

College athletes are being educated, not exploited

By Val Ackerman and Larry Scott



(CNN)As March Madness ends with millions of Americans watching college basketball games, the values of intercollegiate athletics and higher education have never seemed more important.

As former college athletes who now coordinate athletic programs at universities ranging from as many as 40,000 undergraduate students at Arizona State University to as few as 4,000 students at Providence College, we can attest that hundreds of thousands of students across the country benefit enormously from playing sports.

We know that playing a sport in college teaches young people lessons that last a lifetime, such as time management, leadership skills and teamwork, along with how to handle winning and losing.

At a time when student debt is a major national issue, the men's and women's basketball players in our conferences don't have to worry about oppressive financial obligations when they leave school.

They go to college on full scholarships, and when they graduate, most graduate debt-free. They receive cost of attendance benefits, meaning their day-to-day needs, such as food, housing, clothing, gas, and trips home, are covered. They also get high quality medical care, academic support and quality travel experiences, in some cases globally. By some measures, these students receive more in benefits than the average American makes in a year in income.

In fact, the 170,000 athletes who play Division I sports are the beneficiaries of the nation's second largest college financial aid program, second only to the GI Bill. It's privately funded, paid for largely by TV contracts that allow supporters from around the country to follow teams from the schools they love. We refer to the scholarships these students receive when they're accepted to the colleges of their choice.

Importantly, many students who play sports are the [first in their families](#) to attend college, in large part thanks to the scholarships they receive. And if history is any guide, 67% of all Division I athletes will go on to become college graduates, a slightly higher graduation rate than that of their fellow students who do not play on NCAA sports teams.

These athletes also receive something even more important: they're taught how to be successful in college and in life.

In recent years, however, critics of college sports have alleged that these students are exploited. The students should get a salary, the critics say, because their schools generate revenues from the TV contracts that carry certain college games.

Our critics see college sports as professional sports. It's true that some men's college basketball players play for only a year or two, and then go pro. Critics want people to think these athletes are the rule, not the exception.

But they are the exception, not the rule.

Of the 1,210 students who played Division I men's basketball in 2013 (the latest year data is available), only 3.9% [were drafted](#) into the National Basketball Association.

The overwhelming majority of college students who play a sport know that college will be the last time they suit up and play competitively a game they've enjoyed since they were kids. They recognize that college is ultimately about getting a degree and getting ready for life long after their playing days are over.

They're not exploited. They're educated.

As executives who ran two different professional women's sports organizations, we pay special attention to the impact college athletics have on the careers of women today. A [recent study](#) by the EY Women Athletes Business Network and espnW showed that the majority (52%) of top C-suite women business executives played a sport at the university level, compared to 39% of women at other management levels. Further, according to the Harvard Business Review, "Three out of four C-suite women executives said that [job] candidates' involvement in sport influences their hiring decisions, because they believe people who have played sports make good professionals."

College is a time for learning, and college sports provide young men and women alike a chance to learn, grow, graduate and achieve great things in life. College graduates make

more in earnings than non-graduates, and for countless students, it's athletics that give them the chance to get a degree and become successful.

We hope the day never arrives when students are paid salaries, turned into professionals because of lawsuits that disregard these critical principles. These are not professional athletes. They're students. It's that simple.

If the critics prevail, higher education will never be the same again. And that would be a march into madness.