A Data-Driven Approach to NCAA Scholarships Distribution Limits

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Fair treatment of NCAA student-athletes has been a growing issue in the media and scholarship (McLeran, 2017; Sobocinski, 1996). Lawsuits claiming that NCAA rules limiting athletes’ scholarships violate anti-trust law have prompted the NCAA to extend their scholarship limits to include cost of attendance, and current litigation is asking for a free market for football, men’s basketball and women’s basketball players to negotiate their own deals without limitations (O’Bannon v. NCAA, 2015; Alston, v. NCAA, 2019).

In addition to these issues, the current NCAA scholarship limits have been criticized for the inequity in scholarship allocations between sports and for the “head count” and “equivalency” designations. Previous research from Kantor, Weight, and Osborne (2019) investigated the history of NCAA scholarships regulations, finding many decisions driven by football and men’s basketball and more modest adjustments for Title IX and cost containment. This scholarship model has remained stagnant for 20 years while college athletics has changed dramatically (Kantor et al., 2019).

Legislative evolution in the NCAA is replete with a whack-a-mole management approach wherein issues that pop up are quickly dismissed through rushed legislative proposals. As media pressure intensifies, these decision-making processes are increasingly susceptible to criticism. Scholars are able to provide insight and pressure to correct legislative mistakes of the past and pave a road for future policy. Given the random and flawed methodology of the current scholarships model (Kantor et al., 2019), this research sought to identify a data-driven, pragmatic, and equitable model to better serve all student-athletes.

We utilized a critical pragmatic examination of the NCAA scholarships limitations. An alternative to foundational theory, pragmatism has a shared critique of normative, reasonable philosophy with an emphasis on the practical, experiential consequences of a concept (Brake, 2007). The EADA Cutting tool provided data on participation opportunities, sports offered per school, participants per sport, and financial aid spent on men and women student-athletes, and the NCAA Division I Manual identified current NCAA scholarship limits and designations.

Three scholarship models were created to facilitate equitable division of scholarship allocations based on average roster size, NCAA travel squad size, and starting line-up for each sport. Within each model three variants were created to more fully address historic concerns and alternative lenses of fairness. These models were then vetted by a panel of experts including researchers (n = 8), collegiate athletics consultants (n =5), coaches (n = 25), administrators (n = 10), and retired athletes (n = 10) in order to create one recommended model. A brief overview of the historical foundation of NCAA scholarship limits based on NCAA archival data will be presented in addition to the foundational models and variants, and the recommended model which classifies all sports as equivalency while setting limits on the maximum percentage of student-athletes who receive full cost-of-attendance scholarships on each roster. This research provides a framework for future research and practice in the ever-evolving landscape of intercollegiate athletics.