view exploitation differently. It’s important to remember this idea of perspective or opinion in regards to exploitation of college athletes. One could argue that colleges and universities receive underserved benefits from student athletes, using their athletic talents as a means to the institution’s ends of generating revenue and public visibility. Measuring exploitation however is

very difficult, even if one based their argument on economic or legal grounds rather than moral. Before getting into the different types of exploitation utilized by researchers in the past, let us consider the other side of the coin.

## **The Argument Against Exploitation**

College athletes receive some form of preferential treatment over non-athlete students—including being able to register for classes before any other group—so why are they considered exploited? When discussing preferential treatment of college players, one would benefit from comparing their treatment with students who are alike in many aspects, including their socioeconomic status. Through observation of financial assistance for college athletes (predominantly Division I players), one sees that there are some advantages to playing a college sport. Although grants-in-aid—or full time scholarships to college athletes—have lessened over the years, many Division I universities and the NCAA have found other avenues to procure funds for their players (Zimbalist 1999: 41). For example, in 1990, the NCAA started a Special Assistance Fund of \$3 million annually that student-athletes could use, “for special needs, such as babysitters, clothing, or trips home.” Additionally, universities have been “tapping into federal poverty money for Division I athletic programs” in the form of Pell grants for their players. College athletes are afforded a lot of financial support, and there are even universities who are willing to falsify documents in order to gain more money for their players, much like the University of Miami in 1989-91 (Zimbalist 1999: 42). This kind of financial support by

universities for non-athlete students is not as evident. In fact, there is less funding available for academic scholarships and grants.

The budget of academic tutoring programs and living conditions of college athletes have steadily improved putting to debate the issue of whether these athletes are exploited or not. The budget for academic tutoring programs at top Division I universities has surpassed \$1 million and employs hundreds of tutors (Zimbalist 1999: 44). Sports complexes are now multimillion dollar buildings that have state-of-the-art weight rooms, private bathrooms, television, and free meals. Consider the non-athlete student who has to pay for their meals and has academic and athletic facilities that do not compare to the ones provided for student-athletes. It appears that college athletes are given much assistance by their universities and the NCAA including financial support (full scholarships), academic help, and facilities that provide access to athletic training, free meals, and shelter. These arguments against college athletes being exploited have merit, and contribute to the long debate of the plight of the student-athlete. Consider the argument for it.

## **The Argument for Exploitation**

In Van Rheenen's (2012) study on the exploitation of college sports, he says that institutions are placed in a real "crisis of conscience when educational opportunities are offered to certain students based primarily on their athletic ability." Educational "opportunities" are not genuine in that they do not prepare the athletes academically and demand athletic commitment (approximately fifty hours a week) from these college players. Thinking more broadly, college sports "serve to support and maintain cultural values espoused at a given place in time" (Van

Rheenen 2012: 550). The stakeholders involved in college sports (NCAA, universities, college athletes, fans, students, etc.) value the finished product being displayed in massive college stadiums or arenas, and there is a lack of concern with the scandal or exploitation that might be taking place behind the scenes. Researchers have only been able to conceptualize college athlete exploitation and base their claims with the opinions of some university presidents, athletic officials, and mostly student athletes. This fact makes their claims on exploitation of college athletes a moral discussion.

The exploitation of college athletes has been argued economically, legally, and through other disciplines, but one must understand that the definition of exploitation stands as a moral concept first and foremost. One researcher says that “from a moral perspective, exploitation occurs when one party receives unfair and undeserved benefits from its transactions or relationships with others” (VanRheenen 2012: 553). In other words, exploitation stands as an unfair exchange between two parties, one of them benefitting much more than the other. This is the foundation researchers use in order to state that it is very likely college athletes get exploited and that the Association and universities must be more responsible for the overall well-being of their student-athletes. Additionally, attempting to measure an “unfair” exchange is difficult using perspective or morals. Quantifying exploitation, if it could be done at all, needs to be done through economic or legal utilities.

Intercollegiate athletes are unique in that they make billions off of its unpaid college athletes. In fact, “no other industry in the United States manages not to pay its principal producers a wage or salary” (Zimbalist 1999: 6). Economists and sociologists have considered the value of the overall compensation college players receive by finding the hourly wage of an athlete on a full scholarship; that estimate is a little less than minimum hourly wage. Another

study by Robert Brown looked at whether any NFL player earnings would compensate for monopsony exploitation in college. He defined monopsony as a market condition where there is only one buyer or entity in control, and that is the NCAA and its collaborators. He further states that because they are in control of the market and receive all of the economic gains associated with intercollegiate sports, college players are at a significant loss since they do not benefit from any of the revenue they produce while in college; this is known as “monopsony-induced loss” in economic literature. Brown uses a complex method to determine that between 33 and 38 percent of the sample of players he analyzes will earn NFL incomes sufficient to offset the monopsony-lost college earnings. Only a handful of the NFL players in his sample had a lucrative net income, but most only received normative net earnings (Brown 2012: 393). This fact means that most athletes will not receive the fame and fortune associated with making and maintaining production at the professional level. It also brings to question whether college football athletes should even pursue a professional career because of the limited opportunity for a big payout, and the chances of making it to the professional ranks (2 percent for NFL; 1 percent for NBA).

That NCAA and Division I universities make money off of the labor and likeness of star college players and is taken as evidence of exploitation of college athletes. When these players look to make money through the same channel—selling their likeness through memorabilia, autographs, etc.—they are punished. It appears that the NCAA is trying their best to make sure college athletes are really considered “student-athletes.” When a Colorado Supreme Court decision in 1953 found that an injured football player was an employee and entitled to workers compensation, Walter Byers cleverly coined the term student athlete so as to dissociate athlete and employee entirely (McCormick 2009: 645). He knew then that the label of employee would

be a slippery slope, creating opportunity for student-athletes to receive competitive wages, workers compensation, and for increased liability of the NCAA and athletic departments.

So the true question at play here is whether these young college players are employees or not. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), who, along with the courts determine employee status, has written that “an employee is a person who performs services for another under a contract of hire, subject to the other’s control or right of control, and in return of payment.” First, “contract of hire”, is akin to the athletic grant-in-aid that most revenue-producing college athletes receive. They provide athletic services through this contract and are expected to gain payment in return. Second, McCormick interviewed several college players and found that, “virtually every detail of their lives is carefully controlled by coaches and athletic staff, not only during the season but year around” (McCormick 2009: 647-649). The contemporary case involving the Northwestern players aligns with the McCormick’s law review. Northwestern football players were denied the ability to form a union. The legal ramifications of being able to form a union and thereby be considered employees, has serious implications including eligibility for salary and other employee benefits like workers compensation. Additionally, since the NLRB and the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 does not govern over public universities—and most of the Football Bowl Subdivision (the top 125 Division I football teams) are public universities—it will create a situation where private universities will have altered recruitment and such. Essentially, some college athletes will be employees, and all the benefits that come with that, and some will not, creating further problems. When the big corporations of college sports (like the NCAA) are making billions from television contracts and ticket sales, the latter is struggling to stay above the poverty line. If student-athletes are

exploited, then Black student athletes in some sports may be even more exploited than the average athlete.

## **The Black Student-Athlete**

In 1989, Dexter Manley stood before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities and admitted that he was functionally illiterate despite having graduated from college. Of course, that was almost thirty years ago so it is likely that universities have become stricter in demanding academic success (or mediocrity) from their student-athletes. In turns out, according to NCAA records, that “seventy percent of all black men athletes who play football and basketball in the top two earning programs have the lowest graduation rates of any student group” (Murty and Roebuck 2015: 432). These lower graduation rates suggest that the acadmic aspect of scholarships, the aspect that is so heavily emphasized by the NCAA and the university toward the student-athlete and their parents, is getting lost. Since college athletes have less than a two percent chance of making it to professional sports, there are serious questions about whether coaches are selling this pipe dream to young black athletes who only see the fame and success associated with “making it.”

Athletic fame always seems to lure the gifted black athlete, who is seen as the success symbol for most of the poor black communities. This is highly significant because Blacks represent 46% of football players and 60% of men’s basketball players in Division I Universities in 2009 (Murty and Roebuck 2015: 432). There is this shared notion by white and black coaches, players, fans, students, parents, and so on that black athletes have some intrinsic superiority over white athletes in terms of physical and temperamental prowess that allows them to excel in many

sports. This notion reflects the cultural and social values of many communities—especially predominantly black ones—and explains why Blacks are overrepresented in intercollegiate athletics. Since sixty percent of Black college players believe they will make it to the pros (versus forty percent for Whites) and only 2% or less of them become professional athletes, there is a clear disconnect between their perceptions of that elusive “pipe dream” and reality. Clearly, coaches, friends, and others around these young players are convincing them of the promising athletic career that is not too far out of their reach. When high school and college players are sold on the “pipe dream”, most are less concerned with the academic life that will provide them with more opportunity and chance for occupational and monetary success.

On the discussion of college athlete exploitation, only the perception of the players themselves is analyzed. An example of this can be seen in Krystal K. Beamon’s (2008) study on the perception of exploitation told by student-athletes. She was fortunate enough to do in-depth ethnographic interviews with twenty former African-American student-athletes at Division I universities. She found that not only did 80% of them say they did not have a good college experience, that same percentage described themselves as being “used”, “used up”, and “used and abused” during the relationship with their respective athletic programs (Beamon 2008: 358). Most of these college players did not last in their professional sport and it is not hard to imagine that they are looking to blame someone in their lives other than themselves. Still, they touched on some points in the interviews that researchers use in order to argue that there is exploitation of student-athletes. One interviewee for example, Adam, stated that, “colleges make so much money off of the athletes” and that they “are producing millions for that college but the athletes don’t see any of that” (Beamon 2008: 358). Adam was in fact one of the more successful athletes, playing six years in a semi-professional football league after receiving his bachelor’s



degree in computer science. It appears that these student-athletes are aware that they may be exploited during their athletic careers. They clearly see themselves not making any money from all the ticket sales and television contracts they help to sell through their likeness. So although collegiate sports provided opportunity for African-American males, their serious involvement in athletics on the college level can greatly hinder their academic and occupational achievement.

A study carried out by Van Rheenen and Atwood (2014) looked at how athletes perceived themselves as exploited and furthered the argument for student-athlete exploitation. They used questionnaires in order to ask 750 NCAA Division I college athletes questions about whether they considered themselves exploited by their respective athletic departments and universities. The three questions/statements asked of them are as follows: (a) “Sometimes I feel that I am being taken advantage of as an athlete” (b) “I give more to the university than it gives to me,” and (c) “This university make too much money off its athletes, who see very little of it” (Van Rheenen 2014: 487). Factor loadings were used for the three statements and they all ranged between 0.83 to 0.86. These higher “loadings” according to Van Rheenen and Atwood (2014)—which can be thought of as percentages—suggest strong perception of exploitation among the college athlete participants. Secondly, they found that Black student-athletes are five times as likely to feel exploited compared to White athletes and four times as likely compared to any other racial group. This study helped get more opinions about how student-athletes view their relationship with their athletic departments and universities, and the findings contributed to the argument for the perception that college athletes are exploited. Considering that exploitation is mainly a moral concept, it is important to continue attaining not only perceptions of student-athletes and their relationship with their athletic departments but also of non-athlete stakeholders involved in intercollegiate athletics.

## The Non-Athlete Student

Research on student's perceptions of college athlete exploitation has not been considered and wrongfully so, considering their involvement with intercollegiate athletics. The student body represents a large young population, and they are indirectly involved with college sports by providing the universities free advertisements just by going to the games and showing school spirit. Outside of athletic departments displaying lively students packing the stadiums on websites, flyers, and commercials, students will line up at college bookstores and buy sports gear and showcase that throughout the university, their home towns and through social media. There school-spirited students may become alumni who will donate to the athletic departments and possibly be season ticket holders. In order to better predict if students will become these type of alumni, one can study their opinions on college athlete exploitation to see if they value college sports and the finished product as opposed to the inner-workings that supposedly leads to scandal and the like against the college athlete.

I am proposing that if non-athlete students have their own economic and academic obstacles such as room and board, tuition, and schoolwork, they are likely to believe that college athletes are not exploited. Many students are faced with financial difficulties and mounting school loans, and although many college athletes do not receive full scholarships (around 7%); the general perception is that a much larger percentage of student-athletes are on full scholarship. At-large, students do not receive equal academic tutoring centers and state-of-the-art complexes like college athletes do; the latter being provided with occasional free food, shelter, and entertainment. There may be additional factors such as employment status or school involvement

that will have an influence on how students respond to whether college athletes are exploited or not with employed students and those with school spirit less likely to feel that athletes are exploited.

Several independent variables come to mind that may influence student opinions about college athlete exploitation. For example, I anticipate that the less annual household income of a participant, the more likely they will view college athletes as exploited. A possible explanation for this could be that these participants are more sympathetic to the plight of college athletes because of the struggles they go through themselves. Following this notion, I believe the less loans of participants, the less likely they would view college athletes as exploited. I got the impression that most of the economic and moral independent variables (income, loans, events attended, etc.) would influence student's opinions as they answer the opinion statements. In fact, I predict that the less events attended by participants, the less likely they view college athletes as exploited. Two more of my independent variables, being a season ticketholder and playing an intramural sport, would make participants less likely to think college athletes are exploited.

All of these hypotheses developed from me gaining participant's initial opinion about college athlete exploitation. Gaining that initial opinion is likely to tell me that students are less concerned or not as sure about whether college athletes are exploited. From there, I can give them particular opinion statements, which should make participants think college athletes are more or less exploited depending on the given statement. My hope is that their opinion changes significantly. I also believe that after students receive information about college athletes and I do a reassessment of their opinion on college athlete exploitation, they are more likely to view college athletes as exploited.

Studying student's opinions on this topic can help to reveal athletic interest of a large young population. Analyzing their opinions can also help demonstrate their cultural and social values and whether they are only concerned with watching college games for the entertainment value and not thinking at all about the treatment of their peers. It will take more than literary work from accomplished researchers suggesting structural changes in order to better the treatment of college athletes by the NCAA and universities. Other stakeholders must equally demonstrate concern about this topic and what better group than the college athlete's peer: the student.

## Methods

The university where this study took place is located in the Northeastern portion of the United States and is a member institution of the NCAA and the Big Ten Conference. This particular conference has received plenty of visibility in sports and especially football considering one of their fourteen teams (Ohio State) won the 2015 college football national championship. Many of the teams within this conference, including the school being studied, have been successful in recent years and some of their college football and basketball players have transitioned into the professional ranks. This fact makes the school being studied relevant to the discussion of college athlete exploitation and student opinions on whether these athletes experience exploitation or not.

Convenience sampling was used in this study in order to select non-athlete students within classrooms. The participants in this study were required to meet two criteria: 1) they had to be non-athlete students and (2) registered to at least one traditional course at the school. The principal investigator and I had prior relationships with the faculty who allowed us to use their classrooms for five minutes on one class period. Because of these prior relationships, our sample was easily accessible and available.

The questionnaire was given to 229 undergraduate students at the school, both male and female ages 18 and over. Before administering the survey, the participants were informed of a brief overview of the topic I am studying and informed that they were participating voluntarily. Additionally, the front sheet of the questionnaire details the research I am doing and about how they do not have to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable. The questionnaire begins with ten demographic and probing questions. Some examples are “Do you or any of your friends play intercollegiate sports?” and, “Are you or one of your family members season ticketholders for any Rutgers sport?” These are attempting to account for prior experiences participants may have in considering whether college athletes are exploited. Additionally, they are looking to see if affiliation to Rutgers athletics or intercollegiate sports increases the likelihood of participants believing college athletes are not exploited. There is an eleventh question as well on the front sheet of the questionnaire that asks participants to use a scale of 0 to 100, “0” = not exploited at all and “100” = very exploited. They will use this scale to select any number that accurately reflects their opinion on how exploited they believe college athletes are.

It is important to mention that there are ten opinion statements on my questionnaire. Nine statements were presented to the participants on the back page of the questionnaire. They were asked to read each statement and use the aforementioned scale to give their opinion on the level

of college athlete exploitation given that information. Two example statements are the following:

(1) College athletes get to register before all others students and (2) Surveys show that college athletes put 40-55 hours a week into their sport. These statements provide a brief idea of the plight and benefits of being a college athlete that many participants might be unaware. These questions on the back page aimed at seeing if participants would alter their opinions about student-athlete exploitation after receiving more information about the latter.

## Results

All of the independent variables (such as participant's income, loan debt, events attended, etc.) stemmed from my belief that students are less concerned about the inner-workings of college athletics and I got that impression after collecting my data. I asked participants to tell me whether they believed college athletes are exploited using the scale of "0 to 100" mentioned as a part of my methods, before providing them with any information. Their initial opinion of exploitation is likely to tell me that students are unaware about whether college athletes are exploited. Referring to Table 1, and looking at the question "How exploited do you think college athletes are?" the mean of all participants was 53.54. This tells me that participants were right in the middle, not really sure whether college athletes are exploited or not. This supports my hypothesis and leads me to two more key findings that will be explored later.

I wanted to see if my independent variables would influence student opinions about college athlete exploitation and I tested this by using one-way ANOVA's and paired sample t-tests, trying to find some relationship between each opinion statement and each specific independent variable. For example, I thought if a participant has less household income, they are more likely to view college athletes as exploited. I ran several one-way ANOVA's trying to find a relationship with income and each opinion statement, including college athletes not receiving a wage or salary even though they are a principal producer.

***College Athletes and their salary by income*** (Table1)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than \$24,999	34	69.26	37.902
\$25,000 to \$49,999	40	57.05	31.745
\$50,000 to \$99,999	64	64.77	29.450
\$100,000 or more	70	53.91	33.319
Total	208	60.37	32.986

Looking at Table 1 above, none of the means are consistently going in ascending or descending order. Additionally, the standard deviations are scattered, and the p-value is .081. What this means is that a participant's income did not influence their opinion as they read the opinion statement that college athletes are the principal producers of college athletics, yet they do not receive a wage or salary. As I ran several other tests looking for that same type of relationship between independent variables influencing student's perspectives after they read a given opinion statement, I consistently found no significance between most independent variables and any of the opinion questions. Each one of my p-values were above .150.

I then looked at independent variables like income again, loans, and events attended, to see if they would influence student opinions as they read certain opinion statements and there were some significant findings. I ran one-way ANOVA's looking at income more because I was particularly interested in how the economic background variables might be related to opinions about exploitation after reading a fact about the economic relationship between the university and student-athletes.

***Student fees going to athletics by income*** (Table 2)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than \$24,999	35	70.26	36.469
\$25,000 to \$49,999	41	58.49	38.507
\$50,000 to \$99,999	64	63.17	30.919
\$100,000 or more	68	51.46	34.766
Total	208	59.61	35.104



In Table 2 above, student fees going to athletics by income, the less income participants have, the more likely they viewed college athletes as exploited. This hypothesis is supported as one can see the means in descending order, from 70.26 as participants have less income to a mean of 51.46 as participants reported having higher household income. Additionally, the p-value is at .054 suggesting the significance of this one-way ANOVA. I did however find it peculiar that participants thought college athletes were more exploited given this particular statement about billions of dollars in student fees going to athletics. It could be that participants believed these were extra fees and had to go somewhere. A sociological explanation might be that they have been socialized to anticipate paying fees ever since their first jobs, or even before that as they saw their parents paying taxes and bills. Regardless, with the exception of the one mean dropping in the “\$25,000 to \$49,999” column, the perceptions of exploitation consistently increase as participants have less income, and there is significance with student fees going to athletics by income.

***College athlete’s hours into their sport by income*** (Table 3)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than \$24,999	35	70.00	31.808
\$25,000 to \$49,999	40	51.80	32.562
\$50,000 to \$99,999	64	59.14	26.451
\$100,000 or more	70	55.39	34.133
Total	209	58.30	31.573

A potential moral aspect of college athlete exploitation is related to participant's income. Table 3 shows that as participants household income is less, they are more likely to view college athletes as exploited as they read about how many hours college athletes put into their sport. Participants who make "\$100,000 or more" have a mean of 55.39, and that number increases almost 15 points, as participants who make "less than \$24,999" have a mean of 70.00. The p-value is 0.66 suggesting significance because it appears that income seems to be influencing student opinions on this particular opinion statement.

I found some significance with participants attending games and their opinions on college athlete exploitation. My original hypothesis was that the fewer events participants attended, the more likely they would view college athletes as exploited. A few significant findings were found by running one-way ANOVA's, one of which is shown below.

***College athlete's hours into their sport by event*** (Table 4)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
None	75	60.77	34.117
1-3	67	61.84	27.304
4-7	49	60.12	31.046
8-11	15	38.33	33.202
12 or more	13	40.77	33.345
Total	219	58.23	31.898

In Table 4, I found a relationship with the opinion statement about college athletes putting 40-55 hours of week into their sport—the moral aspect of exploitation—and the amount

of events attended. The less amount of events participants attended, the more exploited they thought college athletes are given this statement. This table shows the means steadily decreasing as participants attend more events and the standard deviations are not very far apart.

Additionally, the p-value is .023. What this could all mean is that the more events participants attend—which might say they enjoy the entertainment value of college sports—the less likely they view college athletes are exploited. These findings support my hypothesis that students who attend the games are more concerned about being entertained and enjoying the games rather than the inner-workings of college athletes, and that explains why participants who attended more games were less likely to view college athletes as exploited. That being said, I would need a larger sample size—especially regarding participants who attend a lot of games—and one could only get that at a university where school-spirit and student attendance to athletic events is very high. That type of student population can be found at the top revenue-producing universities.

***Student Perceptions of College Athlete Exploitation, 2016*** (Table 5)

Tests for perceived exploitation of college athletes	N	Mean (Standard Deviations)	Average change in preconception	Change significance (p-value)
How exploited do you think college athletes are?	224	53.54 (27.43)		
College athletes receiving full scholarship	225	50.41 (32.85)	-3.96 (35.21)	.188

Registration for classes	226	45.66 (38.82)	-8.28 (35.40)	.001
College player's likeness	226	65.20 (33.45)	+11.04 (34.34)	<.001
Student fees going to athletics	222	60.34 (35.03)	+6.00 (31.90)	.002
College athlete's access to facilities/amenities	225	47.20 (38.24)	-6.95 (35.74)	.006
College athletes and their salary	221	61.09 (32.96)	+6.94 (33.60)	.001
<b>Reassessment of perceived exploitation</b>	<b>224</b>	61.71 (26.64)	<b>+7.41</b> (20.49)	<b>&lt;.001</b>

I then thought that particular opinion statements about college athletes on my questionnaire are likely to make participants believe college athletes are more or less exploited depending on the statement I gave them. These were all paired sample t-tests where I found significant change in participant opinion between many opinion statements and the initial perception students had of college athlete exploitation. As I refer to Table 5 above, I will focus on three that go over the economic, legal, and moral aspects of college athlete exploitation. Looking at the “college player’s likeness” row, as participants were given this statement about millions of dollars being made off of college player’s likeness and college athletes receiving none of that money, the mean jumped drastically from their initial opinion of college athlete exploitation. In fact, the average change of perception was +11.04 with a standard deviation of 34.34 and a p-value of <.001. Next, in the “college athletes and their salary”, where college athletes are the principal producers yet they do not receive a wage or salary—quite unlike an

employee would—, the average change in perception here is +6.94 with a standard deviation of 33.60 and a p-value of .001, suggesting that there is a significant increase from their initial opinion about college athlete exploitation and what they thought after reading this statement. Lastly, in the “registration for classes” where I told them that college athletes can register before all other students, their opinion about college athlete exploitation dropped significantly, the average change being -8.28, with a standard deviation of 35.40 and a p-value of .001.

My last hypothesis was that after students receive information about college athletes and do a reassessment of their opinion on college athlete exploitation, they are more likely to view college athletes as exploited. This hypothesis was supported and one can refer to Table 5 again to illustrate said support. There was a significant increase from participant’s initial opinion about college athlete exploitation and their reassessed opinion. The average change in preconception is +7.41, with a significance of <.001.

## Conclusion

Researchers have written many opinion pieces about the possible exploitation of college athletes and received opinions from the former executive director, Walter Byers, university presidents and student-athletes themselves. None of them however have considered the perspective of students. My research studies how exploited students believe college athletes are and asks them this question before providing any additional statements regarding college athletes in the questionnaire. Their initial opinion toward college athlete exploitation was at a mean of

53.54, which aligns with my thinking that students were going to be in the middle of a scale from “0 to 100” because they are not really sure if college athletes are exploited or not.

I considered independent variables such as income, loan debt, or number of athletic events attended by participants to influence student opinions about college athlete exploitation, but most of the paired sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA’s I ran attempting to relate given opinion statements to these independent variables were not significant. There was only some significance in the aforementioned tables.

Finally, I ran additional tests looking at the relationship between participants initial opinion on college athlete exploitation and what they thought after each given statement and I found that as students were given particular statements, such as registration for classes or the amount of money going into student fees, their opinion seemed to sway toward more exploited or less depending on the piece of information. Second, is the significant increase from what students first thought about how exploited college athletes are to their final opinion (the reassessment) after several facts related to college athletes. It seems as though students do not think about this much, which is why they initially put 53.54 in relation to how exploited they believed college athletes—right in the middle—to increasing to 61.71, which, in my estimation, is leaning toward them believing that college athletes may be exploited.

Since prior research did not study student perspectives on college athlete exploitation, there are no particular theories that support my findings, however, I owe most of the structure of how I would ask participants questions to past researchers and their ideas of exploitation. An example of this is Zimbalist’s book (1999), where he considers the value of the overall compensation college players receive by finding the hourly wage of an athlete on a full scholarship; that estimate is a little less than minimum hourly wage. This economic aspect of

exploitation led me to form my opinion statements on the questionnaires. Additional ideas of Zimbalist and the McCormick's law review and NLRB's definition of employee status accounted for some of my legal opinion statements (i.e. college players being principal producers to the college sport industry and not having a wage or salary). Finally, Van Rheenen and several other researchers helped provide a working definition of exploitation, which is simply a consideration of whether it is morally right what takes place between the NCAA and student-athletes. These researchers helped me understand that while studying exploitation of college athletes, one must come up with a definition of exploitation. Additionally—and this is more important—exploitation is based on perspective and one person's idea of exploitation could be vastly different than another's.

Student perspectives on college athletes has been missing in the literature and at the very least adds to the ongoing conversation. And let us consider that students are an important group in this discussion about their peers. They are directly and indirectly involved in intercollegiate sports through student fees going to athletics, free advertisement for the athletic departments as they go to the games, school-spirit, and so on. Their cultural and social values are important to understand because they may continue to financially support college athletics first from student fees while in school to contributions as Alumni. It may be that students put great value on the finished product, as opposed to the inner-workings and potential exploitation of college athletes. Students emphasizing the finished product can lead to there being another large and directly involved group simply enjoying the games and blindly contributing to big-time college sports.

Although I can speak confidently about some of my findings, there are some weaknesses to the design and sample size that limit my research. One issue is how there should have been more recoding on two demographic questions, #6 about loan debt and #7 with the amount of

athletic events attended by participants. Time acted as a limitation on not only the proper recoding for some of the questions, but also on the sample size. If I was able to hand out more questionnaires to other classrooms, it is likely that I can speak more confidently about the findings I have now. What makes my findings strong are their relevance and their contribution. Students are directly and indirectly involved as mentioned before, speaking to why it is relevant to gain their perspective about their peers. It is contributory because many researchers used the perspectives of someone—Walter Byers, university presidents, student-athletes, and their own opinion—as the basis of their research, but none of them looked at student’s perspective.

Because of my smaller sample size, I am hoping further research could improve on the amount of participants to take the questionnaire. Additionally, one-on-one interviews of students may also be useful, but going into classrooms and handing out questionnaires is the most efficient way to obtain participants. My original hypotheses, believing that certain independent variables like income and loan debt would influence student opinions, was not supported. If further research could get a larger sample size, this may help in relating the opinion statements with the independent variables. It would be interesting if one gains student perspectives from a “sports fanatic” institution, where school-spirit—and we can tell this by stadium and arena attendance—is high and the universities make a lot of profit. Additionally, further research could adjust some of the opinion statements so as to provide a more economic telling of the college athlete experience. What I mean is that there may be clearer economic facts regarding college athletics that would appeal to participants with lower household income or participants with higher school loan debt.

What we can take from this research is that the students were not really sure about whether college athletes are exploited or not. This can have serious implications because they



financially contribute in the form of student fees and help advertise for big-time college sports. These students in my research were not aware of the inner-workings of intercollegiate athletics and some of the plight that college athletes, their peers, endure. Fortunately, as I gave students opinion statements about college athletes, a reassessment of their opinion showed a significant increase on how exploited they thought college athletes are. Making students aware about the college athlete experience has the potential to increase their belief that college athletes are exploited and that very fact is why the student perspective on the college athlete must exist.

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