

Cecil Gracy

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Investigative Essay

Name, Image, and Likeness: The Future of College Sport

Imagine you're a high school senior athlete suddenly given the opportunity to earn millions of dollars as an 18-year-old freshman before you've even played a professional game. Before July 1, 2021, that possibility seemed completely unrealistic. Today, that dream has become a reality and has quite literally changed the dynamics of college athletics. For decades, NCAA athletes have generated billions of dollars for colleges and universities through endorsements, advertisements, and merchandise sales. Yet, they have received no compensation beyond their scholarships. That changed when Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) came into the picture. Under NIL, "athletes were permitted to profit from their own name, image and likeness (NIL) while maintaining eligibility to compete in NCAA-sponsored sports" (Potter and White 1133). Although NCAA rules prohibit compensation from being used as "pay-for-play", it is likely that this happens behind the scenes, with four- and five-star athletes being offered millions of dollars to simply *play* for a college. This major shift in NCAA policy is highly controversial, especially since the NCAA has long opposed athletes earning money outside of school-issued scholarships. Supporters of NIL believe it creates fairness for students and benefits their schools in the long run. However, critics contend that student-athletes still have "student" in their titles, meaning they are not yet professionals and should not be compensated as such until they become professionals. This leads me to the following question...how will Name, Image, and Likeness

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Commented [cg3]: Under the table → behind the scenes to make the phrase more professional. Added dollars and simply to make the sentence more straightforward and understanding

Commented [cg4]: Unclear pronoun of "one" changed to 'professionals'

ultimately reshape the future of collegiate sports through its impact on athlete compensation, recruiting, university finances, and student-athletes' priorities?

Commented [cg5]: Made the research question less ambiguous by making it more direct in regard to what will be discussed in the body paragraphs.

Before taking a deep dive into examining the effects of Name, Image, and Likeness, it is important to understand the basics of the policy and why it was introduced. NIL refers to the ability of student-athletes to legally earn income through advertisements, endorsement deals, and the use of their image online. The policy was created to help monetize their personal brand without jeopardizing their eligibility to compete for their schools. Now that it has been in effect for a few years, some have begun to question the integrity of many universities' tactics in approaching the matter, as well as the fairness of the system to all recruits. According to a study by Medcalfe and Ehrlich, athletes—particularly men—with larger Instagram or X followings earned more money than those with fewer. In short, they determined that gender and sport are the strongest factors influencing the athletes' pay (9). Although these factors may be the strongest predictors of athletes' overall NIL income, the policy has quickly become much more than endorsement deals and wealth for individual athletes.

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One of the greatest benefits of NIL is that it now allows athletes to profit from the talent they have spent their adolescent years developing. Before the policy, the millions of dollars these young players were generating went only to universities and the NCAA, while those driving the organizations' success—the players—were granted only scholarships. Today, NIL has enabled athletes to earn money not only from scholarships but also from endorsements, social media partnerships, and even autograph signings. With some athletes earning well north of a million dollars annually, they can now support their families and repay those who have invested their money and time in their advancement. This also provides financial security in the event of a tragedy during college. For example, if an athlete were to sustain a career-ending injury, his

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chances of making it to the National Football League (NFL) would be nonexistent – in other words, no payout for him or his family. Beyond improving the lives and well-being of athletes, Name, Image, and Likeness has **also helped prepare them for professional opportunities once their athletic careers come to an end.**

Aside from making athletes more financially stable, NIL has also transformed college athletes into entrepreneurs and influencers. Rather than solely focusing on athletic performance, athletes now devote time to financial management and personal branding, which can attract sponsors and do something much more valuable: help prepare them for the future. The bitter truth is that “fewer than 2 percent of NCAA student-athletes go on to be professional athletes” (National Federation 2), **leaving some stranded and contemplating what to do next. By making complex business and financial decisions, NIL has opened doors for athletes who cannot or choose not to reach the next level. Molly Harry, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, conducted a field survey of 200 student-athletes, 21 of whom were from Power Five schools, to assess how NIL has influenced their day-to-day personal and professional lives. The participants' responses were overwhelmingly positive about the new policy.** One participant stated, “It’s been great to feel seen and have your hard work in a sport help in other parts of life. It’s really nice to use NIL on a resume as marketing experience” (Harry para. 7). In the digital world we live in, learning how to manage wealth and portray a presentable and professional image of yourself has become a necessary skill. **While NIL may prepare players for careers beyond professional athletics, the policy has also produced unexpected financial impacts on universities, specifically boosters.**

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Deleted: also had an unexpected impact on universities, specifically on boosters.

Commented [cg10]: Entire Paragraph was moved from paragraph 5 to para 4 because the paragraph that comes before this one also focuses on NIL’s benefits which I believed made it flow more smoothly and in order.

Commented [cg11]: Removed “something of” to fix incorrect phrasing

Commented [cg12]: Fixed sentence structure and punctuation

Commented [cg13]: Original did not match the works cited

Commented [cg14]: Instead of “their” I added the “participants” to correct the unclear pronoun

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Many critics believed that once NIL became active, it would weaken the financial support from boosters. Potter and White conducted a study to test the validity of this conjecture. The results were contrary to what the critics believed; in fact, they were the opposite. Their statistical analysis found that, surprisingly, major donors increased their support after the policy was introduced (1133). This greater financial support not only helped universities attract high-caliber players but also enabled them to improve training facilities and the hiring of coaching staff. It should be noted, however, that the researchers acknowledged these findings primarily favor the wealthy (Power Four and Power Five schools), whose large alumni bases and high-profile boosters serve as significant financial resources. Thus, the gap between small schools and schools that consistently contend in major sports is widening, making it progressively more challenging for small programs to compete for top talent. While NIL has undoubtedly changed university finances, differences in schools' financial resources have also reshaped the recruiting process.

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Commented [cg20]: Fixed Clunky wording

Commented [cg21]: Fixed transition post paragraph reorganization

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Comparing the difference between recruiting before and after NIL is night and day. It further illustrates how athletes' priorities will continue to evolve. Before NIL, most athletes went to the university they wanted to based on familial connections, lifelong loyalty, the team and staff they connected with best, or the school's proximity to home. Nowadays, if you're a four- or five-star athlete and your dad's favorite team is not doing too well financially, most players are going to 'sell out' to the team that offers them the most money. Ryan Casey's coverage of Christian McCaffrey's commitment to Stanford is an example of what is considered unusual today. In this article, Casey emphasizes how impactful Christian's decision really was. Despite receiving offers from various powerhouse football programs, McCaffrey chose Stanford, not just because he wanted to represent the school his dad played for, but also because he grew up a fan

and wanted to attend an academically competitive university (para 2-5). The sad truth is that decisions like McCaffrey's were relatively common among elite recruits. In the present day, however, many athletes must also weigh lucrative NIL opportunities that could be life-changing financially, not just for them but for their families.

While recruiting has certainly become more of a money contest, research suggests the policy's overall impact may not be as extreme as some members of the general public view it. Even so, it is undeniable that collegiate sports are more money-driven than they once were. Pitts and Evans wrote an article using recruiting data from 247 Sports. It features stories told through the eyes of different coaches – along with their stances on the matter. One notable scenario was the dramatic juxtaposition between Head Coach Nick Saban and Jimbo Fisher, who criticized each other's recruiting methods. Saban told the press that Jimbo “bought every player on their team” through NIL deals, while claiming he “didn’t buy one player” (317). This situation is ironic, considering Jimbo used to work under Saban as his assistant years ago. Despite these highly publicized examples, the researchers conclude that NIL has not completely redistributed talent. Instead, they claim that the universities have reinforced existing advantages rather than completely redistributing dominance among programs (329). This is evident in historically successful programs, which remain successful because of the resources they have accumulated over time to attract elite players. On the other hand, what is unlikely to stay the same is the athletes’ priorities.

Opponents of NIL argue that it has shifted the athletes’ focus and priorities to somewhat narcissistic ideals like personal image and material possessions. With the alluring opportunities NIL presents, it is understandable that many *student*-athletes focus less on education and place

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Commented [cg27]: Unpacked more of the Pitts and Evans summary instead of immediately jumping to the next source. I did this to help the reader gain a better grasp of what the quote meant, going beyond the obvious.

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more emphasis on financial gain. Instead, their priority should be to position themselves as role models for their university. If they do not, this shift in focus could reduce the likelihood of achieving their sporting dreams. A prime example of this is Bronny James. In an article written by Hayes Patton, he points to athletes such as James, who received multimillion-dollar NIL deals while only being a senior in high school, with major brands like Nike and Beats by Dre. These deals generated enormous attention before he even stepped foot onto the court he would play at in college (para. 1). Today, he may still have a contract with the Lakers, but his single-game high was 11 points, and he is spending most of his time in the (lesser) G League. Patton also sheds light on the poor financial habits many athletes have adopted, featuring athletes such as Caleb Williams, who bought a Porsche Taycan (\$100,000+) and leased a penthouse in Los Angeles (para. 6). Patton concludes with a wistful statement that “Student athletes are now essentially professional athletes pursuing money, as opposed to the promise of an education” (para. 9). Although Patton’s article is opinion based, rather than scholarly, many of his assertions make logical sense reflecting criticisms commonly expressed among NIL critics.

In the light of evidence, Name, Image, and Likeness has both strengthened and complicated the world surrounding college athletics. On one hand, athletes now receive fair compensation for the value they generate, gain the ability to securely support their families financially, develop professional non-athletic skills, and enjoy greater freedom over their own identities. However, the critical sports fan has legitimate concerns. NIL has increased recruiting pressures in ways many feel are unethical, widened not only the financial gap between bigger and smaller schools, but also the skill gap, encouraged some athletes to prioritize their image over school loyalty and education, and most controversially, placed ridiculous amounts of money in their bank accounts. This leads to poor decision-making and the creation of bad habits that

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may take a toll on their lives in the future. So, how will Name, Image, and Likeness ultimately impact the future of collegiate sports? Based on the various sources examined, NIL will undoubtedly continue to reshape college athletics rather than simply improve or harm it. As NIL continues to evolve through policy changes, formulation, and regulation, its long-term impact will depend heavily on how effectively these challenges are addressed. All in all, I do not feel there is a single correct or incorrect viewpoint regarding NIL. Instead, it should be viewed as an inevitable evolution of sport. Its broader significance lies in how the policy has blurred the line between college and professional athletes. This should bring a call to action for universities, the NCAA, and athletes to reconsider what college sports are meant to represent. Moving forward, the future should be up to the NCAA, fans, and alumni to come together with a single goal: to make collegiate sports better than the year before.

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