

College Student Perceptions of and Experiences with NIL

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Since 2021, changes in name, image, and likeness (NIL) rules have allowed college athletes to receive financial compensation for their personal brand, illustrating a drastic shift in NCAA policy (NCAA, 2021). The state legislation and abrupt change in NCAA rules, led to many questions and much backlash (NCAA, 2023; Moody, 2023). The public rhetoric was one of concern; many believed allowing college athletes to be compensated would change the face of college sport, with fans citing that scholarships were already enough compensation (Large, 2022). While there was concern that a windfall for most college athletes, data suggests that only a small percentage of Division I athletes have deals, and not all those deals are financial (Carter, 2023). For college athletes, information was limited, and most were left wondering how to navigate securing NIL deals. In most instances, states and institutions were left to make decisions about how to proceed.

The purpose of this study was to explore the differences in perceptions of NIL between non-athlete college students and college athletes as well as discover the current NIL training that is offered within institutions. Using survey methodology, a pilot study was conducted with 230 non-athlete college students and 53 college athletes at two different Division I non-football institutions. Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions investigating NIL attitudes on a 7-point likert scale. They asked to indicate their support for NIL, their perception of its fairness, whether they believe it will negatively or positively impact college sport, whether scholarships are enough compensation, and whether they support athletes making money off their NIL.

Independent sample t-tests indicated significant differences among non-athlete college students and their college athlete peers for all questions. Results indicate that college athletes perceive NIL more favorably ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.551$) than their non-athlete student peers ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.477$), $t(281) = -2.881$, $p = .004$. College athletes ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.705$) perceived the implementation of NIL as fairer than non-athlete college students ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.643$), $t(281) = -3.130$, $p = .002$. Regarding perceptions of NIL, college athletes ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.710$) were more likely to disagree with the statement NIL negatively impacted my perceptions of college sport, than non-athlete college students ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.514$), $t(281) = 2.728$, $p = .007$. College athletes ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.433$) were more likely to agree with the statement NIL has positively changed the way I see college sports than their non-athlete college students ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.410$), $t(281) = -3.193$, $p = .002$. Non-athlete college students ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.607$) were more likely to feel that scholarships were adequate compensation than college athletes ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.607$) than college athletes ($M =$

2.96, SD = 1.709), $t(281) = 3.292$, $p = .001$. Finally, both groups supported college athletes profiting off their NIL, however college athletes ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.605$) felt more strongly than non-athlete college students ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.548$), $t(281) = -2.946$, $p = .003$).

College athletes were then asked an open-ended question about the educational programming they have received around NIL and what they believe could be helpful. Interestingly, preliminary findings for this were mixed, and given the pilot survey occurred at two institutions, indicates a possible disconnect between the athletes and the athletic department, like that found by Brougham et al. (2023). At both institutions, educational programming for NIL is limited with some athletes indicating only discussing NIL in their sport management classes. Additionally, other athletes discuss only having meetings with compliance regarding the rules and processes around NIL. When asked what educational programming could be helpful from athletic departments, college athletes reported interest in learning how to get in front of brands, how to make “safe” deals, and where to seek advice for contracts. These findings provide initial evidence that athletic departments are focusing on providing guidance for NCAA rules, with less guidance related to social media and personal branding education that could help the development of these individuals.

Data collection for this study is on-going, with additional athletic departments agreeing to distribute this study to athletes.