

# The Economic Effects of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) on Athletes, Coaches, and Universities

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## ABSTRACT

Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) has blown up in universities across the United States with athletes having the opportunity to earn money whilst being a student. The top high school stars earn more than 6-figure contracts during their collegiate careers and have deals with some of the most prominent brands in the world, all before entering the professional level. In addition, NIL has proved vital in aiding many young athletes' families who were previously suffering with their finances. Consequently, there is more demand for athletes to attend university, rather than try to go professional right away. This benefits both the school and student because the player receives an education, while the college attains an asset to boost their brand's popularity.

On the other hand, NIL also has the ability to negatively impact any university. With colleges having millions of dollars in order to entice athletes to commit to their teams, these high schoolers tend to choose the college with the highest offer instead of their actual favorite choice. This affects the role of college coaches heavily, as NIL is a significant portion of their recruiting and can determine if they keep their jobs or not. The presence of NIL is profound, in both increasingly positive and negative ways with its future development.

## INTRODUCTION

The following research is based upon answering the question: how does Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) affect both athletes and their universities, in terms of sponsors, revenue, and contracts?

Before the introduction of NIL, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) prohibited any athletes from profiting from their ability and popularity. Major stars that were attracting millions of new viewers were barred from the earnings that they produced for their schools, television networks, and more. Thus, secret deals between universities coaches and recruits occurred where players would be paid through gifts, secret cash deals, and other illegal measures.

As a result, in order to attempt to satisfy all parties, legislation, starting with the Fair Pay to Play Act (California 2019), for the creation of NIL was passed and has formed what is present today.

The significance of this question is shown through the multitude of lives it affects. The ways that NIL is utilized can result in massive success or failure, which could have major implications on many peoples' futures.

The motivation of this research is to critically analyze the effects that NIL has on different parties, along with NIL's role in a student-athlete's life and how it will alter in the near future.

In the research, findings will be made on how colleges utilize NIL for recruitment, the types of deal that collegiate athletes attain, how coaches are influenced by NIL, and the benefits of taking the collegiate route. In order to evaluate NIL, the results are categorized into a SWOT analysis model in order to determine how successful and lucrative NIL is for the college game.

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats; through this methodology, the results will portray the impact that NIL has caused in just its first few years of being implemented. By organizing the research into areas of success and areas of growth, the reader will be able to have their own perspective on NIL's current utilization.

As a result, there has been no surprise to anyone following NIL's development on how monumental it has been for the sport. Athletes from across the country have the opportunity to make between thousands to millions of dollars in profit before even entering any professional leagues. In addition, their universities connect them with brand deals that can be with them even after graduating. With these NIL incentives, coaches have the power to use their universities' resources in order to persuade their recruits into attending their programs.

However, the grand influence of NIL has also caused a major decrease in the competitiveness and fairness of the sports as well. Smaller colleges do not have the same financial capabilities as the elite ones and can almost never get any of their top targets. Thus, it is almost impossible for them to compete with the larger schools they are up against at times. Consequently, the coaches struggle with keeping their positions because the outcomes are now under their control even less.

Overall, the majority agree that NIL has had a positive influence on collegiate sports, as players are now receiving compensation for their name, image, and likeness that is on display in the national stage.

Fortunately, there was abundant information on the NIL contracts that the major collegiate athletes have during their careers before going pro; however, many of the details of the contracts were not revealed due to privacy concerns. Also, there were some limitations in finding how the universities connect the brands with their athletes. In the future, I would research how the NIL money is allocated by universities across all their athletes and sports. Some sports, like football and basketball, generate millions more than others, so it would be interesting to understand how the universities decide to spread the money.

## **BACKGROUND**

Prior to the year 2019, collegiate athletes across all US universities were barred from earning any amount of money during their span in college for their skills and ability. While the universities that these players

were representing were making millions upon millions of dollars, not a penny was distributed to any form of direct payment for their athletes.

This was due to the guidelines of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which oversaw the practices of all the athletic programs in U.S. universities. Their rules stated that an athlete was prohibited from selling the rights to their name, image, and likeness (aka NIL). Thus, in order to recruit an athlete to their university, coaches sometimes utilized illegal measures to essentially bribe the players into committing to their teams. A major instance of this occurred through the recruitment of Reggie Bush: a college football star at the University of Southern California. According to the LA Times, “In 2006, the NCAA launched an investigation into reports that Bush and his family received cash, travel expenses and a rent-free home from two prospective sports agents while at USC, which were against NCAA policies at the time”(Schilken 2024). Obviously, these actions by the universities only intensified the issue regarding if players deserved to be paid. On one hand, you had the NCAA who believed NIL earnings would tarnish fair competition, athletes’ amateurism, and their educational development; however, the other side argued that these young adults were being exploited without compensation.

As a result, after many years of lawsuits and controversies over the issue, California enforced the Fair Pay to Play Act in 2019, allowing “athletes to be compensated for promotional opportunities.” Consequently, 33 other states, as of 2020, followed California’s standing by enforcing similar legislation within their borders, forcing the NCAA to change their perspective on what is now known as “NIL”.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Players**

The research began through analyzing how NIL mainly affects the players, along with their respective universities.

### **(S)trengths**

#### **Financial Support for Families**

To kick off with the strengths, players can earn money in order to support their families and profit off their abilities. Through NIL, many college athletes now have the opportunity to earn money and aid their families’ financial situations. In an article published by Fordham University, “According to a study by Drexel University, 86% of collegiate athletes live below the federal poverty line, even though the average value of a Division I football or basketball player can range anywhere from \$120,000 to over \$265,000”(Bongiovanni, 2020). With the implementation of NIL monetization, these players can use the money earned from their brand deals in order to support their struggles. If someone is an exceptional athlete at a sport, there is a possibility for them to completely change their family’s income status: “[...]24/7 Sports reported that the University of Southern California would look to be giving [Jordan Addison] a \$3 million N.I.L. deal”(Nivison, 2022). The earnings that these players can receive allow for complete shifts in their ways of life and provide a chance for greater welfare for their loved ones as well.

### **Collegiate vs. Professional Route**

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To add on, NIL promotes more interest in athletes electing the collegiate route, instead of going to professional leagues right away. NIL promotes more athletes to pursue the collegiate route rather than go straight to professional leagues because of the financial and future benefits. This conflict of college vs. professional mainly occurs in the sport of basketball. For the majority of professional sports leagues, the players who join are athletes who competed at the college level. However, the NBA allows athletes from foreign professional leagues to be drafted in conjunction with the NCAA men's basketball league. As a result, many stars, such as Lamelo Ball (NBA All-Star), have chosen to take the route of playing in foreign professional leagues until eligible to join the NBA. However, NIL provides opportunities for these athletes to attain brand deals that they can continue to hold onto after their collegiate careers.

### **Education & “Job” Together**

In addition, these players will be able to receive an education in college whilst raking in money. For example, Cooper Flagg, the No. 1 overall pick of the 2025 NBA Draft, was able to get a \$13 million deal with New Balance and a \$15 million one with Fanatics during his one year at Duke University. Now, he will be able to receive an NBA contract, while still holding the brand deals he made through NIL. The combination of setting up connections for the future and receiving an essential education portray how NIL is a genuine factor in grabbing many top-tier athletes into the collegiate route.

### **NIL Sponsorships**

Finally, NIL contributes to greater media activity through sponsor-athlete collaboration. As a result of earning money through NIL collectives and brand deals, many athletes participate in media activity for the brands they work with. Examples include promoting these brands on their personal social media accounts (with hundreds of thousands of followers in some cases) or making appearances for the brand on a national scale through advertisement. This is shown through how former gymnast Livvy Dunne rose to fame. As a result of the millions of followers that the LSU athlete had on her social media accounts, numerous brands desired to work with her in order to promote their products. Thus, “[as of February 2025] her endorsements are valued at \$4.1 million, making her the No. 1 ranked women's athlete[...]" (Maine, 2025). These relationships boost the popularity of both the player and the brand. The followers of both parties become more familiar with the other and tend to show a greater sense of liking as well. Thus, the hope is that the player's role within the brand will increase revenue for the company and allow for the athlete to continue earning money through the sponsorship.

### **(W)eaknesses**

#### **Money Over Education**

On the flip side, there are a handful of weaknesses that are present due to NIL. A majority of the time, players put a higher priority on their NIL packages' in order to decide which university to attend. As a result of the significant impact that NIL can have on players' lives, it is obvious that the amount of money which comes from its deals play a major factor in deciding what school to attend. In the past, important pieces for players to decide included the coach, education, prestige, and opportunity offered by each university. However, NIL has made it so players choose to prioritize the profits over education. A major instance of this occurred in late 2024 when Bryce Underwood, the top high school football recruit of the 2025 class, chose to flip his commitment from Louisiana State University (LSU) to the University of

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Michigan - Ann Arbor because of an NIL offer made by the latter of more than \$10 million. This hurts the integrity of the sport significantly because it brings to light how modern collegiate sports are transitioning towards money over passion. Playing for a specific university used to be a dream for all because of the personal connection, but now it all comes down to NIL.

### **Mental Health Effects**

Also, NIL has the capability to produce negative mental health effects. Many college athletes want the opportunity to be a part of NIL deals and start making money earlier in their careers. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of players who can attain these opportunities due to their popularity, ability, and potential. Thus, tons of aspiring athletes are not considered for NIL, despite it being a major desire for them. This harsh truth takes a toll on many of these athletes in many ways. “NIL may negatively impact student-athlete mental health and even locker room culture. Seeing NIL opportunities potentially diminish due to lack of playing time, or other student-athletes getting better NIL opportunities, for example, could be disheartening for student-athletes, and lead to increased mental health concerns”(Massey, 2021). Imagine if a player just got their first NIL deal, but a week later suffered a season-ending injury. Consequently, the brand finds out and revokes their partnership because of the current circumstances. The presence of NIL causes players to be obsessed with it in many cases and ultimately can hurt a lot of them as well.

### **Decreased Competition**

Furthermore, there is less overall competition because the most popular schools have the largest NIL opportunities. Before NIL, college sports at the NCAA Division 1 level were usually dominated by a certain group of schools. This group consisted of universities hailing from the Power 5 conferences across the country (Pac-12, Big 12, Big 10, SEC, and ACC). All the top recruits would attend these universities and create more revenue for the schools by winning on the national stage. Consequently, when NIL was introduced, these schools were able to have even more influence of bringing in the best of the best. “The financial literature on higher education administration shows sports programs are often only strong fiscal investments if a university is a sports powerhouse with competitive NCAA Division 1 programs”(Meares, 2024). Brands want to ensure that they want to get a high return on investment, so they choose to only work with the schools that can guarantee that outcome. As a result, the competition between these colleges and the rest of the pack gets diluted because of the difference in skill. This hurts viewership because there is less entertainment as everyone already knows what the result will be.

### **(O)pportunities**

#### **Future Sponsorship Avenues**

Though, many opportunities exist to permit NIL to flourish in the coming years. NIL’s framework can create a larger network of sponsorship connections due to initial success of the system. NIL has already become a massive success within the first few years of its implementation. In fact, “The total NIL market is projected to reach an astronomical \$1.67 billion in 2024-25, which is up from the \$917 million in 2021-22 when college NIL was introduced”(Berg, 2024). This demonstrates the benefits that many of these brands have reaped through their partnerships with the student-athletes and universities. Their revenues’ are increasing, in part, due to the gigantic audience they are gaining from these players’

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influence. Thus, it is only logical to assume more corporations plan to join the NIL party and attain the benefits as well. These universities and players will be able to have a wide array of networks with various industries because of the attraction that NIL is creating.

### **Direct Payment from Universities**

Moreover, there is a possibility of schools sharing their revenue with their own athletes. As a result of the recent deal known as the “House settlement” reached in early June of 2025, university athletic programs will be allowed to directly pay their athletes for their name, image, and likeness (NIL). Contrary to the Fair Pay to Play Act in 2019, schools now hold the ability to use their money in recruitment. This is a significant breakthrough in the collegiate sports world as this practice was banned by the NCAA prior to this point. Now, “schools [can] share revenue directly with student-athletes up to an annual cap of \$20.5 million in 2025-26. The cap is expected to increase by around 4%—about \$1 million—each year, ending at an estimated \$32.9 million in 2034-35. Full cost-of-attendance scholarships and other benefits currently permitted by the NCAA would generally be excluded from the revenue-sharing cap”. This will allow college coaches to be able to provide a concrete number, to the athletes they want to recruit, about how much they could make by attending the university. Issues such as bribing and other illegal measures are bound to decrease, as coaches now have the ability to legally provide money to athletes outside of scholarship. There are still some conflicts with state laws to ensure this will be fully in effect, but Congress seems to have made it their intention to allow the NCAA to bypass these regulations.

### **(T)hreats**

#### **Transfer Portal Volatility**

Despite this, NIL is still fairly new and faces a multitude of threats towards its development. The transfer portal is causing athletes to not be dedicated to one university, but rather pursue the highest NIL deal offered. The portal is a method in which athletes can choose to leave their current university and be picked up by another. The reasons for an athlete to enter the transfer portal include: unsatisfactory university experience, searching for larger NIL incentives, relationship with team, and other reasons. A reason for why the transfer portal has become extremely popular is because “the NCAA is quickly transitioning from a bureaucracy to an adhocracy. An adhocracy is an organization that is defined by a highly organic structure, scant formalization of behavior, low standardization of procedures, and selected decentralization (Towers, 2011).” Through this more fluid structure, athletes have a much easier process of transferring.

#### **Commitment Concerns**

Thus, in conjunction with the rising popularity of NIL, many of these athletes desire to pursue routes with more bountiful NIL possibilities if they are unhappy with their current situation. This is detrimental to universities because they cannot be assured that the players they recruited will stick with them throughout their college careers, will have to invest more money to keep their athletes, and more malicious social media activity will appear for both the athletes and the athletic programs.

#### **Lack of NIL Education**

Additionally, universities do not provide adequate resources for athletes to understand how to navigate NIL. As the majority of college athletes are within the ages of 18-22, they need a lot of assistance in order to be able to understand and navigate through how NIL affects them. Through these deals, tons of money are being streamed into these players' accounts, but at what cost? The contracts that are presented to the athletes may have many hidden details that could negatively impact the player in another manner. For example, they might be prohibited from using certain brands because of competition or be required to do activities they would prefer not to participate in. Also, it is important to note that, "[...]the NCAA does not have any guardrails to limit how much a player can earn in N.I.L. deals and where that money is coming from"(Wiggins, 2022). Consequently, it is essential that these athletes are informed and have sufficient resources to their avail from the universities. However, many universities seem to lack this necessity within their athletics department, which leaves many of their student-athletes prone to exploitation.

### **Decreased NIL Funding**

In late July of 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order termed "Saving College Sports". According to the President and White House, "The Order prohibits third-party , pay-for-play payments to collegiate athletes. This does not apply to legitimate, fair-market-value compensation that a third provides to an athlete, such as brand endorsement"(2025). This has major implications for the major universities that utilize "third-party, pay-for-play payments" in order to recruit their athletes. Now, these colleges will have to rely more on their NIL collectives (brand connections), rather than using the millions of dollars that were being "donated" to them by wealthy partners. In many ways, this is beneficial to college sports as the competition gap will be smaller with more top players attending a greater variety of schools. Though, this also negatively impacts the athletes because they will likely be receiving less money from their NIL deals than their predecessors a couple years before.

### **Coaches**

#### **(S)trengths**

#### **Recruitment Power**

It is important to understand that coaches are also heavily affected by NIL. Primarily, NIL gives coaches more power for recruitment. Many coaches are able to utilize the connections that their universities have with brands (NIL collectives) in order to produce large-scale offers for their recruits. Naturally, the larger and more popular the school is, the greater the power these coaches have in reeling in their desired targets. For example, The Athletic reported, "Basketball star JT Toppin[...]remained at Texas Tech following his All-American season in 2024-2025 by reportedly signing a \$3 million deal with the school's NIL collective"(Mandel, 2025). Toppin was considering transferring to another university in order to gain more NIL money or play at a higher level; however, this gargantuan offer made it so Toppin had no other choice but to stay because of the earnings he would get. This allows the coaches of these top-tier universities to succeed at a higher extent and not have to worry about their jobs as much. By having the best players in the nation come to them because of the money, the coaches know that their teams have the ability to be the best.

#### **(W)eaknesses**

#### **NIL > Coach**

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However, coaching is not the most important factor in recruits' decisions. With NIL in play, the best high school athletes desire the option to be able to make the most money possible. Consequently, the modern trend for collegiate recruitment is moving towards whoever can offer the highest bid to the players. According to Nick Saban, the University of Alabama Head Coach for football, ““Maybe 70 or 80 percent of the players you talk to, all they want to know is two things: What assurances do I have that I’m going to play because they’re thinking about transferring, and how much are you going to pay me?””(Friedman, 2024). Nick Saban is regarded by many to be one of the best college football head coaches of all time. Winning championships constantly and sending many of his players to the National Football League (NFL), all high school football players know how impressive he is. Yet, these players choose to prioritize their profits over values such as their development in skill and character. As a result, coaches only have so much NIL power before it becomes virtually impossible to meet the demands of all their recruits.

## **(O)pportunities**

### **Increased Coach Popularity**

There is opportunity for coaches to earn from NIL deals. While players produce the majority of attention and revenue for the collegiate sports world, coaches also play a major factor into the action that ensues. There is tons of media coverage on these coaches and they are in the spotlight for much longer periods of time than the players who join and graduate from their programs. Dawn Staley, the head coach for the women’s basketball team of the University of South Carolina, has over half a million followers on her instagram account. Despite the fact that she gets a fixed contract and has the opportunity to work with brands, the NCAA prohibits coaches from “being employed by NIL collectives”(Brice, 2022). There are an abundance of brands that would love to work with these coaches through NIL and it will only benefit both parties as well. In fact, these coaches are a much safer bet than the players, in many situations, because they are more likely to be at their respective programs for longer durations.

## **(T)hreats**

### **High Pressure on Coaches**

Though, there is a high risk of losing coaching jobs because of NIL impact in leagues. The addition of NIL has put a load of pressure on college head coaches that are trying to efficiently manage the new collegiate system. With players constantly demanding higher NIL deals and entering the transfer portal more frequently, coaches have an extremely tough time navigating how to produce the best team possible. While coaching is a significant portion in developing players, talent is a necessity at the college level in order to have success. However, talent now costs money in the NIL era: “Florida State men’s basketball head coach, Leonard Hamilton,[...]announced he’s stepping down at the end of this season following a \$1.5 million NIL lawsuit brought against him by six former players”(Lee, 2025). If the players are not satisfied with their NIL deals, they will either transfer, request for a better deal, or take part in a form of resistance (e.g. lawsuit). This portrays how difficult it is for the coaches to satisfy all parties: they only have so much NIL money they can give to their recruits, and players asking for deals over the budget will result in eventual controversy. Thus, the stress of succeeding in the modern collegiate sports world causes many of these coaches to fall because of the little amount of control they hold now vs. the pre-NIL time period.



## DISCUSSION

Overall, there was adequate information on the general contract information of many of the top tier collegiate athletes. Thus, the research was able to portray the brands and financials that the players receive through their universities' connections. In addition, data on the living situations of the collegiate athletes brought to light the reasoning for their NIL decisions and the impact it has on their future lives.

On the other hand, there was insufficient information on how the average collegiate athlete navigates NIL and the brands they work with. Also, there is limited data on how coaches communicate with their recruits in terms of NIL and convince them to commit to their universities.

In the future, greater research should be done about the NIL situations of athletes in the Division 2, 3, and Junior college levels. It is obvious that these players do not receive the same amount of media attention as athletes at the Division 1 level; thus, it would be interesting to understand how NIL impacts these students.

## CONCLUSION

Through a SWOT analysis, an evaluation of the effect of NIL on both athletes and universities produced significant results. In seeing the benefits and roadblocks of the NIL system, the reader will be able to better understand how these parties navigate their journeys. The top athletes are connected with major NIL deals and large brands because they choose to commit to the most lucrative universities. This life-changing money helps many of these players' financial situations, while the universities have the opportunity to be the best and gain even more national attention. On the contrary, the NIL era has also created a lack of competition and lots of fluctuation in areas such as the transfer portal; creating a league that is primarily focused on the money rather than the game. In the future, there will be investigations on how the average collegiate athlete is impacted by NIL and if NIL is a significant factor in their decisions. In addition, another avenue of supplemental research is how the various laws and regulations impact the NIL scene, along with the measures used to work around them. As NIL expands, more regulations are bound to be set in place, opening up major opportunities to scrutinize the subject. In all, NIL has resulted in a massive alteration of the college world and will continue to have an influence on the future of both the players and universities.

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